

BARBARA LAWRENCE

After the Swim, 2014
Oil on canvas, 30 x 36 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

CODY PEACE ADAMS

Spin the Bottle

Asher Muncy snapped awake at Gate 38 of the San Francisco International Airport, irritated at drowsing off before his flight. Falling asleep during air travel was an exact science for him and any premature slip of the eyelids could sabotage the whole affair. He removed the bottle of expired medication from his pocket: *Dana Muncy, take one tablet before bed as needed; do not operate heavy machinery; do not ingest alcohol; use care until you become familiar.* It had been impossible to tell as he sorted through his mother's belongings what belonged to Dana and what to Deborah. In their later years, after consolidating their households, the twins had taken to sharing absolutely everything: their clothing, their money, their bed, and, as Asher suspected, even the single toothbrush on premises. The only item he could definitively attribute to his mother was this bottle of sleeping pills, and even that she had shared with her sister at the end. He had left the rest of the detritus to his cousin and an eventual estate sale.

Asher sat facing the gate to avoid looking at the clusters of travelers shuffling along the arc of the terminal concourse. People in airports had a strange propensity for seeking eye contact with strangers, only to accelerate away, wheeled luggage nipping at their heels. Airport faces titillated the periphery of Asher's vision with shadowy memories of classmates he had distantly hated in high school. And he always had to look, to make sure it was only an illusion. It was better to stare through the windows at the taxiing planes, reminiscent of horses being stabled for the night.

11:11 p.m. winked out on the digital banner above the Delta check-in attendants, replaced by *CANCELED*. Like prairie dogs signaling the approach of a predator, half-dozing heads popped up around him, registering squawks of disapproval: "Can you believe that?" "Ah, shit!" "Fuck me." This communal aggravation goaded a dispirited stampede to the gate counter. Asher did not rise from his plastic seat. Old women, backpacking couples, young mothers, and a variety of ageless professional men in cheap slacks and tucked-in shirts crowded in front of the Delta employees, muttering predictable, half-hearted opprobrium. Asher watched as the older gentleman in charge of the desk hushed the mob by speaking over it into his intercom receiver.

“Flight 112 with beverage service to Portland, Oregon has been canceled due to unforeseeable technical difficulties. The plane is grounded in Phoenix, and will be unable to continue its journey. A replacement flight is currently being arranged, but will not depart from San Francisco International Airport until, at the earliest, 9:00 A.M. tomorrow morning. If you wish, we can assist you with rescheduling flights through other airlines, provided you can pay the fare difference. Thank you for choosing Delta.”

This announcement generated muffled outrage, and soon babies, and even one teenage boy, began to cry at a soft frequency nearly canceled out by the background hum of the night terminal. Asher was crestfallen, but he had learned not to question the temperamental god of airports, a thousand-armed titan cruising its winged toys around the country as it saw fit. He would not sleep in his own bed that evening, that was all. Nothing awaited him in Oregon, other than a deadline for the Arts & Leisure section of the *Salem Statesman*, and even then he could catch a matinee of his film assignment the next day and plunk out a review by five o’clock. The real difficulty lay in falling asleep at Gate 38, as Asher could not pay for an airport hotel room; the funeral expenses had drained his meager savings and Delta had refused to honor the death certificate (his cousin had taken Dana’s by mistake, leaving Asher with the not-close-enough-kin Deborah’s). The voice of the public faded to a low grumble as travelers lined up to change flights, drifted away to make phone calls, or found secluded nooks in which to ride out the bright airport night. Asher again slipped the bottle of sleeping pills out of his pocket. He checked his watch—10:13 P.M.—and made his decision.

He entered the nearest men’s bathroom, stood at the row of metal sinks, unscrewed the child safety lid, and shook a small, blue pill into his open hand. He raised it to his face and read the tiny, etched word: *Dormax*. Asher had never heard of the brand, but then again he had never taken a sleeping pill before. Dana Muncy had never mentioned the pills, and the cause of death had not been discussed at the funeral. He shook out two more pills, and, avoiding his doughy reflection, leaned down to the automatic faucet for a mouthful of water that tasted of bleach and rust.

