

# The Birds: To Fly Among the Birds

written by Guest Contributor | April 9, 2021



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They arrive a few minutes earlier than anticipated, deviating from the embossed schedule that sits crumpled within my hand. The sound of them slicing across the horizon sends tremors radiating down Beau's back, the knots of his spine convoluting against the clamor. I lean down, placing a hand on the back of his head, hoping to assuage the panic that swims in those milky eyes. It does little to ease him though and the earthquake beneath his skin continues to shift, sending undulations fluttering over edges of arthritic bone. A low-pitched keening slips from between his panting lips. Beau wants to be here as little as I do.

Tangerine blossoms across the horizon, chasing away night and dragging my eyes up and away from Beau's fur. Light folds across the crowd of figures, illuminating our black garments in shades of gold. I bring a hand up to my brow, shielding against the sun's assault to peer in the direction of the planes. Wind reaches out with unseen fingers, whipping tendrils of hair into my red eyes. A gasp sounds from somewhere behind me and I tear my hair away in time to see sunlight glinting off a metallic wing.

Seven perfect silhouettes in a loose V-formation streak toward us, eating up wasps of clouds in their wake. They drop lower, leaving forgotten ribbons of white puffs trailing behind. The feeling of déjà vu hits, tainting fragmented memories from happier times. Squeezing an eye shut, I try to focus on the cracked paint and worn letters I know adorn each aircraft. They're too high to see of course but the failed effort soothes my spirit and holds the grief at bay. The noise builds to a crescendo as they fly over in tribute and head towards the vacant field that sits adjacent to the cemetery.

I think of the person they honor today, Beau's favorite human. The tall, hunched man with pink tennis balls jammed on the ends of his walker and stickers vandalizing his cane. My Grandfather had been a jolly old man—the kind of senior you see flickering across the television late at night, beaming while touting about the miracles of cholesterol medicine. But Milton hadn't *evolved* into such joyfulness. No, even during his teenage years, he had always radiated joy, or so he claimed. Pregnant tears gather on the edges of my lashes. I squeeze my eyes shut, the only defense at the tsunami that

threatens to flood over my cheeks. With eyes closed and shielding me from my gathered family, it's easy to dredge up memories of Milton. Moments, both fuzzy and fresh, spill over me, drowning me in melancholy.

My Grandfather had been lucky enough to know from the start what he wanted to pursue during his lifetime. Setting out at the tender age of 18, he pledged himself to the Air Force and climbed the ranks to become a cargo pilot. It was boring work, shifting boxes and supplies from point A to point B, but he loved it. He tried to explain, one afternoon on the porch, where his love of aviation had stemmed from.

"When I was young," he rasped, in between chomping on broken shards of pretzels. "When I was young and a schoolboy, I always had my head in the clouds. I didn't care about comic books or impressing the girls at school... I itched to get my feet off the ground. I wanted only to fly among the birds."

Eventually after all those decades, Milton's golden years hit and he retired. And my Grandfather realized he suddenly had time—too much time. Boredom snuck into his days. Most men his age took up golfing or bowling but Milton had no patience for those activities.

"Golf hurts my elbows, Linda." The same excuse he'd have ready when my Grandmother suggested he head to the Club. "Not to mention, it's boring." But there was something he missed dearly, a missing piece of his military days.

Wasting no time, Milton joined the local flying club. The Friendly Flock was a myriad of mismatched pilots, of people coming from different backgrounds and jobs, with varying degrees of expertise in aviation. They were comrades in arms, becoming family friends over the last few years. My eyes spring open automatically searching for their planes and those familiar faces of The Flock, but I don't spy them. They've already landed and parked in the field.

My eyes are dry as I walk with Beau around the crowd. Aunt Cynthia stands with my parents, the same morose expression staining their faces as they greet the latecomers. I wander away through the cemetery and past the handful of cars that crowd against the edge of the parking lot. The sun has risen higher in the sky, beating back shadows and stealing dewdrops from the grass. I look left, right, and then left again before tugging Beau across the street towards the field of parked planes.

My gaze snags on familiar blue metal sitting at the edge of the lot. I walk to Milton's plane, briefly wondering who of The Flock flew it here. My fingers brush against the cold door and I crack it open, hauling Beau up first and then sliding in after him. Scooping my dress up, I slam the door shut enclosing us in musty silence. A bag of abandoned pretzels sits sandwiched between the seats and I steal one, biting down on stale skin.

Beau must sense Milton's lingering scent in the small cockpit because his nervous panting ceases. I lean my head back against the vinyl headrest, looking past the dirty windshield. Sounds of geese flying overhead interrupt my loud crunches. I scoot forward, spying the lines of their feathered bodies cutting across the horizon. The sight of their wings doused in brilliance

leaves a lump in the back of my throat. And I find myself wondering if maybe Milton is up there somewhere now, flying among the birds.

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*featured photo by Evelyn Freja*