

AT LARGE AND AT SMALL: No Step

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AND
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No Step



NICHOLSON
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In 1994, I took a nap on an airplane. On waking, I pushed up the oval window shade and looked outside. The window was surprisingly hot to the touch: incoming sunlight had bounced off the closed shade, heating it up. And the wing looked hot, too, like something you would use to press a shirt. But it wasn't hot; volumes of freezing wind were flowing over and under it—invisibly wispy, top-of-Mount-Everest wind. I was so close to the wing, closer than any other passenger, and yet unable to determine for myself, by touch, what temperature it was. Would my finger stick to it?

The plane turned, so that the long sickle shape of sun-dazzle slid from the wing and fell to earth; and then, in the shadow of the fuselage, dozens of Phillips-head screws appeared, like stars coming out in an evening sky. Some of these wing screws surrounded a stenciled message, which I read. The message was: WARNING WET FUEL CELL DO NOT REMOVE.

A few months later, on a Boeing 757, I was given a window seat with an excellent view of the right engine. The engine was painted a dark glossy blue; it hung below the wing, shiny and huge, bobbling a little in the turbulence, like a large breast or a horse's testicle. There was a message on the engine. HOIST POINT, it said.

In April of 1996 I looked out directly over another wing. Its leading edge was made of shiny naked metal, but the middle of the wing had been painted a pinky beige color. The painted part looked like a path—and because the wing tapered, the edges of the

path angled in and converged at the far end, so that it seemed by a trick of perspective to extend for miles, disappearing finally at the blue horizon. If I climbed out the window and set off down that path, I'd have to walk carefully

at first, with my knees bent to steady myself against the rush of the wind, which would otherwise flip me off into the void. But I would get my wind-legs soon enough. When I was a quarter of a mile down the wing, I'd turn and wave at the passengers. Then, shrugging my rucksack higher on my shoulders, I would set off again.

There were no words for me on that wing. But on the return flight I got a seat farther forward in the cabin, near the left engine. This engine said: CAUTION RELEASE UPPER FWD LATCH ON R.H. AND L.H. COWL BEFORE OPERATING. And it said: WARNING STAND CLEAR OF HAZARD AREAS WHILE ENGINE IS RUNNING. The hazard areas were diagrammed on a little picture. It was not difficult to heed this warning, since the areas were all out in empty space. I spent a long time looking at the engine. It was an impassive object, a dead weight—part of the problem, not part of the solution. You know when propellers are turning, because you can see them turn; but this piece of machinery gave no sign that it was what was shot-putting us forward through the sky.

Usually I don't become interested in the wing until the plane has taken off. Before that there are plenty of other things to look at—the joking baggage handlers pulling back the curtain on the first car of a three-car suitcase train; the half-height service trucks lowering their conveyors; the beleaguered patches of dry grass making a go of it between two

~ Nicholson Baker's books include *Vox*, *The Mezzanine*, and, most recently, *Double Fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper*. He writes the SCHOLAR's "At Large and At Small" column each autumn.

runways; the drooped wind sock. As you turn onto the runway, you sometimes get a glimpse of it stretching ahead, and sometimes you can even see the plane that was in line ahead of you dipping up, lifting its neck as it begins to grab the air. Before the forward pull that begins a takeoff, the cabin lights and air pressure come on, as if the pilot has awakened to the full measure of his responsibility; and then, looking down, you see the black tire marks on the asphalt sliding past, traces of heavier than usual landings. (It still seems faintly worrisome that the same runway can be used for takeoffs and landings.) Some of the black rubber marks are on a slight bias to the straightaway, and there are more and more of them, a sudden crowding of what looks like Japanese calligraphy, and then fewer again as you heave past the place where most incoming planes land. And sometimes there are fat yellow lines that swoop into and join the center yellow line of your runway, like the curves at the end of LP records. And finally you're up: you may see a clump of service buildings, or a lake, or many tiny blue swimming pools, or a long straight bridge, and then you go higher until there is nothing but distant earth padded here and there with cloud. Then, out of a pleasant sort of loneliness, ignoring the person who is sitting next to you, you begin to want to get to know the wing and its engine.

In April of 1998, sitting in an emergency exit row on the way from San Francisco to Denver, I was surprised by how sharp-edged some mountains were. I was used to the blunt mountains of three-dimensional plastic topographical maps, which are pleasing to the fingertips. But real mountains would scrape your palm if you tried to feel them that way. I passed a salt lake, perhaps the Great Salt Lake, which had a white deposit on its edges like a chemistry experiment. And then I gave up on the world, and looked out at my new friend, the wing. It had nothing to say to me at first, no words that I could see; but then, when I put my head as close as I could to the window and looked down, I could make out two arrows. These were painted on a textured non-slip area near where the wing joined the fuselage. We passengers were not meant to see these arrows from our seats: they were there in case of a catastrophe, when we would hurry out the

window and leap off the wing onto an inflatable rubber slide. How fast do you go down a slide? Fast enough to break a leg, I would think. I wouldn't want to leap onto that slide, but I like the arrows.