* * *

Thirty minutes later Asher sat at Gate 38, facing the concourse. Though he found himself, if anything, less sleepy than before, a furry warmth had spread into his arms and legs, and a baseless sense of well-being pervaded his consciousness. Foot traffic had slowed considerably, but that gave Asher the time and focus to carefully observe the human beings circling around the terminal like carousel fixtures. A hugely fat woman with a four-footed cane trundled by, and Asher realized that she bore a striking resemblance to his kindergarten teacher, Miss Gray, who always wore the same purple muumuu and whom Asher saw one time at the grocery store piloting a motorized cart. She had winked at Asher then, and the obese woman did the same now as she caught his gaze. He smiled and looked down, and when he looked back up he locked eyes with the man with a shrunken, nubby arm who had come to his mother’s door one afternoon when Asher was in middle school, a UNICEF can clutched to his chest with tiny, raw-pink fingers. Asher jolted, but relaxed when he saw that the man in the airport clutched not a tin can, but a Diet Coke against his ribs.

“Red purse. We have a red purse,” the PA system said. “Will the owner of the red purse please come to the Delta courtesy desk?” Understanding crept up on Asher from his tingling belly; the message was meant for him. He stood and almost buckled. His head hadn’t felt so light since huffing glue on a third grade playdate with one of the other poor kids in his class, and he began to love the airport.

Wandering for a few minutes around the arc of the terminal, Asher remembered what he had gotten up to do, and doubled back to the Delta courtesy station, next to the Admiral’s Club. An Indian man in a blue vest and maroon tie greeted him with steely apathy, and at first refused to believe that the red purse did indeed belong to Asher.

“My mother just died,” Asher said, the smile below his moustache faltering, “and this was her favorite purse.”

“My mother died, too,” the Delta employee said, “just two years ago. I think of her face and mourn her loss every day.” He handed the purse over to Asher without further question or comment.

“Thank you, sir,” Asher said. “Your mother would be very proud of you.” The attendant nodded with watering eyes, and turned away.

The purse, red leather with looping handles, was oversized even in Asher’s meaty hands, and yet curiously light. He unlatched the shining clasp and peered inside to find an empty glass milk bottle and nothing else.

“Oh, you’ve got my bag.” Beside Asher stood a young woman, younger than him, anyway, wearing a sleek red evening dress nearly the shade of her bright red hair. Nearly the color of Asher’s hair.

“No I haven’t,” Asher said. “I have my mother’s red purse.”

“Is there a bottle inside?” she asked.

“I’m sorry for the mix-up, miss.” Asher handed the woman her purse. He brimmed with hot, syrupy shame. Of course the purse wasn’t his mother’s; she’d hated bright colors and was buried in a black dress.

“Are you a Delta employee?” the woman asked. Even her nostrils flared red.

“No,” Asher said, straightening the knot of the red tartan tie tucked into his gray sweater vest. “I just dress like this.” Her green eyes danced, and he felt he had known her all his life.

“I like to dress up to go to the airport, too,” she said, and gave Asher a brief twirl, a flash of her white calves, and an uneven smile. “Are you a liar?”

“Yes, I suppose I am,” Asher said.

“Me too.” She wrapped her fingers through his as the purse slid to the crook of her elbow. Her palm was cool and damp. Wet electricity surged up Asher’s arm into a dry, numb corner of his chest, and he tore his fingers out of hers and wrapped her up in a forceful hug. She stiffened and gasped, and then melted into his arms. She felt small and bony against Asher’s chest, her heartbeat rapid and insubstantial like a hamster’s.

“Ah-ah-ah-CHOOO!”

“Did you just sneeze into my hair?”

Asher uncoiled his arms and stood before her, teeming again with shame and doubt. “I’m sorry. If you’ll excuse me, I’ll find solace elsewhere.”

“What’s your name?”

“Asher.”

“You don’t look Jewish,” she said, looking him over carefully. “Just fat.”

“I’m not. My mother just liked the name. Though I wouldn’t mind if I were. Jewish. I am fat, though.” Why

deny it? His convexity matched perfectly the concavity of the conditioned air.

“That’s just fine.”

Asher could scarcely talk to women under the best of circumstances, he remembered, tongue shriveling. The woman waited for him to speak, sniffing and rubbing her nose.

“Well, it was nice meeting you, Asher,” she said.

“Where are you going?”

“Hmm?”

“I mean, where are you flying to?”

“Oh. Somewhere. But I don’t know how I’m going to sleep on that plane. I’ve had too interesting an evening.” She was glancing over her shoulder now, squinting little smiles at the occupants of a double-barrel baby carriage.

“I’ve got sleeping pills,” Asher said.

“Do you now?” She refocused on Asher as he fumbled the bottle out of his pocket and pried off the lid.

“How many do you want?” he asked.

“How many do I need?”

“Usually about three does the trick.”

“Give me four,” she said in a whisper, scooting closer. He doled four tiny robin eggs onto her delicate palm.

