

# Taking Flight

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*“Be like a bird in flight, passing awhile on boughs too slight, feeling them give way beneath her, yet sings, knowing yet, that she has wings.”*

—Victor Hugo

boarding call<sup>1</sup>

Sometime not too long ago, a Chinese fortune-teller predicted that I was destined to travel the world in my lifetime. With nary a ruffle of a hair, with one flick of a slim bony finger, she scrutinized my scrawny frame from head to foot before the distinctive syllables escaped her lips, curt and succinct: *You. Fly. Different. Country.* At my age, I fancied a world without borders. As fireworks sparked to usher in a new millennium, my imagination sparked gaudy scenes from Jules Verne’s *Around the World in 80 Days*, stubborn in my belief that legitimate clairvoyance needed no hefty ball-gazing or loony palm-perusing to stir a formless future into fruition. In the realm of the incredible mind where no formal rigid cockpit simulations are required of one to sprout intangible wings, the rules of flight are simple: Gaze upwards. Take flight. Don’t let the earth pull you back. And keep, keep flying.

Looking back, I realize that psychic prophecy, perhaps, did not stray too far off from the truth. The year I was born, storks took flight over the northerly Chinese city of Changchun in the freezing cold of winter, a good 2,000 miles away from home, arduously reached with a four-hour plane trip plus a train ride. As if conforming to common Filipino mentality that everything topnotch has to come from abroad, my parents—Ilonggo newlyweds—somehow made sure their firstborn was an import. “A foreigner in his own land,” they teasingly commented. “But certainly no foreigner to an airplane.”

In Cartesian parlance, I call it *cogito ergo eroplano*. I think therefore I fly (on a plane).

And so it happened that at four years of age, I took my first airplane ride with the joyous exhilaration of a cygnet treading thin air for the first time. Just like that awkward transitory flight towards freedom, I frantically threw myself up the plane doors churning with pleasure and hesitation. We were ten minutes late behind the scheduled departure time: our names paged thrice over the cracked sound system, the ground crew impatiently digging their calloused heels, the passengers sporting bewildered faces. *They didn't throw rotten eggs and tomatoes at you, eh?* My mother would ask afterwards, when she had deemed it safe to assume that both father and son had landed—cheeks and faces and dignity intact—at the intended destination. I chuckled recalling a similar incident, when my balding grandfather was said to have run after a train he narrowly missed by a hairsbreadth, breaking into a wild goose chase past dirt roads and tram tracks and opportunely clambering onto one of the carriages somewhere deep in the sleepy hinterlands of Iloilo, not quite near but almost making it to historic Santa Barbara.

I guess that is altogether the paradox of taking flight: The initial brunt of gravity seizes you even after a few thousand feet, and yet you jubilate with aplomb and actually behold that moment in fond reminiscence. The cygnet *nee* swan will probably treasure how it flapped its wings like crazy before characteristically acquiring that majestic avian flair, in the same way that retrospection allows me the privilege of delighting in the sheer banality of a plane ride. It was a shared enthusiasm among the boys in the family, this love affair for the big birds of the air and for flying itself. My grandfather looked to the skies with a twinkle in his eye, hinged to a life fated instead to run a dreary dry goods business that would fortunately see prosperous existence for the next half-century or so. The succeeding generations were luckier. My father grew up witnessing the advent of the propeller DC-3, the turbo-powered de Havilland Comet, the tri-engine BAC 1-11, the jumbo 747, the supersonic Concorde—telltale figures transposed into tomes that slowly filled the scholarly shelves at home. Had he spent more time measuring life with the lucent yardstick of mirrors, my father could've sworn how the gradual advancements in aviation uncannily reflected the way the family store was being run: *Clothing. Sacks. Ropes. Bags. More clothing.* Little did he know that many years after, a four-year old boy would hop onto his first plane bound for Manila, regaled with eggs and tomatoes and the resulting aerial pandemonium within the lair of his Freudian *id*, his otherwise oft-spurned subconscious.

