

one story

Pilot, Co-Pilot, Writer

Manuel Gonzales

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I.

We have been circling the city now at an altitude of between seven thousand and ten thousand feet for, according to our best estimates, around twenty years.

I once asked the Pilot—this was early into the hijacking, maybe a week—how we were in terms of gasoline and how he planned to refuel, but he did not tell me. He laughed and patted me on the shoulder as if we were good friends together on a road-trip, and I had just asked him how we were going to get there without a map. Back in the cabin I asked a man who was an engineer if he knew how we had managed to stay aloft for so long, and he gave me a complex explanation, most of which I did not understand, centered around a rumored “perpetual oil.”

“Is there such a thing?” I asked him. “Perpetual oil?”

“Well,” he said. “I’m not sure that there isn’t.”

The Pilot called my name over the intercom a number of times before I realized it was me he was calling for. By the time I figured it out, the other passengers were leaning into the aisle and stretching over their seats to see who it was being summoned. I stood up and a low murmuring passed through the cabin. I suppose everyone assumed I was being called to be executed, since the hijacking had just happened a day or two before and we had been kept in the dark about it ever since. There had been speculation about demands, about actions, about executions, but nobody knew, really, what was going on or going to happen. I didn't blame the others for thinking that I had been called in to be the first casualty as I had assumed the same, though I wasn't sure why me instead of the man in front of me or the woman across the aisle or anyone else on board, one of the flight attendants, maybe. A woman grabbed my arm as I walked towards the front of the plane and shook her head, entreating me with her eyes not to go, to sit back down, but I didn't want to make the Pilot mad, so I pulled myself free and made my way.

When I knocked on the Pilot's door, I heard his voice say in a sing-song way, "Come in." He turned to look at me as I entered his cabin. "Sit, sit," he said, gesturing to the seat next to him, the co-pilot's seat.

I sat and he smiled and, without looking at me, said, "So you are the writer."

Unsure of what else to say, I said, "Yes. That's me."

"My name is Josiah," he said. "Josiah Jackson." He handed me a pad of paper and a pen. "Write that down," he said.

I wrote on the top of the sheet of paper, *Josiah*. And then, for

good measure, underneath that, I wrote, *Josiah Jackson*. I tore the sheet off the pad and gave it to him for his inspection.

He laughed as if I had made a very good joke, and then he said, "You are no less than what I had expected you to be."

We sat next to each other in silence for a moment, then two moments, until finally he said, "Okay. You can go now."

Feeling a certain amount of relief knowing that I wasn't to be executed and feeling confident in having made him, for whatever reason, laugh, I asked him why he had hijacked the plane and why we were still circling Dallas. At this he gave me a stern and serious look. "I do not usually answer questions, but since it is you: We are circling because I only know how to fly to the left." He looked at me and then laughed again, and said, "No, no. I'm only kidding." Then he turned back to look at the sky, which was now growing dark, and said no more.

The plane was full. The overhead compartments were full too. The woman next to me had somehow managed to board the plane with more carry-on items than is normally allowed, but as she and I had been the last passengers to board, she was forced to cram as much as possible under the seat and then, noticing that I had not carried much with me onto the plane, she asked if she could place just one or two items under the seat in front of me.

"Just this small bag and this other small bag," she said. "You can just kick them out of the way, if you want. They're nothing but dirty clothes."

I told her I didn't mind, but in fact I minded a little, and after we had taken off and the seatbelt light was turned off and she left for the restroom, I did kick one of the bags, but it wasn't filled

with clothes and I heard, or felt, something break. I was waiting, after she came back to her seat, for a good time to tell her that I had accidentally broken whatever it was that had been in her bag, but then the hijacking happened and nobody thought about anything like their bags or their connecting flights for a long time, and then, as she was an older woman and as the years passed by, she eventually forgot about almost everything else and passed away in her sleep before I was ever able to apologize.