“Thanks, Asher,” she said and popped two Dormax into her mouth. “Two to relax, and two for the plane.”

“You know, that sounds like a good idea.” Asher dribbled two more pills into his hand and dry-swallowed.

* * *

After drifting a full revolution around the circular terminal, Asher and the woman sat down at a nearly empty gate, flushed, and let their hearts pump Dormax through their veins, breathing softly and touching each other’s clammy fingers and palms.

“What’s your name?” Asher asked.

The woman did not answer, opting instead to air out her armpits with flair. The mammalian physicality of the act irked Asher. Images of his mother’s panty hose and the smell of baby powder troubled him through the cotton-candy cloud of Dormax.

“Will you tell me?” Asher asked again.

“No.”

“You don’t...you don’t feel like we’ve met before?” Asher saw a red-headed girl in a red jumper, sitting ahead of

him on the school bus, on the morning when he brushed her foot from behind, accidentally on purpose, only for her to turn around and tell him to stop playing footsie with her, which soon metastasized into a bus-long chant, one of Asher’s earliest enduring recollections of humiliation.

“Sure, you’re that guy with the pills,” the woman said. “Dressed like a stewardess.”

Asher blanched and let his hands dangle between his knees. He had bungled every opportunity in his life, and still he couldn’t find her name. Instead, he sat up, closed his eyes, and slipped his arm around the woman’s shoulders. Without hesitation she leaned into him and rested her head in the crook of his neck.

“That’s better than a sneeze,” she said. “Speaking of which, do you have any more pills?”

Asher could feel her lips moving against his collarbone, and his knees shook involuntarily. Her chest hitched, and the warm shape immediately withdrew.

“Oh. Oh my,” she said.

“Oh no,” he said.

“Yeah,” she said and looked away.

Asher crossed his legs to hide his erection. “I didn’t mean it like that. I didn’t mean anything, I mean.”

The woman stood up and pestled her palms into her eye sockets. “It’s fine. It’s okay. Nature’s thumbs up.”

“It’s just...it’s been awhile, and you, well, you—”

“I’m going to go, I think. I don’t know what came over me. It’s better that we, ah, don’t. Maybe I’ll see you again in another life, Asher.” She picked up her red purse and backed away a step.

“Excuse me, sir,” a new voice said. Asher jerked around and laid his arms over his lap. A Delta employee stood behind him, the older man from before. Asher realized he had ended up right back at Gate 38. “You were waiting on the flight to Portland, correct?”

“Yes, I was.”

“Well, there’s a flight out of Terminal 3 through Southwest that will connect you to Flagstaff, where there’s a Delta connection that will get you to Portland by 4:00 A.M.”

“Right, right. I think...I think I’ll just wait for the flight from here tomorrow.”

“Off the record, sir, negotiations with the pilots’ union have faltered, and by 9:00 A.M. tomorrow, I wouldn’t expect to fly Delta for at least a week. So...unless you want

to buy a new ticket from another airline, or wait here for arbitration to take its course.”

“Arbitration? When’s the flight to Flagstaff?”

“In thirty minutes. You’ll need to leave here immediately. Southwest will honor your ticket.”

“Looks like you’ve got a flight to catch, Asher,” the woman said from a distance. “Good luck!”

Asher turned back to her as she retreated, a diminishing red smudge against the white walls and tiles.

“The flight is boarding shortly. I suggest you hurry.”

“How do I get my luggage?”

“You don’t have time for that, sir.”

* * *

The Southwest gate attendant took pity on the profusely sweating Asher, and hailed the flight crew to let one more passenger board before taxiing. He trotted, wheezing, down the Jetway, and slipped aboard past an irritated stewardess. Spotting only one opening, he spidered around an obese man in a business suit to take a middle seat in the middle aisle. On his other side sat a young Hasid dressed in black and wearing a large, round-brimmed hat. Although sparse of beard, the Hasid was tall, and the back of his hat rested on the top of the headrest. Asher slotted his seatbelt, breathing heavily as quietly as he could. A hot echo from his now flaccid penis triggered terrible sense memories of gym class and tepid bath water. Asher could feel his smell wafting from his cooling skin and soggy underclothes, and he tried to shrink into himself, covering his face with his hands. The migraine light of economy class faded, and he detected a trace of the woman in red on his fingers, a wisp of ephemeral perfume. He sniffed his fingers until it was gone.