*Cogito ergo eroplano.* I think therefore I fly.

## pushback<sup>2</sup>

It is almost indubitable to say that my fascination for planes was equaled only by a child's insatiable thirst to quench his burgeoning curiosity. I blew candles off an airplane-themed cake for my sixth birthday. To further match his own prized collection of Maoist sagas and Vietnam War narratives, my father eagerly supplanted my inclination with books of my own. The humongous *Airliners of the World* with its glossy cover introduced me to the basic must-knows of each aircraft, their individual features and corresponding specifications. *Commercial Airlines* dealt extensively with the flag carriers of each country, while *The World's Major Airlines* gave ample recognition to the contemporary key players of civil aviation. Pretty soon, I claimed quasi-territory over that portion of the dismissible family trove where the sands of Iwo Jima ended and the wings of Lockheed Martin began. Each time I pulled a book from the wooden shelf and opened the first page, it was always a chance for vital self-discovery, possibilities peering out at me through a thin veneer of rose-colored lenses. And almost as if embracing the golden years of childhood like an old friend, my father would gladly join me in these moments of deliberate exploration, asking the questions and then very deviously providing the answers. That was how it slowly came to be: father and son taking flight together.

“Lemme see now, that one’s a beauty, isn’t she?”

He would point out how a plane lands—taxies to its rightful place—departs on the clock—takes off swiftly—and lands again. A fine, graying sliver of memory transported me back to a postwar era where airfields meant a meager strip of grassy terrain, where one can spot strapping Yankees picking up the remnants of an abomination best left to rot in ruins. Hereon he demonstrated a diffuseness in detail. My father spoke of quaint 1960s Iloilo City, where nothing was ever far away. In a journey scarcely spanning five minutes on the road, he’d track a short segment of the southern highway, veer left at the roundabout, and cross a battered stone bridge before the concrete edge of the runway appears like an elusive pot of gold at rainbow’s end, flanked by glittering salt flats on one side and lush, verdant foliage on the other. Behind a frail, weather-beaten airport fence that stood as a portal to boundless cerebral excursions, I learned that my father was the little boy long before I was, the staunch city-dweller contentedly engrossed with the blunt technicalities of a stationary plane. Could it be that evolution chose to recapitulate in our furtive desires a spitting replica of the physically unfeasible?

In its heyday, he'd retort, the airport terminal was nothing much to brag about: a generic rectangular building loosely fashioned out of sun-kissed cement. Meters off level ground, a control tower barked the vagaries of departures, arrivals, delays, and cancellations, coolly indifferent to the bustling canopy of baggage carousels, coffee shops, spick-and-span glass-walled ticketing offices. The roof, in all its deep, dirty, brick red glory, resembled a surreal refuge of antiquity almost plucked straight out from within Beijing's embalmed *hutong* district, bearing mammoth salutations with ephemeral nonchalance but for the thoroughly initiated. Underneath its emphatic awning, sweaty porters in blue seamlessly interspersed with the stolid tones of a presumably poker-faced commentator, spurred to raucous revelry with the unmistakable symptoms of an approaching plane: miniscule lights pulsating with vigilant phosphorescence, the shrill familiar drone swooping with calculated grace over coconut trees to land with a thunderous screech of tires, engines, and smoky asphalt. One can even argue that this shiny new metallic creature served to ward off inhuman figments conjured up only by a child's prolific inventiveness, the pervasive *aswangs* and *manananggals* of lore, startled back into hiding with its deafening roar that whipped the virginal trees and brilliant flashing lights that vividly defied the stark blackness of the night. And just like that, just like Antoine de Saint-Exupery before he unwittingly changed the world with his little prince, the airplane has unveiled for me the true face of the earth.

