

On the Road, In the Air

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Maybe everyone in the world already knew this but me, but I discovered yesterday that they cannot fuel an airplane if there is lightning in the vicinity. I discovered this because I had to sit in the Knoxville airport for several hours waiting for the lightning to go away.

When you are waiting to board a plane and the weather is terrible, you try to think about other things. And so I sat at the airport thinking about poetry. This is the poem, by Billy Collins, that came to my mind, and it was not at all in the category of "other things":

PASSENGERS

At the gate, I sit in a row of blue seats
With the possible company of my death,
This sprawling miscellany of people—
Carry-on bags and paperbacks—

That could be gathered in a flash
Into a band of pilgrims on the last open road.
Not that I think
If our plane crumpled into a mountain

We would all ascend together,
Holding hands like a ring of sky divers,
Into a sudden gasp of brightness,
Or that there would be some common spot

For us all to reunite to jubilize the moment,

Some spaceless, pillarless Greece
Where we could, at the count of three,
Toss our ashes into the sunny air.

It's just that the way that man has his briefcase
So carefully arranged,
The way that girl is cooling her tea,
And the flow of the comb that woman

Passes through her daughter's hair...
And when you consider the altitude,
The secret parts of the engines,
And all the hard water and the deep canyons below...

Well, I just think it would be good if one of us
Maybe stood up and said a few words,
Or, so as not to involve the police,
At least quietly wrote something down.

I looked around. There were two teenage boys, each juggling two pairs of rolled socks that they had taken out of backpacks. A young couple dealing with a perpetual-motion toddler. Many people talking into cell phones, rearranging their plans because of the delayed take-off.

Finally the lightning moved beyond the hills, into the distance, and they were able to re-fuel.. No one stood and said a few words before we all climbed aboard a fairly small plane to hurtle through the rain and the huge roiling clouds. We just shuffled past the person who scanned our boarding passes, found our seats, picked up our airline magazines, and opened our paperback mysteries.

The pilot quoted Bette Davis in "All About Eve" and the passengers chuckled. Then we all ascended together.

But I felt that Billy Collins had gotten it just right, the way he usually does.

And now I am in Houston, and the sun is shining.

Tags: Untagged