The onboard intercom broke his reverie, gently demanding that he watch the discolored screen at the front of his section for emergency directives about flotation devices. Asher placed his hands in his lap and stared ahead, trying to ignore the fatter man on his left’s unveiled attempts to shift away from Asher’s stink. The Hasid on his right fetched a kosher brand of pretzel snacks from his carry-on bag and crinkled it open.

“Would you like one?” the Hasid asked, his voice soft and fluty.

“Oh, thank you,” Asher said, “but I’m on medication right now.”

“I see.”

“My name’s Asher.”

“Ah. Are you—”“No, I’m taking sleeping pills. Would you like one?”

The Hasid twizzled a patch of beard. “I think I would. I’m flying all the way to New York, and I never can sleep on airplanes.”

Asher tapped two Dormax pills onto his neighbor’s long, white fingers. He then doled out two for himself.

“You’re also going to New York?” the Hasid asked.

“No, Flagstaff.”

“But that shouldn’t take more than—what?—an hour and a half?”

“Well, you know, catch as catch can,” Asher said, and popped the pills into his mouth. The Hasid shrugged and did the same.

“May you have a blessed flight.” With that, the Hasid plugged iPod buds into his ears, folded his arms over his chest, and closed his eyes.

As Asher cooled off and focused on the incoming tide of blue throughout his body, the plane finished taxiing, and, after a pregnant, motionless period of silence, the engines whirled to life, loud and hungry, gobbling the night air, launching the plane into its brief and unnerving terrestrial motion. Asher clenched his jaw until he felt the tires leave the runway, when the plane became weightless and the potential for disaster disappeared.

The plane angled higher and higher, and the only evidence of movement Asher could discern from the middle of the cabin was the slight, pleasant tug of gravity on his testicles. Eventually a signal went *bing* overhead and the flight attendants returned, scuttling back and forth with purpose, eerily quiet in their movements aside from the reassuring whisper of their polyester uniforms. Asher began to feel better as the woman in red faded into the symphony of sniffles, coughs, shifting bodies, the early sounds of communal, public sleep. Asher, however, was not tired in the least. Or at least, not sleepy. His eyes would hardly close if he tried. He suddenly needed to apply himself, to channel his formidable skill and energy and grief into a productive outlet, or just move again, disperse the burbling pharmaceutical energy churning in his gut, but his exits were blocked by his neighbors; the dozing fat man was too protuberant for Asher to attempt another slide-by, and the

gangly Hasid, though navigable, was strangely resplendent in his black attire, delicate and holy, not to be touched or disturbed in any way. Asher knew that the plane remained aloft on this man’s concentration and good will; any suspension or interruption thereof was a tremendous risk.

“Good evening, and thank you for joining us on our full-service flight to New York, with stops in Flagstaff and Chicago. Snack boxes are available for seven dollars and ninety-nine cents from any of our flight attendants. We’ll be starting the first of two in-flight movies in just a few minutes: *Taxi III*, starring Jimmy Fallon and Queen Latifah. Runtime is seventy-three minutes, audio on channel five. Thank you for choosing Southwest, and we hope you enjoy your flight.”

Asher jammed the call button, amazed at his luck. The very movie he was assigned to review was already showing on airplanes, and he was brimming with creative and critical energy, among other feelings he couldn’t quite identify but treasured nonetheless. A flight attendant appeared and leaned over the majestic Hasid.

“I need a pad of paper, a pencil, and a set of earphones immediately,” Asher said.

“I’ll see about the paper, and it’ll be four dollars for the headphones, sir.”

“And a pencil.” Asher slipped his wallet out and flicked four dollar bills at the attendant, who snatched them out of the air and handed Asher a plastic sack of airline earbuds. She returned with a pad of Southwest stationary and a pencil stub. Asher dismissed the stewardess with a wave of his hand, his professional grain rising through the chaff of his body. The opening credits of the film unspooled on the screen four rows ahead, and Asher started writing his review.

Opening in late February, Jimmy Fallon’s *Taxi III: Taxicab* features a bold substitution of audible dialogue and sound effects for an entirely extradiegetic soundtrack of soothing and forgettable soft rock tracks interspersed with periodic advertisements for Southwest Airlines. Costume design by Henrietta Weiss. Extraordinary. The color palette is dingy and stained. Queen Latifah runs taxi dispatch. Traffic and congestion plague the modern cityscape, in stark opposition to the relaxing music of Jack Johnson. Car chases, masks, and bags of money. And explosions!

