

Al Maginnes

Crop Dusters

No reserved seats so forty thousand of us funneled through one gate running, a heedless lemming-rush that carried us into the locked glass doors of the arena. Pressed against the glass, we must have resembled a multi-limbed, many-faced aquarium creature. On the auditorium floor, the crowd thickened like smoke while on the stage above us, roadies posed with their bosses' guitars, and oxygen became a commodity more precious than good seats or the cheap acid and angel dust that littered the parking lot. When people began to fall like chopped weeds, they were passed over the crowd's heads, a conveyor belt of hands moving bodies forward even as we grumbled over how long we had to stand for this.

But when the music swirled its dusty cape around us, we were rabid acolytes, head-bobbing fodder, ready to fall on our chemical swords. When a machine-bred fog rolled across the stage in waves, swallowing the players, hiding the front rows, some paranoid minister in my brain expected the band to emerge wearing gas masks. My wife told me that she and her friends sued to ride their bikes behind the trucks that rolled through Southern neighborhoods just before dusk, shooting its white mist of mosquito killing compound into the air. The game was to be soaked by the fog.

Riding from one dry-wall job to another, my boss parked on a back road one afternoon so we could watch the tree-skimming acrobatics of a crop duster at work, the rickety plane swooping low to let a white dust of pesticide fall over the field

as neatly as a sheet drops over a mattress,
then lifting clean as a blade, the plane's metal belly
just missing power lines, the tips of black pines
before turning for another run. Years later,
a man sitting next to me in a bar told me
his father died when the wing of his crop-dusting plane
tipped a power line, sending the plane wobbling
into a line of trees across the road. The wreck burned
longer than anyone thought it would, he said,
safe inside the room bar whiskey had built for him,
a place where he would tell a stranger this tale.
He was sure it was the chemicals.

I still hear that band droning from the radio,
predictable as a motor. Jamie and I buy organic vegetables;
she will not use even bug spray to thwart
the persistent summer invasions of ants and shudders
to learn someone younger than she has cancer.
I still slow to watch crop dusters buzzing fields,
dropping their payload and finding an angle
that lifts them into clear sky, all blood aloft
in the keening, in the steel-feathered edge
my most extreme moments have found, when
my eyes and nostrils so filled with what swirled around me.
I believed what I was doing was worth my life.