The immortal books at home became my sources of solace, of encouragement, of inspiration.

taxi<sup>3</sup>

My father believed in the immense power of vast horizons. He eschewed Nietzsche, nihilism, and the death of God and religion, but placed paramount faith in the German philosopher when he proclaimed that "he who would learn to fly one day must first learn to stand and walk and run and climb and dance ... one cannot fly into flying." Having learned to stand on my first year of life, walking and running like any other toddler soon after, I once hurled myself haphazardly off a high table, arms spread wide as if simulating flight, entirely oblivious of the panic-stricken, flabbergasted elder who rushed to catch me with outstretched and heavily anxious arms, the fleeting reverie dissolving at the first touch of reality. My father couldn't resist amusement. A hint of a smile forming at the angles of his mouth, he proceeded to lay all

cards on the table, tongue-in-cheek and solemn at the same time, and casually promised the gift of flight with the dawning of “intellectual light.”

I fervidly engraved his words on paper. Taking flight took on an abstract embodiment and became the fungible target of my adamant efforts, converging into a perpetual drive to blaze new trails and consummate meritorious expectations. In school, I was the *bibo* kid clutching a microphone with surefire gusto, the prodigious smart ass with rocketing marks, the starry-eyed storyteller and performer who crept to the limelight even in its wake. The moment I gripped a pencil in my fingers, I turned to the sacred books for endless pages of silky pictures and print, my raw depictions richly coated in a mélange of splendid liveries and powerfully equipped with cutting-edge Rolls Royce engines. I craftily beguiled peers with artistic legerdmain, the underage entrepreneur swapping self-proclaimed magnum opuses for a peso apiece and gushing forth petty details by heart: Milan has two airports—*Malpensa* and *Linate*. *Frankfurt* is different from *Frankfort*. *Five hundred miles* between Hong Kong and Taipei. *Khabarovsk*, now that’s in Eastern Russia. North of *Vladivostok*. South of *Magadan*. And easily accessible from Tokyo, Seoul, or Beijing. (With your choice of airline.) I incessantly amazed my wide-eyed classmates with this collective wealth of data, eliciting a riotous multitude of gasps and praises that concurrently spilled genuine surprise and pure admiration for this trifling boy-hero shamelessly parading in emperor’s clothing, cloaked in a false sense of pride and security that vicariously affirmed: “You know so much about flying.”

But truly, at six or seven or eight or even nine years old, what do I know about flying? What does man know about flying long before he earned the enviable right to doze off for sixteen hours comfortably ensconced on a gorgeous 78 inch flat sleeper pod in First Class? Legend has it that Socrates, the most erudite academician of the civilized world, fathomed the significance of flight early on and so deftly remarked that man must “rise above the earth to the top of the atmosphere and beyond, for only thus will he fully understand the world in which he lives.” His equally savant protégé, Plato, diligently observed the birds in the air and pronounced that the natural function of the wing is to “soar upwards and carry that which is heavy up to the place where dwells the race of gods . . . more than any other thing that pertains to the body it partakes of the nature of the divine.” A thousand years later, in the thriving bosom of the Renaissance, Leonardo Da Vinci would echo these sentiments, opining that “once you have tasted flight, you will forever walk the earth with

your eyes turned skyward, for there you have been, and there you will always long to return.” It only seemed apropos that Da Vinci’s bold, radical ideations eventually found their way into his groundbreaking diagrams of “complex flying machines,” whose enormous progeny I so passionately immortalized in my rough portraits. I couldn’t help but wonder that perhaps, the urge to fly has always encompassed an inextricable human lust for the divine. The mythical builder Daedalus, imprisoned by the ruthless King Minos on the island of Crete, planned his and his son Icarus’s escape by devising makeshift wings but gravely warned his son “not to fly too high lest the sun burn your wings.” The imprudent caprices of youth were too much, however, and in a foolish lapse of judgment, the young man gave in to the lofty beckoning of the skies and tragically fell into the raging waters of the Aegean Sea.

I was born therefore I fly. My father finally decided that time was ripe to release a cygnet into the higher echelons of the atmosphere.