Despair. Police station, mustaches; Jimmy Fallon tosses his badge on the desk of a man who must surely be the police commissioner. Probably his mother has died, but he bears it as he bears the degradation of. Mouths move, a woman is introduced and her body language is angry, dissatisfied. She is typical of all women as she slaps Jimmy Fallon and shoves him out the door. Jimmy Fallon is sad. Taxicab. Night drifting: phantasmagoria; the melting faces of everyone you’ve ever disappointed; radical experimental departure of narrative into fifty-five-minute montage of violently shifting geometric shapes. Fade to black. Rated PG-13 for scenes of mild gunfire. Four out of four stars.

Asher’s pencil fingers ached but his soul swooned; he had just completed the finest piece of film criticism ever to grace a regional newspaper. The flight was well into its approach at the Flagstaff airport, and the plane descended appreciably. When the plane hit the runway with a heart-breaking thump and shudder, Asher lost the struggle against returning gravity and felt his brain and entrails fall to the earth, trailing flumes of precious blue energy. Post-coital without the coit.

* * *

There was only one terminal at Flagstaff, comprised of a dozen run-down gates, a convenience store, a Dutch Bros. Coffee, a McDonald’s Express, and a sports bar, which at 2:30 A.M. local time was the only establishment open. Asher spotted the analog Arrival/Departure board; two Delta flights were listed, one to Minneapolis, and one to Portland. The Portland flight was on time, and set to depart at 3:20 A.M. Then, just as institutional certainty had begun to thaw the frozen strangeness in Asher’s chest, both Delta listings disappeared into a slot machine swirl. The analog characters resolved at random, piecing out *CANCELED*. The airport PA crackled alive.

“Attention all Delta passengers. As of 2:30 A.M., negotiations between the pilots’ union and Delta airlines have been terminated. Effective immediately all Delta pilots are on strike. All Delta flights are grounded until further notice. If you have a valid reservation, please see the Delta representative at Gate 9 to assess your options. Thank you for choosing Delta.”

Hopeless wails erupted from the two affected gates. The disenfranchised Delta customers rose to their feet and shuffled toward the counter at Gate 9 like eroded spirits lost in the underworld. This turn of events did not affect Asher deeply. His head felt like a leather balloon on a short tether from his spine, and the cancellation seemed as inevitable as his own death. Still, he needed to find a route home, if only because he had nowhere else to go, so he joined the moaning line. Minutes expired, and travelers gradually peeled off, chafing with resignation. Asher’s turn arrived, and the elderly attendant asked for his name without looking up.

“You’re rerouted from San Francisco?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“To Portland?”

“Yes.”

“Alright.” She creaked the keyboard keys one at a time. “There aren’t any flights to Portland from this airport until Delta settles. We can route you back to San Franciscy this afternoon via Southwest and get you to Portland in the early evening.”

“Is there any other way? I need to get back in the air as soon as possible.”

She frowned and clacked another glacial refrain. “Not really. There’s a flight to Dallas leaving in an hour through Southwest, a few flights to San Francisco from Dallas in the early morning. But the amount of time—” “I’ll take it. I’ll take that,” Asher said.

The attendant looked up, her eyes young and wet in her cratered face. “Really?”

* * *

Asher could not shake the feeling that he had lost part of his essence to the vitality of his film review, and he headed straightaway to the sports bar to fill himself back up the only way he knew how. He keistered onto a wheezing stool, but before he could order, a hand dropped on his shoulder.

“This one’s on me, pal.” An older man in a full pilot’s uniform and angular cap sat down on an adjacent stool. “You’re a Delta passenger, right, bucko?”

“Yes, I was,” Asher said.

“Shame, shame. Those twerps cook their books crookeder than a Siamese ass-crack.” The pilot’s face was more lined than wrinkled, and he sported a full gray mustache, nearly the same size and shape as Asher’s.

“You don’t have to buy me a drink. I’ll be okay,” Asher said.

“Nonsense. Consider it a consolation from the unfriendly skies. Barkeep, two double Jamesons. Neat.”

“Thanks. Thank you. I appreciate that,” Asher said.

“Don’t worry about it, I can never spend enough money. I’m always in the fucking clouds, nothing to buy up there,” the pilot said. The bartender slid over two glasses of straight whiskey and the pilot dropped a fifty on the bar top.

“Don’t you have a family?” Asher asked.

“Hell, I’ve got three families. There’s a duplex in San Francisco with Samantha, two kids; an apartment in Chicago with Courtney, one kid; and a condo in D.C. with Dana. *Three* kids with that one. She’s only 28, can you believe it?”

“Dana,” Asher said.

“Yeah, she’s the pick of the litter. Hasn’t started the full-court sag.”

“You have three families?”