For a while, we all fought over the window seats because no one believed me when I said that we weren't going anywhere, that we were merely circling and circling over the same city. I was pulled out of my seat and pushed aside, and even though I didn't care to look out the window anymore, knowing that it would be the same view again and again, I didn't like being jerked away like that, and I grabbed the guy who had pushed me by his jacket and pulled him roughly back, but he was lighter than I expected him to be and the both of us fell into a pregnant woman, who pushed into another passenger, and then we all started fighting. After a while, we were pulled apart by the Pilot, who said, "I have to fly the plane, and I can't keep coming out here like this to baby-sit you. So sit down and shut up."

Afterwards, no one cared to look out of the windows but me and a few others, and as the days and weeks and months passed, these people, too, stopped looking, pulled down their window shades, turned their heads to look anywhere else but outside at the Dallas skyline, because, they said, their necks hurt and the sight of Reunion Tower only made them depressed.

“Nobody move,” is what he had yelled. “This is a holdup!” Then he began to laugh at what he thought was a clever and tension-breaking joke. Since he was dressed as a pilot and had a softly Southern accent, we laughed, too. But then, it turned out to be a holdup, of sorts.

We weren’t sure for a long time what had happened to the other pilots, the real pilots. Had they been abducted on their way through the airport? Were they now tied and gagged and locked in a broom closet, or possibly murdered? It wasn’t difficult, despite his laughter and his slight paunch, to picture our Pilot engaging in such activities. But how had our Pilot managed to maneuver through security? How did he fool the flight attendants, who surely should have known he wasn’t a real pilot?

Only later did we find out, from one of the flight attendants, that he was the real pilot. That he had been flying for ten years. That she had flown with him a number of times. But that no one knew what had happened to the co-pilot.

At one point, looking out the window at the city below and the streets and the highways and the trees and buildings, I saw a long freight train moving slowly along the tracks that run parallel to highway 635, and I was reminded of a story I had written in which a man had tried to build a scale model of 19th century America and the trains that crossed it. He lived underground, as did a number of other people in this story, and so had no concept of how large exactly the continent was. Looking out the window at this height made me realize that such a model was now laid out before me, and I understood that I too had

no concept of how large exactly the continent was. That the scope of my imagination was shown to be so much smaller in scale and weight than the continent that I had been trying to imagine through the eyes of a man who had never seen it before, depressed me, and so I closed my window-shade for the first time and leaned my head back against the seat and tried to sleep.

Sometimes I will go for weeks, months, even, without looking at myself in the bathroom mirror. I know the bathroom well enough to be able to perform whatever human functions I need to perform with my eyes closed. Then, after a long enough time has passed, I will suddenly open my eyes and stare directly into my own face in the mirror, hoping the sight of age will shock me into feeling some kind of emotion, sadness or anger or humility, but I have decided that anything besides boredom and thirst and a dull, physical ache are beyond the reach of airplane passengers.

I have tried to write other things besides this since the plane was hijacked. The Pilot gave me pen and paper, and I at first supposed that he expected me to chronicle the hijacking. I wrote a few pages—descriptions, mainly: the color of the woman's hair next to me; the stale, cold air of the cabin; etc., etc.—and showed them to him, but then he didn't want them, said he didn't have time to read them. "Don't you know I'm busy?" he said, laughing, but also, or so it seemed, peeved that I had bothered him. I've never been comfortable with rejection of this sort, and, for the first year or so, his words kept me from writing anything down at all.

Then, slowly, I began to take notes for a story and then notes for a novel and then notes for another novel and another story, but all they have been are notes.