#### takeoff<sup>4</sup>

I finally stepped into the shoes of unlikely exile Viktor Navorski in 2004’s *The Terminal*, a four-foot alien tentatively thrust into the elaborate machinery of a major international airport. The analogy is striking. While Tom Hanks’s Navorski found himself indefinitely trapped inside an ostracized dimension that could only be salvaged by the cursory resolution of one’s own internal battles, I labeled airports within the idyllic hierarchy of a home within a home, the effusive simplification of everything and anything that defines an impossibly microcosmic existence: stores, cafés, prayer rooms, toilets, gardens, even miniature playgrounds. And while Navorski proffered the stars and the moon to return home to his native Krakhozia, I savored each extra minute, nay, each extra hour, in these esteemed architectural colonies, blissfully riveted with each revered square foot of dappled tile or marble, jaw agape at a sleek wing protruding from a streamlined fuselage, at a stagnant plane docked at the adjoining air bridge, at split-second glimpses of congruent takeoffs and landings. I would instinctively close my eyes and anticipate dimmed cabin lights as the jet accelerates down its concrete turf, lithely climbing to thousand-foot altitudes over the swirling speck of a city drowned out soon after by the prosaic mellifluousness of gracious smiles and amiable greetings.

For millions of migratory individuals shuttling back and forth in a quest for metamorphosis, airports symbolize a measure of hope tantamount to a lifetime of transfiguration, unabridged odysseys concocting metaphors of

success and stability. We are our own unwritten stories, celluloid vignettes tucked under our tongues awaiting deliverance. *Doon na lang*, quipped an unwed mother of three, kindly requesting to be transferred away from the plane's emergency doors. Behind her, a Cebuano family of five fidgeted on their seats as turbulence rocked the cabin with sinuous cadence, unable to keep their seatbelts securely fastened. The beleaguered Kuwaiti worker beside me, meanwhile, lamented her inevitable wretchedness, how her boss "without a heart" wouldn't so much as let her stay until the New Year. *Ganun talaga*, she softly murmured as I watched dumbstruck, empathic but petrified. The emptiness in her voice belied the shallow pretense of happiness she was attempting to put on. It was escape. An escape so vehemently desired by one left to silently stomach the bleak impediments of decades-long sufferance. An escape that only a four-year old child wont to dream and fly and imagine can ever afford.

In 1901, Orville Wright faced what he termed his "narrowest escape in the air" experimenting with a glider which he presumed to be "scientifically correct in construction." Those days, smallpox was rampant, iPods were practically unheard of, and James Naismith had just invented basketball out of puny peach baskets. What then could have compelled the pioneering Wright brothers to consider changing a future that was, at best, fraught with remote possibilities? No more average businessmen before their innovative feat, it was said that they ardently devoured a book with Da Vinci's avant-garde illustrations and so must have reflexively imbibed his revolutionary spirit, never taking their eyes off the heavens when they finally decided to dispel the limiting forces of nature by test-flying their invention at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina on December 17, 1903. *Gaze upwards. Take flight. Don't let the earth pull you back. And keep, keep flying.* The human milestone was achieved in a series of record-breaking attempts, each overtaking the other, the unyielding wings of "The Flyer" soaring higher and higher above the breathtaking Atlantic landscape overlooking sun, sand and sea. It wasn't so much conquering the air than "romancing" it, in the words of journalist cum aviation enthusiast Peter Garrison. With ten years of hindsight, even Orville Wright admitted that "I look with amazement upon our audacity in attempting flights with a new and untried machine." Bill Gates, in a millennial article extolling the two brothers, would later call it an audacity that "forever made the world a smaller place."

Yes, we are in a smaller place. In the fifteenth century, taking flight—if one could even call it flight—meant trundling past narrow potholed

lanes on a butt-scraping, mind-numbing horse-drawn carriage along the transcontinental Silk Road, from the tranquil canals and pagodas of Suzhou and Hangzhou to the exotic markets and minarets of Bukhara and Samarkand, a pilgrimage circling the trim waistline of the Dardanelles to kneel at the feet of cosmopolitan Paris. The ordeal could take an agonizing weeks, even months. For Marco Polo and his valiant ilk, there were no guarantees. The expertise of ancient cartographers spelt a whole world of difference between arcane words and symbols and inadvertently falling prey to the clutches of lawless elements: hungry wolves roaming the thick forests, or eagle-eyed mercenaries awaiting a flawless ambush. Luckily, history willed people to wrack their brains off and venture with the steam engine, the propeller, and the space shuttle, and the universe is forever indebted in gratitude. College partyphiles are now free to hop from London to New York in seven or eight hours courtesy of an ultra-quiet twin-engine jetliner, with ample time left to tuck themselves tight in bed.

touchdown<sup>5</sup>

My father and I know the same old story: Doña Teodora Alonzo reading to the young Rizal, how he paid not an ounce of attention preferring to focus instead on a little moth that lingered around the flickering lamplight. In our parallel minds, his exasperated mother would promptly close her book, acquiescing the futility of her efforts, and survey the tiny winged insect that was her son's object of interest, now hovering dangerously close to the light, unmindful of getting scorched. And almost as if anecdotal arms nudged us to chorus in unison, we saunter our lips to whisper the all too famous incantation: *That moth was cautioned by its mother not to get too close, or it'll get burned.* Before he could even take in the wisdom of his mother's words, we watch aghast alongside the young Rizal as the moth flew an inch too close in a precarious moment of youthful insouciance, accidentally burning one of its delicate wings, and helplessly dropping to the dirt floor.

Grade school taught us the lesson of obedience. Flying imparts humility, as we realize how diminutive we are, how little we know of where we are headed. Inflight radars mark the "spot" and we have no choice but to bang our heads, gamble the odds, and rely on their inanimate veracity, "Singapore" being truly Singapore and not Sydney, Australia, or 500 miles off the shores of Myanmar into the Andaman Sea. We teeter on a tightrope risking the formidable unknown that lie ahead, sometimes with disastrous consequences.



In 1983, my natal predecessor of exactly fifty-five years boarded a China Airlines flight and chose to return to the Philippines for good. This nation of then 50 million throbbed with doubts spiraling at each indecisive second of whether to let him fly on or head back, until we balked with unrestrained revulsion at how he was prematurely gunned down in cold blood on the tarmac of the airport that now bears his name. On September 11, 2001, we reeled in horror as twin jetliners plummeted straight into two seemingly invincible skyscrapers, spewing thick smoke and flying debris, the gruesome image unsparingly flashed across TV screens and smudged across pages of newsprint. Airlines crumble into irreparable collapse, open-skies policies erupt into warring disputes, and terrorism ubiquitously hovers with an evil smirk. And yet, just like Icarus and the moth, we refuse to desist. Our lack of trepidation tells us to shun the sinister light of recent events and give celestial dominion a shot, “hanging poised between the illusion of immortality and the fact of death” in the cogent pages of Alexander Chase’s *Perspectives*.

I was born therefore I fly. Now let me tell you how I flew, fell to the ground, broke my wing, and soared in spirit.

In fourth grade, while children my age romped on skates and waxed Batman figurines, I conspired with a fellow classmate and dreamer to establish an airline baptized after its two ambitious founders, namesakes bound by a keen, abiding love for the intricacies of flight. The blokes in Malacañang probably had their hands full of cronies, we reckoned, and so we gallantly raised the cudgels for acutely reviving air transport in the wake of the shaky 1997 Asian financial crisis. To avenge the lackluster state of the Ninoy Aquino International Airport—the country’s main gateway—we fittingly envisioned a colossal airport borne out of regal dust, perched atop a distant man-made island off the coast of Cavite. The walls were to be built out of sparkling glass, ceremoniously modeled after the humbling image of an *anito* pouring out a libation to the skies. We hastily scribbled our plans and snaked things into order, but without that rhetorical ounce of temporal maturity to bridge reel and real, the “airline” wavered in its infantile conception. With heavy hearts and crushed egos, its juvenile owners were forced to declare Chapter 11 bankruptcy, blaming skyrocketing oil prices, massive inflation, and dismal passenger turnout. A similar fate befell the spanking, immaculate airport of futuristic pipe dreams. It bred uncertainty; it was too much. You could simply say that the world isn’t ready to accept instant ten-year-old billionaires, and no one would give his darnedest.