“Sure. A lot of pilots have different theaters of operation. A lot of the older ones do, anyway.” He took a mouthful of whiskey and wiped his mouth with back of his hand.

“I don’t see...how you can do that?” Asher’s voice was neutral, as if he was pondering the solution to a logic problem.

“Easiest thing in the world. Schedule’s completely irregular. You put in a day here, two days there. Nobody suspects a thing. Everything’s in the names of the wives, and the government don’t know squat about it.”

“I see. The children, though, they—”

“They do alright. Although I haven’t been to Chicago in a couple months. I feel a little bad about that.”

“You should,” Asher said, and took half of his whiskey in a gulp.

“Let me tell you something, friendo. I love my kids. I do. No one can tell me I don’t love my children. But you can’t get too attached to anyone. That’s the only way you can really get hurt, and it’s a weakness.” The pilot paused and took another slug of Jameson. “So that’s why I treat them like shit when I’m there. Make it look like I don’t care. Breaks my fucking heart, tell the truth. But they have to learn. They know I’m always somewhere, but that I’m never really anywhere, and I don’t give a shit.”

“That doesn’t sound much different from my childhood,” Asher said.

“Did you ever see your father?” the pilot asked.

“He left when I was three. I think he’s probably dead.” He finished his drink and coughed.

“Well my kids, most of them, see me at least a couple of times a year. And it keeps the lesson fresh. No girly handkerchief, looking-out-windows-at-the-rain horseshit, imagining I’m a spy or a fairy or dead or any of that jazz. Prevents over-attachment to the mothers. Do you get it?”

“I don’t know.”

“You get it.” The pilot finished the last of his whiskey and clinked his glass on the counter. “You get it.”

“I don’t,” Asher said.

“‘The man who loves gives hostages to fortune.’ LBJ said that.”

Asher and the pilot sat in silence for some time, Asher looking down at the counter and the pilot scratching his mustache and watching the muted television mounted in the corner.

“You up for another round?” the pilot asked.

“No, thank you. I’ve got to take a pill,” Asher said. He took the bottle from his pocket and placed it on the counter.

“What’ve you got there?”

“Sleeping pills.”

“What brand?”

“Dormax, I think.”

“Dormax? You’ve got Dormax?” The pilot snatched the bottle off the bar and held it close to his face. “Well I’ll be damned. This was on the market for all of a week, about four years ago. This shit is a disaster. Where’d you get it?”

“My mother,” Asher said.

“Oh, brother. Listen, can I have a couple of these?”

“Why not,” Asher said. The pilot popped off the cap and shook three pills into his hand and three onto the bar top for Asher before handing the bottle back.

“Thanks, chief.” The pilot swished his mouth and checked his chunky gold wristwatch. “It’s been nice teaching you about the turds and the fleas, but I’ve got to prep for a hop to Dallas. Take care of yourself.” The pilot stood up, clapped Asher on the back, and strode out of the bar.

“Anything else?” the bartender asked.

Asher scooped the pills off the bar and placed them on his tongue. “Nuh thahs.”

* * *

The boarding call for the Southwest flight to Dallas reeled Asher to Gate 12. His head no longer felt like a balloon; in fact, it no longer felt like anything at all. Stimuli pulsed through a strange, sensationless throb in the center of his being, and the murmur of boarding passengers, the tearing of tickets, and the buzz of the overhead lights were no different to him than the components of his own body. He moved again through the walkway arm, his arm, into the orifice of the airplane cabin. The pilot from the bar brushed past him and winked as the Southwest attendant examined Asher’s ticket.

Seat 36B, Asher heard, his age, pants size, and high school GPA, and taxied down the aisle, past rows of familiar, unsmiling faces. He sat in the first open seat. A woman immediately informed him that he had made a grievous error. Unable to argue or apologize, Asher simply stood and continued down to the next open seat, which fortunately was his. The blur of colors and noise upset his stomach. Suddenly he wanted very much to sleep, but knew that he could not, could never sleep again. The pills saw to that. Sleep was replaced by elevation. All the components of a dream were present, humming and nodding. Asher sensed no movement until the plane lurched forward at the snarl of the engine turbines, and then the sweet disconnect into the sky.

The plane wobbled as it rose and Asher wobbled in his seat, alone in his row. Cold air from the lens of the window buffeted his face. The black porthole was *his* heart and his *hole* and all the events and hurt of the last week poured out of him, onto him. Dots of light from the landscape were people and instances and thoughts, and he leaned over and slammed the plastic shutter.

