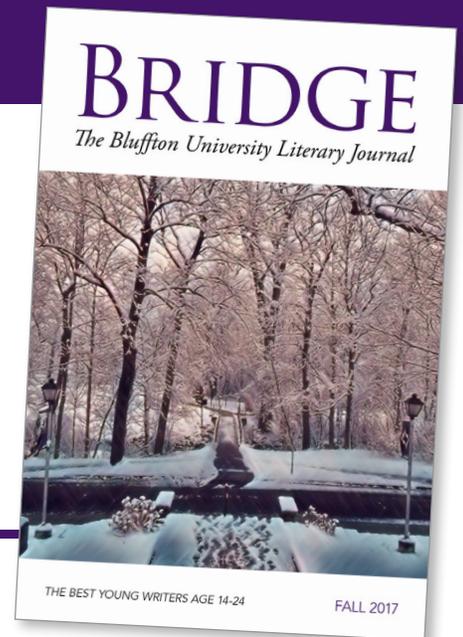


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THREE'S

Char Dreyer

They had been in the air for three hours, now. The plane was destined for Tokyo, a long twelve hours from Los Angeles. So far the flight attendant was satisfied. She handled the few expected discrepancies during take-off with grace and efficiency, adhering to her self-created Flight Manifesto. Her sleek, navy uniform remained mostly unwrinkled, with only one small exception appearing in the elbows near the end of the second hour. Her dark hair, wrapped delicately in a well-crafted bun, had yet to attempt any misbehavior. The flight attendant affirmed this with pride during her repeated trips to the lavatory.

The plane was dark and quiet, lit only by scattered and dimmed overhead lights. Lowering herself into the narrow seat near the cockpit, slowly - as to not cause any further wrinkling - her mind floated idly through the inky night to the ground below the plane. It was such a shame, she thought, that more people did not live in the sky. Most are anchored to the same life, filled with the same faces, the same routes to work, the same dull and endless white noise of traffic or baby cries or lawn mowers. She clucked in pity. Slowly though, her sympathy began to bore her, and she returned to more interesting thoughts. She closed her eyes and pictured her dream from the night before. The dream that had warned her how very important the next twelve hours would be.

A wail pierced through the flight attendant's reverie. She craned her neck to peer down the aisle from her seat. The crying continued. People began to fidget, tossing disapproving looks over their shoulders like salt. The flight attendant stood, straightening her skirt with two swift swipes and glossing her hands smoothly over her hair. She walked down the aisle, smiling in reassurance at the passengers. She traced the noise to the near back of the plane, where a young woman sat with her arms crossed and face pointed toward the window. Next to her in the aisle seat was a boy of no more than four or five, his face scrunched in anguish. Tears rolled down his fat cheeks steadily, his fists twitching atop his chubby legs. "Ma'am," the flight attendant smiled, addressing the sulking woman. "Would you mind terribly telling your baby to please be a little quieter? It's quite late and folks are trying to sleep."



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"I tried that already," the woman grumbled. "But it seems he doesn't like planes." The boy's crying grew louder and more violent. The flight attendant caught the glares of people nearby like glints of light off a blade.

"Do you mind if I try?" she asked the woman, raising her voice just slightly to be heard over the boy. The woman shrugged, seeming entirely uninterested, and what's worse: unembarrassed. The flight attendant lowered herself awkwardly in order to speak directly to the boy.

"Sir," she said. "Could you perhaps find another way to express yourself? I, myself, am an avid journaler when I find myself distressed. Normally I wouldn't ask, I really wouldn't. It's just that you're causing quite a scene and I'm sure you don't intend to make it worse." The boy's face reddened further, his breath hitching in exasperation. His crying did not stop. The flight attendant frowned, straightening to speak to the woman again.

"Well, he's simply inconsolable," she said, splaying her hands in helplessness. "The only thing I can think to do is offer him a cup of something soothing, something that might put him out. We've got some gin—only twelve dollars to the glass that I think would work swimmingly. I'll fetch it now."

"That's outrageous!" the woman cried, her face contorting into a horrified expression. "How dare you! I should report you to someone for even suggesting that I would ever purchase something so egregiously overpriced! Twelve dollars for one cup of gin? I don't think so! The boy wouldn't know the difference between Merlot and mud, for God's sake. There's got to be something cheaper you can give him."

"Well," the flight attendant huffed. "The pilots usually drink Pinnacle in the cockpit, but I should quite doubt they've any left by now. We've been flying for hours." The boy's fit grew more violent, whacking his head against the seat behind him, heaving his legs up and slamming them down in outrage.

"You best go check," the woman muttered, sinking back into apathy and again turning towards the window. The flight attendant gave a curt nod.

"Right away, ma'am." Along the way, she stepped into the lavatory.

The dream had begun in fog. At first, she worried it was smoke, but she was quickly relieved by the moisture she felt in the back of her mouth after every cool inhale. The dream was hard to explain, she explained to Doris - the other flight attendant.

"It began in fog," she said wistfully, as the two women walked toward their gate at LAX earlier that evening.

"And the fog gave way to a kind of... Oh, I don't know, Doris. A kind of oasis, I suppose. A bright, turquoise pool of water, just nestled into the ground like a gem. Surrounded by nothing but blinding snow."

"Mm," Doris said.

"And I went to the water's edge, and knelt in the snow," the other flight attendant continued, her face glowing in earnest. "Only, I didn't feel any cold. I looked for my reflection in the water, but it was my mother's face staring back at me. Yes, I know, it was peculiar!"

"Mm!"

"And she, my mother, said my name in this odd kind of voice, like she was casting a spell of sorts. She said my name, and she told me, 'There won't be another day like this one.' And I said 'Mother, what can you mean by this?' and my mother said, 'You'll know it by its name. It will come in three.' And I said, 'Three? Three of what, Mother?' But her reflection vanished! And I looked

up from the pool to find three clouds in the sky. And then I woke up. It was all quite strange, Doris! What do you suppose it means?"

"Mm..."

"I think it's got to mean something wildly important. How could it not? I suppose she was trying to tell me that there will be three life-altering signs on this flight today. Some big, indubious moments that will drastically influence me to the very core. That's the only possible answer I can come up with." The two flight attendants boarded the aircraft, and prepared for the twelve hour flight ahead of them.

After repairing a slight imperfection to her hair with one camouflaged bobby pin, the flight attendant entered the cockpit, determined to quiet that insolent child. One of the pilots straightened noticeably upon her arrival, speaking her name with gross over emphasis on the wrong syllable.

"Hello," she said. "I'm here to inquire about your Pinnacle. There's a little boy having a terrible tantrum out there and we need something to shut him up. Have you any left?" The pilot eyed her in a way that made her almost wish the plane would crash. The pilot had been kind, warm, alive. Afterwards, she only felt worse; she knew exactly what her mother would say.

"We were just about to finish it," the pilot said, licking his lips. "But you should have it." He held the blue bottle up for her, his hairy paw wrapped around its throat. He sloshed it about.

"I'd reckon there's about a shot left."

"Perfect," she smiled out of obligation. "Thanks so much." She snatched it away from him, managing to avoid his touch altogether.

She hurried back down the aisle toward the shrieking boy and his stoic companion.

"A shot of Pinnacle, as promised," she said, holding it out to the woman with pride. "Free of charge." The woman reached across the boy and took the bottle, offering it to him without interest. The boy clutched at it greedily, bringing its glass rim to his lips and sucking at the contents. He spluttered for a moment, dropping the empty bottle onto his lap and puckering his lips in an entirely ugly expression. But the crying did not continue. After a few hiccups, his head lolled back against the seat, though his eyes remained open. The flight attendant rejoiced.

"I thought he'd cry all the way to Tokyo," the woman confessed, sharing the briefest of smiles with the flight attendant. "But I'm sure he'll start back up again. They say it comes in three's, you know."

"What did you say?" the flight attendant gasped.

"The crying. They say it comes in waves of three on big trips like this." The flight attendant shuddered at the significance of the moment.

"May I ask you your name?" she asked the woman in a soft, eager voice.

"Martha." The flight attendant nearly lost her footing and the woman looked concerned for a moment.

"Are you quite alright?"

"Oh, yes," the flight attendant murmured. "That was my mother's name. Have a nice flight." She floated back towards her seat at the front of the plane, her mind returning to the turquoise pool.

"Doris," the flight attendant hissed. "Doris, you won't believe it! I've already gotten the first sign!" She poked Doris in excitement, lowering herself to sit beside the large black woman.

"I've just met a rather bratty young boy and the woman sitting beside him proved to be most clairvoyant. It was such an important moment, Doris, I could feel it. She seemed to look right into me, this woman did. And, wouldn't you believe it, her name was Martha! Yes, that's right! My very own mother's name! Now, I'm sorry, but not even a graduate from Harvard could convince me that's pure coincidence." Doris muttered a few supportive sounds under her breath as she continued to nap. Her uniform was already quite wrinkled, the flight attendant observed with sympathy. "My mother never took me on flights, though," the flight attendant continued, undeterred. "In fact, she never actually took me anywhere. She always insisted that she would become quite embarrassed if she were required to tote me around in public like a piece of luggage." The plane tilted gently upwards, and Doris' head was pulled toward her chest.

The second sign did not come until much later in the flight, nearly nine hours in. The flight attendant spent her time patiently, biding it intermittently with quick trips to the lavatory, sleep, and journaling. Her handwriting was immaculate. During the eighth hour, in the middle of a sentence (...a woman of great poise and inspiration, whom I know we shall all miss as we...) one of the call buttons chimed, accompanied by the flare of a bright blue light. The flight attendant snapped her journal shut, eyed Doris - who was snoring - and walked towards the light.

"How can I help you tonight?" she asked, her voice a polite lilt. A middle-aged man looked up at her, his wrinkles bunching in welcome.

"Hi there," he greeted her. His voice crackled with heat, like that of a contained and gentle fire. "Would you mind telling me what time it is?" She straightened her right arm slowly, as to avoid wrinkles, and tilted her wrist just so she could read the silver watch's face.

"It's nearly six in the morning, sir," she answered him. "But that's Pacific Time. I'm not sure what time it is exactly where we are. But I can tell you we've been flying for almost nine hours, and that we're nearing the last leg of our trip. Tokyo is waiting for us." The man nodded and seemed to settle deeper into his seat.

"Something kind of nice about not belonging to time for a while," he said, letting his head fall back. The flight attendant knew that the seats were not comfortable. In fact, she would agree with some that might argue the seats were actively uncomfortable. But, even though the man's knees seemed pressed into the seat back in front of him, he appeared so peaceful and at ease that the flight attendant yearned for her own seat.

"Would you mind," the man asked, his voice wrapping her in warmth, "just staying and talking with me for awhile? I'm having such a hard time sleeping, and it's gotten quite lonely." The flight attendant thought of her journal, and the sentence she had abandoned. But that thought was chased away by her dream.

"Why, it'd be my pleasure," she smiled widely. She placed her arm gently on the headrest of his chair, and stooped a bit, shrinking towards him. "May I ask what's bringing you to Tokyo?" "Oh, just change, I guess you'd call it. Needed a little bit of change." The man glanced at his knees, knocking them together like a shy child, before continuing. "My wife just left me."

"Oh," the flight attendant cried. "Oh, I am so dreadfully sorry. I really am. That's just awful."

"Yes," the man agreed. "It is. But that woman was always such a free spirit. She was never meant to be mine forever. God,

will I always love her though. She changed my life, Martha did." The flight attendant stooped lower, drawn towards the man in a ravenous hunger.

"Martha, you said?" she whispered, trembling with excitement. "Her name is Martha?"

"Yes," the man said. "Martha May Francs. Well, Francs is my last name. She'll be changing it back to Martha May Rogers now."

"This all must have been so hard for you," the flight attendant said.

"Oh, it has."

"Yes?"

"You wouldn't believe the stubbornness of this woman. She intends to take full custody, but I assure you that I am fighting with everything I have to maintain joint ownership."

"Oh, you've kids?"

"No, I wasn't able to ever give her that. I'm not fighting for children."

"Then I'm not sure what you mean. Custody over..."

"I'm fighting for our piano."

"Your what?"

"Our 1988 Steinway. Cream. A perfectly restored grand piano that can summon the sunbeams of heaven. It's a divine thing. Truly. I simply can't live without it."

"I see," the flight attendant nodded without understanding.

"But, as Martha still owns the house, and I've been exiled to a dingy studio apartment, I have no room for the Steinway. It appears that I shall only win visitation rights. Twice a week, for an hour at max."

"How dreadful."

"Quite."

"My mother used to play the piano," the flight attendant told the man. "It was her party trick."

"Is that so? Was she talented?"

"I'm not sure," the flight attendant confessed. "She only ever played one song. The same at every party."

"Which was it?"

"I can't hardly remember now. She never let me near enough to listen for very long. If I strayed too close while she was playing, she slammed her fingers down on the keys in a great fit of disapproval, and whirled off into the crowd, leaving me to stare at the empty bench." The two were silent for a moment, each imagining the slow, graceful piano music drifting sleepily between them.

The flight attendant spent another fifteen or twenty minutes with the man, engaging in the most polite and well-poised small talk she could manage. But her mind returned again and again to her mother's long, pale fingers - usually accented in a deep and bloody red - splayed across piano keys. She finally excused herself to the lavatory, as the man began to drift into sleep, and then returned to her journal. The eulogy was to be perfect. Refined, yet moving. Eloquent, but vulnerable. The balance suddenly felt unbearable.

The plane landed smoothly. It was midnight, of two days later. The time difference had delivered the passengers from a Californian night to a Japanese one, and the engulfing, ongoing darkness felt eerie. Doris was shaken awake as the plane landed, wiping a bit of drool off her chin with the heel of her hand. She had slept well. She eyed the flight attendant next to her, who was sitting with perfect posture, her legs crossed neatly, her entire concentration directed into a small journal in her lap. She was reading furiously, nodding to herself. Doris sighed and closed her eyes again.

As passengers began unloading, the flight attendant made eye contact with each of them, searching.

"Sayōnara," she said. She had looked up the Japanese word for good-bye on her way to the airport in L.A. and had practiced it over and over until she felt confident with the pronunciation. The flight attendant felt hollow. The plane was empty.

The pilot was the last to exit the plane. He was thinking of the flight attendant, hurting for her again. He sought to find her, to ask her for a drink, to see if the night could lead to someplace familiar, as it had before. He heard faint crying as he looked down the aisle, but could see only the knees and black heels of a woman. The pilot walked toward her, and found the flight attendant sitting in one of the seats. She was crumpled in on herself, her uniform bulging near her stomach and bunching at her knees. Her fingers running through her hair, causing it to spring loose from its bun. He said her name hesitantly. Her head snapped up, and he recoiled from her unkempt face. Mascara ran down her cheeks, splattered on her marble white skin.

"I don't understand," she cried, whining like an animal.

"Don't understand what?" he asked her, beginning to back away. The hurt for her was fading into something like boredom.

"I missed something. She always told me I didn't look hard enough." The flight attendant's head fell back into her hands, her shoulders heaving with broken breaths. The pilot muttered his condolences - he knew she had lost her mother earlier this week. He made his exit, leaving her to murmur over and over again, "What did I miss? What did I miss?"