Time lumbered along and brought my friend to his corporate empire, me into my realm of stethoscopes. Bereft of a globally-renowned airline or a chunk of world-class air infrastructure, we could still bet a thousand lottery tickets, get ourselves lucky, carry a gigantic wad of shimmering cash, and land ourselves in the *Forbes* List of Top 100 Billionaires under 30. But we'd know better. Somewhere in our callow youth, waiting to be rummaged, was the proverbial broken wing harking back the bitter truth to the fore.

For a fledgling cygnet, tormented by tedious seasons of watchful anticipation, taking flight meant growing lightweight contour feathers and robust wing muscles as destiny pulls it closer to epiphany. For my grandfather, trapped in the aftershocks of a barren postwar milieu, taking flight bred a relentless outburst of uncompromising toil, sacrifice, and hard work to establish a decent family enterprise; traversing decades of unflinchingly honest transactions to catapult him into the Top 100 Taxpayers of Iloilo City and emerge into an illustrious neighborhood figure. As for my father, the years haven't been particularly kind, either. He took flight by way of meticulous and oftentimes meandering paths, foregoing his medical aspirations in exchange for better prospects as an engineer, investor, and businessman—all rooted in solid hopes that his own son would tread the very path he had once failed to tread. *Could it be that evolution chose to recapitulate in our furtive desires a spitting replica of the physically unfeasible?*

I'd like to believe that perhaps, Navorski will find his way back to the terminal. An affectionate ray of sunlight grazes his skin, as if he were the archetypal prodigal son and Helios roused from his throne to welcome him home. Alabaster columns soar around him like totems into an infinitely high ceiling, while artificial palm fronds caress a stately signboard that read, *Departures*. A portly woman in heels clutching a vintage Armani whizzes past. He whisks around to the cacophony of laughter shattering the surface, to a pair of lovers engaged in intimate banter, to the mustached elderly caretaker tiptoeing on freshly-mopped floors—and he sees them everywhere: my father, the cygnet, the old *hutong* terminal, the books at home, the fortune-teller, Orville Wright—and he bowls over, the staggering montage of mementos caving in to reveal a yawning mound of childhood phantasms. Vulnerable and powerless, he readily succumbs to the sentimental pull of memory, to the brittle touch of history, to the nostalgic magnetism of has-beens and what-ifs brimming with a hapless trail of misty recollections. He picks himself up as his flight is announced: his moment of liberation. He strolls behind a swelling

queue, boarding pass in hand, and disappears into the plane doors as Jose Mari Chan's mellow pipes permeate his acoustic senses.

*Dreaming of love while cruising at high altitude  
Dreaming of making love with you the way we should  
Closer to heaven we're thirty thousand feet up in the sky  
Here among the stars our spirits will fly*

I'd like to believe that perhaps, the last image he sees is a swan taking flight.

### Glossary of aviation terms

1. **Boarding call.** The formal airport announcement for passengers to embark on an aircraft.
2. **Pushback.** The procedure during which an aircraft is pushed backwards away from the airport gate.
3. **Taxi.** The movement of an aircraft on the ground, usually in preparation for takeoff or just after touchdown.
4. **Takeoff.** The phase of flight where an aircraft moves from the ground to being airborne.
5. **Touchdown.** The phase of flight where an aircraft returns to the ground after being airborne.