“Thanks for choosing Southwest,” the pilot said over the intercom, his voice prancy and his words slurred. “We’ve got an exciting flight for you to Dallas, Texas, and we should get there in about two hours. All you pudgy folks will get home to your mothers in no time at all.”

Mothers. Asher saw that the majority of the windows in the airplane were open and he had no power to close them. The leaks were many and he shivered from the exposure. A ding sounded. Southwest attendants shimmied up and down the twin aisles in their blue vests. Twinned and parallel, like the coffins at the funeral. Stewards and stewardesses moved in unison as the cheap black boxes moved

toward the twin graves on the shoulders of funeral home staff. The coffins were unlabeled and lowered into the earth on a guess; Asher had purchased one tombstone with two names. A unique scenario, the funeral home director said, unprecedented in his experience, though Asher had saved money buying two coffins at once, an unadvertised special. The morgue couldn’t tell them apart and neither could Asher at the service. Both faces were unfamiliar.

“Sir, anything to drink?” the flight attendant asked, dragging the beverage coffin up the aisle. Dana Muncy set a cup of hot cocoa in front of Asher. They sat at the kitchen table. Asher was crying. Ralph had pushed him down in the snow and stuffed piles of wet slush down his coat. His underwear was wet and cold but he couldn’t tell his mother. She had remembered the yellow and pink marshmallows. The flight attendant pulled down Asher’s lap tray and set down a stack of napkins before moving on.

Taxi III reeled in silence on the projection screen. Queen Latifah embracing Jimmy Fallon on a gurney. The film was almost over and Asher had hardly noticed it begin. A sitcom replaced the movie but the motions were the same. A couple arguing in a queen-sized bed. Asher had had the mattress thrown out when he arrived at the house in California. Two ruts remained, the size and shape of Deborah and Dana, and there were traces of hair on the pillows, mostly gray. Sometime between 9:00 and 10:00 P.M. they had lain down together with a glass of water and a handful of pills, the coroner’s report stated, and ingested a lethal dose of prescription sleeping medication. They lay together, holding hands, and fell asleep and more than that.

“I’m afraid I’ve got some bad news for you folks, depending on your perspective,” the pilot said over the intercom. “It looks like I made a few miscalculations a ways back, and we’ve flown a ways off course. So I’ve gone ahead and rerouted us to Washington, D.C. We should be there in about an hour and half. My daughter has a ballet recital in Bethesda tomorrow or yesterday. Thank you for choosing Southwest, and I’ll see you on the other side.”

Sleeping passengers stirred to the shouts of the wakeful, and soon the entire cabin reverberated with the laments of dozens of disappointed flyers. An older woman in the seat in front of Asher wept into her hands, as Asher’s cousin had done at the funeral. Asher did not cry then, but he had put a hand on her back as she sobbed. She shook it

off and moved a seat away. She had wanted two headstones. Asher did not cry then, but now he touched his chin and felt the mixture of snot and saltwater, and realized his face had been leaking for some time. Attendants ran up and down the aisles in a panic, promising and pleading. They broke out the expensive onboard champagne and poured drinks for all takers and Asher signaled for a glass. He took the bottle of pills from his pocket and dropped three tablets into the fizz, and then shot the flute all at once, as he had finished the last bottle of wine in his mother’s vacant house. A farewell to two tired old women, setting off on a grand misadventure, never to return.

Most of the other passengers had quieted down, sick from frustration and sipping too-sweet champagne. The flight neared Washington D.C. as the first signs of the onrushing dawn filtered through the windows, pale and meaningless. The coffins had a matte finish, and the wet dirt sprinkled over the top of the boxes did not contrast, passively digesting the dead women, easily forgetting. Asher refused the shovel. He had needed to know which grave to fill. But now he saw that it didn’t matter. They were in the same place and the same coffin after all. The dirt was the same as Dana and Deborah. And it was better that way; his mother could never be closer to her sister than in total uncertainty.

* * *

The plane alighted on the tarmac in D.C. and taxied with great haste to Gate 23 at Terminal 1. A final relieved ding released the passengers from their seat belts and they cascaded out of the airplane and raced up the extended Jetway into the pristine white ovum of Ronald Reagan International. Asher was among them, tugged along with the crowd on the momentum of righteous indignation and panicked dislocation. A Southwest agent met the mob at the gate and shouted directions for connecting flights west. With that, the travelers charged onward toward other gates and other destinations. Asher remained, his head spinning in the tinted morning light.

“Sir, where are you going?” the Southwest agent asked. “Home,” Asher said. “Where’s home?” “San Francisco.” “San Francisco?” The agent consulted her printed

flight manifest. “Why were you headed to San Francisco from an eastbound flight to Dallas?”

