

Wings

God gave you wings to soar above the clouds but gave me wings to shelter my young on the ground. -Lara, *Doctor Zhivago*, by Boris Pasternak

Bronwyn told me about the year that most of the girls in her class all got boobs. Same year Labour ruled you could only fly in case of a medical emergency. I chart the rises and falls of my early life by the decline of the aircraft industry.

Bronwyn saw the way that school jerseys draped on budding girls, the attentions of boys, the horrors of PE, diving boards, push-up bras, the time that Jody did a handstand on the field and ONE FELL OUT, her mother's milky flotation devices, her grandma's pendulous terrors. She started sleeping on her front. Her grandma said, If you do that they'll just burst out the back, and then you'll be sorry. Her grandma constantly said crazy shit that everyone ignored. Bronwyn was not sorry so much as surprised when two bumps appeared between her shoulder blades. It was painful to lie on her back, so she kept lying on her front. Still no sign of boobs, she noted with satisfaction. She liked how when you have a flat chest and you hug someone who also has a flat chest, there is a full connection, like praying palms.

It was the hottest summer on record, again. Bronwyn's friends postured in self-conscious bikinis while she hunched in the shade, sweater over the growing back-bumps, pouring with sweat.

It was the coldest cold snap on record, again, and girls shamed each other if a frozen nipple asserted itself through clothing. Except for Jody, who wore a T-shirt that said Bombshell, through which her nipples pointed directly at you like headlights. The handstand incident had shaped her in unexpected ways.

The lumps on Bronwyn's back grew hot and strange while we got used to a world without planes. Which really sucked for me because I had just finished an apprenticeship as an aircraft engineer. I'm a couple of years older than Bronwyn. When we met after she

finished high school, I should have been putting planes up on the daily, coming home smelling of jet fuel and the glamour of the skies. Instead, I was working on EVs like any old sod.

Stiff new feathers bust bloody through Bronwyn's skin. Her mother said People are getting so accepting these days. Her sister said You can just wear your backpack on your front! Nothing there anyway! Her grandmother said We could charge for people to see you. That's what we would have done in my day.

Bronwyn refused to go to school; she was old enough to drop out anyway. She tried out the wings on the school field in the dead of night, running and flapping, but couldn't get even a little lift. A quick Google revealed the conundrum of weight and wingspan. We are hefty sacks of liquid and dense bone. Yet we have this yearning for flight. Planes really meant something to people. Downloads for flight simulator games hit an all-time high.

An aunt on the Mahia peninsula died and left the house. Bronwyn convinced her family she should go live there. She insisted if she were allowed to go live alone, she would finish school by correspondence.

While flying was dying, rocketry was booming and using a location off Mahia for specific strategically important orbits. I went to Launch Lab on my knees. I would have worked for nothing. Just to be touching the metal flanks of something sky-bound. To break atmos, the bodies have to be mathematically flawless. I have always been a details guy.

When I met Bronwyn, the wings were fully grown. To go out in public, she'd fold them painfully tight and wear this enormous coat. She looked like a hunchback out of a kids' story. But she hardly ever left her dead aunt's property. Got everything delivered, finished her schoolwork then played video games. I only met her cos, on a piss run for my new workmates, I came back to the wrong house, and there was this chick with actual full-size wings standing at her kitchen sink like an angel, too scared to scream.

I put my eyes back in and stumbled doorwards, apologizing, but she grabbed my arm and begged me not to tell anyone. I agreed, and that was that.

Bronwyn read online that there was an operation you could get in Thailand. Full wing removal. They did tails, webbing, all sorts. But she wouldn't get a flight. She got this weight loss app and went hard. When she got down to 60kg, she tried again on the beach at night. She got a little lift, but not enough. She tried again at 50, skin and bone, flapped a metre in the air and crashed down, exhausted, sobbing, mouth full of sand.

I couldn't stop thinking about her. So the next time they sent me out to the peninsula for a launch, I knocked on her door with a six-pack, a pizza, and another apology. It was easy. She was so lonely. Flat as a board, but the novelty of the wings kind of made up for it. When she was on top, she'd bring them down around us like a feathery tent, our own wild little world. When I was behind her, they would flap involuntarily and brush my whole body.

I drove her out to the launch site. People from the peninsula sat on a rise to watch the launches from a distance, drinking and rumbling about the old days, flight, the unreachable funeral in the islands and so-and-so whose cancer could only be treated in Sydney. I had clearance to get us right up to the razorwire fence. All those rockets standing erect, ready for their secret business that was so important, they got fuel and offsets. Surveillance, top-secret military contracts. We counted down to the fire, the great plume of smoke, the shaky first vertical metres, then the speck and the blazing tail disappearing into the sky.

I never introduced Bronwyn to my friends nor took her back to Auckland. I'd just stay with her when I worked out that way. She got Speights when she knew I was coming. I brought movies on a hard drive. She liked horror films because they were an excuse to snuggle into me. It cracked me up when she'd have a couple of drinks and imitate her grandma. I guess we loved each other.

Guys mocked me, reckoning I made a girl up. Around the same time I met Delilah, whom everyone called Double D-lilah. I asked Bronwyn to come to the piss-up after the next launch. I told her it was a costume party. It's perfect. I'll get you a tinsel halo, and you're set!

She said, My wings are the wrong colour. People only have white wings for costumes. Everything Bronwyn knew about the world was from movies. We got some fabric paint and did her wings. To this day I'm not sure if I was trying to save or sabotage us. I wanted the guys to see. It was some crazy shit, you know? Anyway, we get to Mattie's place, and it's pretty obvious it's not a costume party. Bronwyn laughs, and we pretend we had a miscommunication, but her voice is metal. She goes to the bathroom and returns without the halo. But then I put on *Slice of Heaven*, we dance, everyone cheers, and for a moment it all seems OK.

Then I have a few, Delilah turns up, and Bronwyn sees how I look at her. Then I'm wasted, and the boss is asking me, So, for real? He wants to touch the place where they meet her back. Skin to feathers. That miraculous arc of bone. I stumble over to Bronwyn and ask. She knocks over a trestle table on her way out. She can't control the wings as well when she's pissed.

I went home with Delilah. I don't feel great about it, OK? So I didn't see Bronwyn washing the paint and beer out of all those feathers.

She wouldn't answer her phone or door. I kept a single tawny gold feather in my pocket.

Over the next months, she dropped all the weight again and then some. She told me once she reckoned if she could just lose enough weight she would soar, glide, far above the world.

Her body was still too heavy, but she could flap clumsily a few metres up and along. Enough to scale a razorwire fence clutching a hammer, which she swung to deform several shining fuselages standing ready in the hangar.

I don't know whether she couldn't or wouldn't clear the fence to get out. She landed on top of the razorwire, one strand across her stomach and one across her throat. From a great height. Above her, Mammatus clouds hung in the air, full and sweet with rain.

by Phoebe Wright