On the return from Denver, the wing, attached to an Airbus A-230, said DO NOT WALK OUTSIDE THIS AREA. The clouds were enormous flat-bottomed patties resting heavily on an ocean of low-pressure air. A few days after that, on a Boeing 767—one of the ones with the misdesigned call buttons that people press when they are trying to adjust the volume on their headphones, so that when the movie begins, the air is filled with unintended dingy calls for flight attendants—I had, just after takeoff, a quick, pleasing view of the neighborhood where I lived, visible just above the lump of the left engine, whose crest bore the words NO STEP. We rose higher. NO STEP. Never would I step. Never would anyone I know step. We were just peanut-chewing passengers locked inside our silver safe five miles in the air, breathing our own repressurized exhalations, staring yearningly out through the window at the rarefied frigidity on the other side. (It was a double-paned window; tiny inner fronds of frost were growing near a leaky seal.) Out on the wing, faint wind-wear lines streaked like aurora borealis from behind one of a group of eight little flat-head screws. I wanted to ride the wing, and I never would.

By 1999 I had become a collector of wing language. Boeing 757s said: HOIST POINT SLEEVE ONLY, and THRUST REVERSE ACTUATOR ACCESS, and LEAVE 3 INCH MAXIMUM GAP BETWEEN FAIRINGS PRIOR TO SLIDING AFT AND LATCHING, and SAFETY LINE ATTACH POINT. I noted these cautions down on folded pieces of paper, with arrows pointing out which words were in red paint and which in white. It was a pleasure to ride in McDonnell Douglas planes, because they were less common and offered different messages. Once when I was in an emergency exit row in an McDonnell Douglas MD-80, there were two pilots seated behind me. "This is an old plane," one of the pilots said, "but it's got new engines—you can hear the new engines." I listened for the note of

newness in the engines but wasn't sure that I could hear it. On the wing there was an irregular area bounded with red paint, with NO STEP commands around the inside, and then in the middle it said ELECTRIC HEATER BLANKET 110 VOLTS.

In April of 1999 I rode a little propeller plane called a Dash 8 to Seattle. The window looked out below the wing, leaving the spindly landing gear, projecting from below the engine, visible from my seat, as if I were looking at someone's legs from under the dinner table. I watched the wheels as we began the surge down the runway, to see whether the tires (there were two tires on each side) would change shape visibly at the moment of liftoff. They didn't, but the moment was marked by a sudden extension of the greased piston of the shock absorber, and by the appearance of the tire's crisp shadow against the asphalt. Then came a small surprise: the wheels kept turning, fast, as we rose a few hundred feet, and then the wheel struts folded and disappeared into the under-nacelle, and, with the wheels still going, the carapace flaps closed.

When the plane descended an hour later, I watched our shadow coming into focus on the blur of the skid-marked ground; and when the now-motionless tire first touched the runway there was a beautiful puff of white smoke before it began to turn. As we drove to the gate, the rubber showed its whitish burned patch over and over; it was almost worn away by the time we reached the gates. I was so interested in the wheel struts and the smoke puff that I failed to copy down the messages on the engine. Later, though, when I rode a Dash 8 propeller plane again, I recorded this from the engine cowling: WARNING HY-

DRAULIC SERVICES MAY OPERATE / CLEAR PERSONNEL FROM RUDDER FLAPS AND LANDING GEAR DOORS BEFORE CONNECTING.

The words NO STEP are everywhere now. On an Airbus A330 this past March, I saw NO STEP NO LIFT NO STEP NO LIFT running like a decorative border along the riveted hull that covers the structure that holds the engine to the airplane. The engine itself said CAUTION / PRESS HERE ON LATCH TO ENSURE LOCKING, and there was a little set of gills next to which were the words FAN COMPARTMENT VENT AIR INTAKE. I copied down the cautionary words and then walked the aisles and galleys until I reached the curtain beyond which was the first-class cabin. Parting the curtain, I saw a man's shoulder, and beyond it, a small china plate on which there had been a bunch of grapes. Now the grapes were gone, but the firework display of green spent stems was there. I walked back down the coach-class aisle, allowing my eye to fall on the tableaux of sleeping passengers, each of whom arranged his or her blue blanket a different way. I kept thinking I was getting close to my row, but I wasn't—instead there was someone in a black sweater asleep with her head on a bunched blue blanket. I was one whole cabin section off, I realized. And then I saw a magazine with a clear plastic protective cover angled over a file folder, and the back of one of my shoes just visible on the floor. I was home. I slid into the window seat and looked outside. The window was cool to the nose. The engine, my engine, was still out there, toiling away, as inanimate and companionable as a thermos bottle. NO STEP, it said.