“I don’t know.” “Well, I’ve got a Southwest flight leaving for San Francisco in a half hour. It boards in ten minutes. You’ve got to go to Terminal 2.”

“How do I get there?” Asher asked. “Shit, you’re going to have to catch the shuttle. Follow those signs, you might make it if you hit a full room.”

“Room?” “You’ve got to go right now, you’ve got to run,” she said, pointing down the concourse. “Run. Run right now.”

Asher obeyed and broke into a flat run away from the attendant, clean recycled Reagan air inflating his lungs and legs. He followed a series of arrows, past junctions and gates, around a corner to an open portal jammed with travelers of all shapes and sizes. Asher could not see the other side, but he pushed his way into the clot just as a set of automatic plastic doors closed behind him. The floor shook and suddenly the room in which he stood detached from the airport and rolled onto the tarmac. Asher looked out the windows and saw a giant, wheeled room moving in the opposite direction, a crowd of people standing and waiting for the space to reattach. He had never seen anything like it in his life.

A mechanical screech pierced the hustled calm and the shuttle whiplashed to a stop. The passengers teetered, prevented from collapsing like bowling pins only by density. Asher turned away from the window and saw two dozen tired, sallow faces, stranded and uncertain.

“There has been a technical difficulty,” the shuttle intercom said, speaking from the very air. “Please be patient as we work to restore motion.” Tremors of fear and dismay snaked through the crowd. Asher was unperturbed; he had just caught a glimpse of red from the other side of the shuttle-room. He slipped through men in business suits and overcoats, teenagers with backpacks, old women and children, until he beheld the woman in red leaning against the plastic wall with her legs crossed, her red purse resting against her hips.

“I see you,” Asher said. “Asher,” she said and curled her lips. “I was hoping to run into you. Do you have any more of those pills? They’re the bee’s knees.”

Asher doled out three pills for her and three pills for himself. They swallowed together, hands held. The tall Hasid emerged to Asher's right.

"Are there more?" he asked. And of course there were. Soon the pilot of the botched flight to Dallas smelled the action and emerged from the pool of faces.

"It's been a long day," he said. "I think we ended up in Washington. Can I have another dip into that bottle of yours?" And of course he could.

"We're trapped," Asher said.

"For a while," said the woman in red.

"How do we kill the time?" Asher asked.

The woman reached into her purse and held the empty milk bottle, glistening in the early morning sun, high in the air. "I brought this in case of an emergency." She maneuvered her way to the middle of the motionless moving room, her banner held high and proud, and cleared a circle without speaking or touching another passenger. She sat down on the linoleum floor, cross-legged, and placed the bottle on its side in front of her, its open mouth facing out. Asher followed and sat by her side. The Hasid and the pilot sat across from them, filling out the circle.

The woman in red set the bottle spinning. Men and women, young and old, stood around them, watching the glass, watching the gleam. The mouth of the bottle stopped on the Hasid, and both he and the woman in red leaned in over the glass and met at the lips, kissing with open mouths. Strangers from the crowd plopped down, expanding the circle, including all who wished to be included. Asher spun the bottle, fast and clean, and it clinked to a stop on the pilot. Asher leaned in with his eyes closed and felt his moustache touch another. The pilot's lips were dry and his breath stank sweetly of whiskey.

"Go again," the woman in red whispered into Asher's ear. And so he spun the bottle again, his hand in hers. He kissed the Hasid and tasted pretzels and chastity.

"Go again," said the woman in red.

"Go again," the circle said as one. Asher spun the bottle, again and again, kissing a pregnant woman, kissing her husband, kissing a fat man, kissing a stewardess. The bottle stopped on Dana Muncy and he kissed his mother with passion, breathing her cocoa and asthma-inhaler breath, tasting her misadventure. The bottle stopped on Deborah Muncy and Asher's lips could not tell the difference.

He spun the bottle for the last time, and its mouth stopped on the woman in red, as he had always known it would, as he had known all his life.

Cody Peace Adams is a native of Salem, Oregon, who migrated to the East Coast to complete his undergraduate studies; he later matriculated at NYU's MFA program. He currently lives in Brooklyn and labors as a freelance educational design consultant, editor, resume preparer, and tutor. His writing has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *New Orleans Review*, and *Electric Literature*. Follow him on Twitter @VentnerKendo.

BARBARA LAWRENCE

Proud Tessa, 2012
Oil on canvas, 24 x 24 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST