# Perspective

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I used to wonder, a few years ago, about railroad tracks. I’d stand between them, watch them go out into the world, and the two rails narrowed, they came together, they touched each other just five miles west, on the horizon. Monster locomotives would go hiss-thundering west through town, and since a locomotive is the kind of giant that needs its rails set just so, I knew there had to be a great pile of steaming wreckage just beyond the place where the tracks came together. I knew that the engineers had to be fiercely brave men, blurring past the Main Street crossing with a grin and a wave, facing certain death on the horizon.

Eventually, I found that the railroad tracks didn’t really meet beyond our town, but I didn’t get over my awe around railroad men till the day I met my first airplane. Since then, I’ve followed track all over the country and haven’t yet seen a set of rails come together. Ever. Anywhere.

I used to wonder, a few years ago, about fog and rain: why was it, some days, that the whole earth was gray and wet, the whole world a miserable, flat, sad place to live? I wondered how bleakness happened to the whole planet at once, and how it was that the sun, so bright yesterday, had turned to ash. Books tried to explain, but it wasn’t till I began to know an airplane that I found that clouds don’t cover the whole world at all—that even from where I stood in the worst of the rain, soaking wet on the runway, all I had to do to find the sun again was to fly above the clouds.

It wasn’t easy to do that. There were certain definite rules to follow, if I really wished to gain the freedom of clear air. If I chose to ignore those rules, if I chose to thrash around wildly, to insist that I could tell up from down all on my own, following the impulse of the body instead of the logic of understanding, I would invariably fall down. In order to find that sun, even today, I have to ignore what seems right to my eyes and hands, and rely totally on the instruments given me, no matter how strangely they seem to speak, how senseless they appear to be. Trusting those instruments is the only possible way anyone can ever break out into the sunlight. The thicker and darker the cloud, I found, the longer and more carefully I had to trust the pointers and my skill in knowing what they say. I proved it over and again: if only I kept climbing, I could reach the top of any storm, and lift into the sun at last.

I learned, when I began flying, that boundaries between countries, with all their little roads and gates and checkpoints and Prohibited signs, are quite difficult to see from the air. In fact, from altitude I couldn’t even tell when I had flown across the border of one country into another, or what language was in fashion on the ground.

An airplane will bank to the right with right aileron, I found, no matter if it’s American or Soviet, British or Chinese or French or Czech or German, no matter who’s flying it, no matter what insignia is painted on the wing.

I’ve seen this and more, flying, and it all falls under one label. Perspective. It is perspective, it is getting above the railroad track, that shows we needn’t fear for the safety of locomotives. It is perspective that shows us beyond the illusion of a sun’s death, that suggests if we lift ourselves high enough, we’ll realize that the sun has never left us at all. It is perspective that shows the barriers between men to be imaginary things, made real only by our own believing that barriers exist, by our own bowing and cringing and constant fear of their power to limit us.

It is perspective that stamps itself upon every person up for his first flight in an airplane: “Hey, the traffic down there … the cars look like toys!”

As he learns to fly, the pilot discovers that the cars down there are toys, after all. That the higher one climbs, the farther he sees; the less important are the affairs and crises of those who cling to the ground.

From time to time, then, as we walk our way on this little round planet, it’s good to know that a lot of that way can be flown. We might even find, at the end of our journey, that the perspective we’ve found in flight means something more to us than all the dust-mote miles we’ve ever gone.