We were given permission to use our cell phones. The Pilot said he didn't care about signals or about whom we called. Everything he said, he said with a laugh, though none of us could ever tell what he thought was so funny. We called our loved ones. I called my wife. I told her we had been hijacked. She knew, she said, because it was all over the evening news. We said those things we were supposed to say, but I felt that her heart wasn't in it; that maybe she was distracted by the news story on the television. Maybe my heart wasn't in it either. A baby had been crying for some time in the row or two rows behind me. We, my wife and I, didn't have kids yet and she wasn't pregnant and we had only been married for a short while, so I had a hard time feeling as bad for myself as for the old man who was missing his wife's birthday, who then missed—as time went on—their fortieth anniversary, and then her funeral; or the man whose pregnant wife was on board with us (the one I pushed down by accident), whose unborn child he might never see again. But then, they (the old man, the pregnant wife) never appeared to feel too sad about it all, either. Mostly, once I hung up with my wife, I felt worn out by the need to shout so much over the poor reception, and twice our phones hung up by mistake—lost signal, etc.—and each time involved a series of callbacks and messages until we were finally able to reconnect. Looking around the cabin at the other passengers as they also hung up with their loved ones, I had the feeling that they had been worn out too. No one much

used their cell phones after that first time and eventually all of the batteries died out anyway.

My eyes adjusted so completely to looking at the city from high up that when I imagined myself on the ground, walking through the downtown area, or driving from north Dallas to Plano or Grapevine, I could not figure out how I would navigate from such a narrow perspective. How would I know my way around? How would I avoid being run over by a car or hit by a trailer truck?

As the years passed, I learned to pick out details, as if I were a hawk or an owl. I got to where I could see my parents' house, my wife's mother's house, the church where my wife remarried; not just see the general area where they should have been, but see them, in detail. Sometimes I will see a little boy or girl whose ball has bounced into the street run out after it unaware of the teenager speeding around the corner, or some situation like this, and the first couple of times I saw this, I yelled at the child (or dog or blind old man) to watch out, but I soon realized how foolish I sounded, how I startled the other passengers with my yelling, and so I stopped.

A young man in first-class—a business executive or some such, I suppose—began a regimen of walking and stretching and worked very hard to convince everyone else on the plane to follow suit.

“This poor excuse for food,” he complained, “will only make us sick and flabby.”

He said, about our muscles, “Use them or lose them, people.”

He would walk down the aisle and pat random bellies or

he would jog down the aisle, bouncing on his toes, his arms up around his face as if he were preparing for a boxing match. A few of the passengers joined him. Calisthenics, jumping jacks, yoga stretches. Most of us, though, sat in our seats and watched him bounce up and down, his face sickly and pale and sweaty. It turned out that he wasn't eating the food at all, and it was really no surprise, in hindsight, that he was the first to go. After that, the exercise regimens came to a quick and quiet end.

The phone in front of my seat rang once. It was my mother. I do not know how she knew how to contact me on the plane. Other phones rang at other seats too, and I suppose it is possible that the airline gave these callers our numbers. She sounded the same on the phone as she had when I had last spoken with her, some seven or eight years before, but I knew that she must have looked much older than I remembered, and as we spoke, I closed my eyes and tried to add wrinkles and creases to her face, gray hairs to her scalp, liver spots to the back of the hand that held the phone.

She told me about my father. She told me that she had gone to my wife's second wedding, and that it was a nice, small affair. She asked me about what we had been eating, and, so she wouldn't worry, I did not mention the weight I had lost, or the flavorless liquid the Pilot had us drink. She asked if I had met anyone on the plane, a nice woman, perhaps, someone, anyone to keep me from feeling lonely. So she wouldn't worry, I told her about the pregnant woman, who had not been pregnant now for quite some time, but I was embarrassed talking about it on the phone since I knew that she could hear me saying these things to my mother

even though both of us knew nothing had ever happened between the two of us except for one night, during a heavy storm, when the cabin lights blew out and she grabbed my hand out of fright. I tried talking to her once or twice after that night, but her son, who had grown into a rather big boy at seven years old, locked me in the bathroom when his mother wasn't looking and threatened to keep me locked in there unless I promised to leave his mother alone.

After a while, a second woman's voice came on the line and informed my mother and me that the call would end soon and that the phones would be disconnected and shut off once we hung up. We said our good-byes. I told her to tell my wife hello. Then we hung up.

Early on, I figured that what I would miss most from my former life, assuming that we would not make it through the tragedy alive, would be my wife: the presence of her, the sound of her voice, the feel of her pressed next to me at night in our bed, her small, soft hand enveloped by my own. But I have found, over these past relentless years, that, not being dead, not even being seriously injured, not being lost or, technically, alone, but instead finding myself in this plane, what I miss most are those basic qualities of life—standing up, walking around, sleeping lying flat, sex—and what I miss above all is food.

We ran out of the ham and cheese sandwiches within six weeks, despite the rationing, and the pretzels were eaten within the next month after that. At first, we were disappointed that we had no more food, until it dawned on us that, unless the Pilot wanted to starve himself, or, even if he had been hoarding his own supplies

in the cockpit, unless he wanted to circle Dallas with a plane full of the starved and emaciated and, eventually, dead, he would have to finally land.

A full two days passed after the last bag of pretzels had been emptied before the Pilot finally came out of his cockpit. Expecting him to admit defeat, or to inform us of his plans to land in some remote island in the Pacific or simply to crash us into the earth (by then, anything would have been preferable to the constant sight of the city below us), we waited patiently for him to speak. He frowned and looked down at his feet. "As you are probably all now aware, we have run out of food, which means we must now draw straws to see who of us will be the first to be eaten." He paused as we each looked at our neighbor, and perhaps if he had actually made us try to eat one another, we would have then risen up, wrested control of the plane from him, found a way to land, ended the ordeal, but before we could do or say anything, he smiled broadly at us and laughed, saying, "No, no, no. I'm just joking." He then proceeded to walk down the aisle, pulling out a bag he'd hidden behind his back, and began to hand out small vials of a clear liquid to each passenger as he passed. With each vial handed out, he would repeat, "Two drops should do. No more than two drops. Don't want to overdo it. Two drops should do just fine." Once he was finished, he walked to the front of the plane again, turned to us and said, "Bon appétit," and then stepped back into his cockpit, the door closing solidly behind him.

As we ran low on drops, the Pilot would bring us new vials.

I'm not sure how they work or what sustenance they provide. While I am still hungry after my two drops, while I still have an

unnamable appetite (the drops at first had a mild grassy taste to them, but are now as good as flavorless, as I can't taste anything at all, or else I seem to have forgotten almost entirely what anything might taste like) and I have lost weight and will probably continue to lose weight, I have not starved. As far as I know, no one who has taken his drops has.

The Pilot would come out of his cabin two or three times a day. As the years passed, as he grew older and became thicker around the middle and as his blonde hair turned, in places, white, I began to wonder how he felt in the mornings when he woke up, if he felt as old and tired as I sometimes felt.

I assumed he slept. He locked the cabin door at night, so none of us knew for sure. I asked him once if he slept and he didn't answer me and then I asked him, if he did sleep, who flew the plane. He laughed and patted his belly and said, "My co-pilot." When I asked him, recently, if his co-pilot would also be the one to fly the plane once he has died, he did not respond, pretending not to have heard my question.

It is surprising to me how quickly news of the hijacking spread. I called my wife within the hour of being told we had been hijacked, and she already knew. The people of Dallas organized a vigil that very night. We could see the huddled bunch of them with their candles standing on the tarmac of the Dallas-Ft. Worth Airport. Someone—a gentleman from the rear of the plane—said, "Them standing there, we couldn't land even if we wanted to." In the morning, the same group of people (or perhaps a new group) stood in approximately the same formation, this time

holding white posters with black letters on them that spelled out something too small for us to read.

For a while, I liked to think of my wife there among them, holding a candle or a piece of the message, but, in truth, my wife does not like crowds, and it's more likely that she was not.

Within a week, regardless of my wife's involvement or lack thereof, the vigils had stopped, the news reports, I'm almost certain, had stopped as well, and we had become a fixture of the Dallas skyline no different or more exciting than the neon Mobile Pegasus.

II.

I often find myself considering the man my wife married, by which I usually mean myself, a thought that then returns to me the fact that she has since remarried, and so I am forced to think of the two of us, her husband and I, side by side. This despite the fact that I have never seen him, which leads me, more often than not, to picture only myself side by side my other self so that I might consider how the two of us have failed and how we continue to fail as husbands. I have a catalogued list in my head; it grows by the day, and it changes nearly constantly as faults are moved around, given more or less priority, my dirty underwear left on the bathroom floor moved down a rung by the peanut-butter crusted knife left for a week in the backseat of my car.

When I get into this mood of rearranging faults—real and imagined—I begin to wonder, too, what the other passengers, those who are left, are thinking. We are not friends, any of us. Of course, we were all friends at first, or, at the very least, friendly with those

people to our left or our right or across the aisle, as people on a plane tend to be, in that manner of searching for common ground in a book being read, a destination being reached, a vacation being taken. With the underlying sense that these friendships would last no longer than the few hours between Dallas and Chicago, we opened ourselves up to our neighbors. These relationships were made stronger once the plane was hijacked, as we felt bonded to each other by a shared sense of tragedy and uncertainty. Then, as time passed, as we continued to circle, as we realized just how long we might have to share the same space with each other, we—I am projecting, now—began to feel crowded, as if there wasn't enough room, and slowly we gathered ourselves inward, pulling knees into our chests, feet onto the seats, curling our arms around our shins, and placing our heads down or, if we could stomach the sight, pressing our faces away from our neighbors and against the windows. Now the plane is still and quiet and we have been moving with such regularity for so long that I have this sense of perfect unmovement, which creeps into the pit of my stomach and produces there a soft fluttering of wings and a welling anxiety, as if I had forgotten to do some minor but personal thing, or as if I am riding a child's ride at a fair, the dips not enough to be truly belly-rising, but raising, instead, a tingling awareness of gravity, or gravitas, in my arms and shoulders and legs: a feeling that is at once pleasant and upsetting.

When we were still talking – the other passengers and I – the woman who sat next to me and who had once asked that I store some of her bags beneath my seat told me, breathlessly and as she sat down, officially the last person to board the plane and take her seat, how she had nearly missed the flight and how

she had to beg and argue and plead with the gate attendants to let her on board. "I explained to them," she told me, "how the shuttle had had a flat and how someone was supposed to have called ahead to tell someone about the situation and that we had somehow convinced the first tow-truck driver to squeeze us into his cab and drive us to the airport so that we could all make our flights on time, but by then, with rush hour traffic, and even with the tow-truck flashing its yellow lights, it took us over an hour to move through the accidents and the stalled cars and by the time we arrived at the entrance to the airport, I only had fifteen minutes to get my baggage checked and run to my gate, and after all of that, do you believe that they almost didn't let me on the plane?" "How did you convince them," I invariably asked, to which she replied, "Why, honey, with my feminine charm." It was an amazing story the way she told it, embellished and repeated often to the others around her as we taxied down the runway and in those first few minutes in the air before the Pilot came out of the cockpit and hijacked us all, and then, much later, she began repeating the story again, though lamentably and with less energy, as if she were reciting the Act of Contrition; and with each successive dirge, more and more details of the story were removed until finally, late one night a month or so into our circling, she turned her head to me and confessed that in fact there was no flat tire, no tow-truck driver, no real traffic even, but that she had overslept, and that's why she had almost missed her flight. "If only I had slept ten minutes longer," she said, and then she turned her head to face straight again, and, while I'm sure she must have said something else between then and the time she passed away, I cannot remember

what else that might have been. Now, however, I repeat her story to myself, having adopted it as my own, except that sometimes the tow-truck driver refuses to carry us in his cab and we are forced to hail down a woman driving with her baby in a station-wagon, and she's the one who brings us to the airport on time, and sometimes I will catch myself thinking, If only she hadn't picked us up, and despite the fact that the story, which is not even mine, has never been true, I cannot help but feel a keen disappointment in the fact that such an insignificant event has led me to this end.

III.

When the Pilot died, it came to light that he in fact did have a co-pilot. The pregnant woman's son had been spending more and more time in the Pilot's cabin, learning the technique of flying, learning the secrets of our perpetual oil. At first, we were relieved. The Pilot was gone, we could finally land, and the boy, now a young man, would certainly land the plane, just as his mother had asked him to. But, of course, why should he? In a way, it made more sense to us—perhaps, not to the boy's mother—that we continued to circle Dallas even after the Pilot's death. In all of our time circling with the Pilot, we never learned, were never told why we could not land, why we had been hijacked. Now that the boy was in charge, though, what else should he have done? What other world did he know but this one inside the plane? Would he so easily give up its comforts, its familiarity?

Most of us had some memory of what it was like to stand

straight, to walk on an object that does not so noticeably move, to breathe an air that has not been cycled and recycled a hundred thousand times, and even we were a little afraid of what our lives would become if we were to finally land on solid ground. The prospect of seeing a building up close and from below must have been a devastating and frightening one for the boy. Despite his mother's weeping and crumpled body outside the Pilot's door, he did not alter the Pilot's original course, not even to change the direction of our circle.

Shortly after the Pilot hijacked the plane, he had us pose for pictures taken with a Polaroid camera. As with everything else, he did not explain why he wanted these pictures. The flight attendants had us stand in front of the lavatory between First Class and Coach, and after the picture was taken and had developed, they let each of us look at our photograph before placing it in a box with the rest of them that was eventually handed over to the Pilot.

The Co-Pilot—he had a name, but since the Pilot's death, he refused to answer to anything but Co-Pilot—found these photographs and decided to take another series of them, and we lined up again and posed. Once these had developed, the Co-Pilot had his mother give everyone the original photograph and the new photograph. A sizeable pile of old pictures with no matching new ones remained in the box, and these, we decided, should be placed in the now empty seats, but once this had been done, we changed our minds and took them all up and placed them back in the box and returned the box to the cockpit.

I had begun to put on some weight before my trip, and I remember feeling self-conscious about the way my pants had

begun to fit. There is a difference of maybe thirty pounds between the first man pictured and the second man pictured. Still, the thinness looks no better on me than the extra weight did. Whereas my clothes once seemed uncomfortably small, they look, in the more recent photograph, ridiculously large. Furthermore, along with the weight, my face has lost whatever charm it once had. Oddly, and this seems to be the case with nearly everyone else's picture too, I am smiling in both.

IV.

I often find myself lost in thought trying to imagine the paths of our lives after we have landed. In this I am, I believe, alone.

Suppose the Co-Pilot falls ill and we are forced into an emergency landing, or simply, as he matures, he experiences an epiphany, a change of heart, a desire to do something more with his life. Whatever the reason, some small part of me would not be terribly surprised if one day the Co-Pilot were to step out of his cabin and ask, nonchalantly, "Does anyone know how to put us down?" I wonder, then, which we will choose: to rebuild our former lives or begin them anew. Is twenty years long enough to wipe away bad marriages, poor career choices, too many long hours spent following someone else's dreams? How many of us will return to our old homes, rented out to new tenants or boarded up or sold, settle ourselves back into old routines now occupied by new people?

Some of us have already made our choice. The former accountant practices sleight-of-hand tricks for hours on end. He has told me, while pulling quarters out of my ear, while filling

and emptying the overhead bins with the wave of a blanket, that he plans to change his name, buy a few costumes, and take up the birthday party racket, or aim for the big time, the comedy club circuit. "Carpe diem," he told me. For others, the choice seems to have been made for us. My wife has remarried. It is likely that by now my parents have both died. The friendships I enjoyed have surely unkindled themselves after twenty years. I will step out of this plane and onto the tarmac with no human connection but to the people on board with me, most of whom I have not spoken to in months. I am afraid that I will, if I'm not careful, seek out a life that most closely resembles the one I have for twenty years been living. Perhaps, when we land, I will buy a bus ticket and ride the crosstown 404 as it loops through its never ending circuit. Or I might rent or buy a car and drive to Belt Line Road and continue to circle the city in that way. It would be good to devise a plan to prevent this sort of life taking hold, but no such plan comes readily to mind. In my imagination, then, I often wind up on the side of the road, kicked off the bus by the driver or having run out of gasoline, forced then to continue my course on foot. These thoughts bring me little comfort, which explains, perhaps, why the others have given up such fruitless speculation and why all plans of overpowering our hijacker and taking control of the situation were long ago abandoned.

I will not be here for the more realistic ending, of course. How could I be? Though not yet the oldest person on the plane, I am not far from it, either, and it's not likely that I'll conspire to live as long as the Co-Pilot, who seems to be in excellent health. We can hear him perform his calisthenics every morning after he wakes

and every night before he goes to sleep, a regimen he must have learned from the Pilot. When we catch a glimpse, his face has a ruddy glow.

As I imagine it, everyone else will have gone by then, too. Even now there is only the one flight attendant left and though younger than many of us, she has stopped taking her drops and her once pretty face is gaunt and withered. Soon, then, no members of the original crew will be left, and there will be only the seven other passengers who remain. And once we have all died and there is only the Co-Pilot, what then? It's unlikely that he will bring the plane down—I doubt he even knows how. But he might become lonely. He might tire of the Dallas skyline, which has changed not at all since we first took off, and seek some new skyscape. Flying straight ahead for some time, east or west, toward sunrise or sunset, perhaps finding himself soon over the Pacific Ocean, wondering what this world is, blue above and blue below, that he's flown himself to, until, following the sunset each day, he eventually finds the Asian continent, or perhaps Africa, and then Europe, and then the Atlantic, and the Eastern Seaboard, until he reaches Dallas again, at which time perhaps he will turn left, or right, or continue on straight again, circling the world the way he has for so long circled Dallas. I can't see how it will or should matter to me, since I will have long since died by then, but at times I feel sorry for the boy, sorrier for him than for us. He will fly and fly and fly, until he one day slumps over in his Captain's chair, the dead weight of his body pushing the controls forward. I can feel my stomach lurch even as I imagine the nose dipping, the wings turning downward. The plane will break through the clouds, condensation beading up

along the windows like rain. The world will rush past below, cars and buildings and trees and people becoming larger by the moment, as if they are rising to meet us, until, at last, with great and terrible speed, the Co-Pilot finally lands.

Manuel Gonzales lives and writes in Houston, Texas. He holds an MFA from Columbia University and has been recently published in *The Believer*, *Fence*, and *The L Magazine*. His work has also appeared in *McSweeney's*, *The Mississippi Review*, and *The American Journal of Print*.

To read an interview with Manuel Gonzales about "Pilot, Co-Pilot, Writer," visit the stories section of one-story.com.

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ONE STORY
PO Box 1326
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WWW.ONE-STORY.COM

PUBLISHER: Maribeth Batcha

EDITOR: Hannah Tinti

MANAGING EDITOR: Pei-Ling Lue

DESIGN AND PRODUCTION:

Matthew Fetchko, Nora McCartney

WEBMASTER: Devin Emke

COPYEDITORS:

Robin J. Lauzon, Rachel Carpenter

READING SERIES COORDINATOR:

Meredith Phillips

EDITORIAL ASSISTANTS:

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