


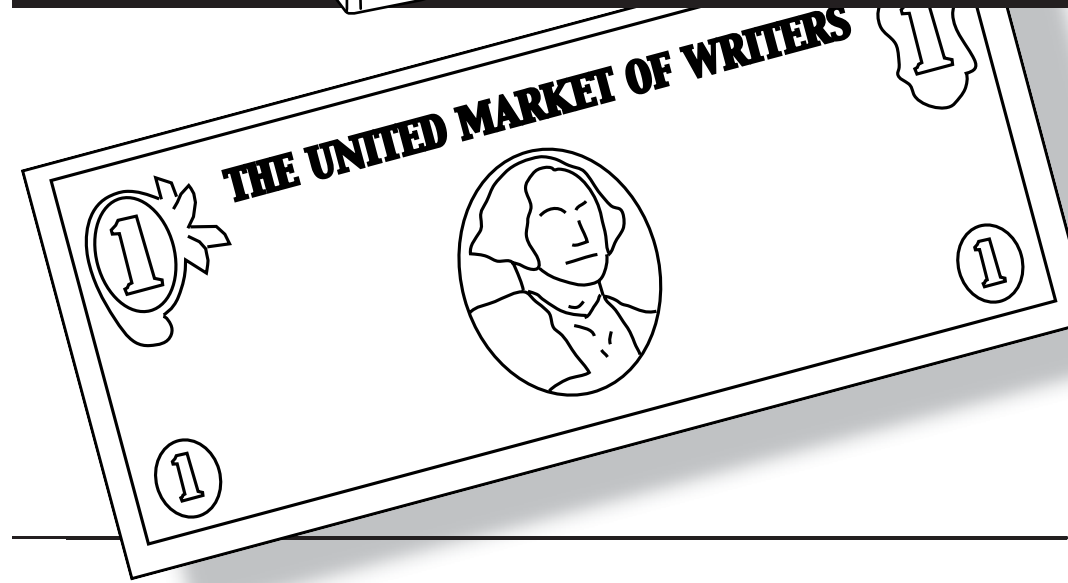
TONER



Your work here.

Fancy yourself a writer? Join the biggest new community of writers online.

Find out more at
www.tonermagazine.com/info



the Fall



all stories and artwork copyright © tonermagazine.com and/or the individual authors and artists. please feel free to print and distribute as many copies of toner magazine in its original, unaltered state as you'd like. in fact, we encourage that sort of thing. please do not feel free to charge money or equivalent for those copies, alter the publication in any way electronically or otherwise, or post any or all copyright material online or elsewhere for profit or not.

BY TODD GORDON

From up here, you can see the cobalt blue lakes gathered in puddles, the lines where the foothills uplifted and the spaces where they were pushed apart by the glaciers. I looked down. I couldn't see the airfield or the golf course.

While I was looking, Carl told me something that bent my head wrong for three days. He told me that in terms of skydiving, the dive was pretty terrible. My legs were bent wrong. I hadn't arched correctly. I'd made him work much harder than he should have had to. It sounded like he was disappointed in me. Disappointed I hadn't let us fly.

My legs and arms were still cold from the wind rushing past.

He said he thought my performance showed a great amount of disrespect to his sport, that of skydiving, and to him personally as an instructor and as a human being.

But fuck it, he said. We were both alive. We would both have beer with our dinners that night, and so he said the day wasn't totally shot.

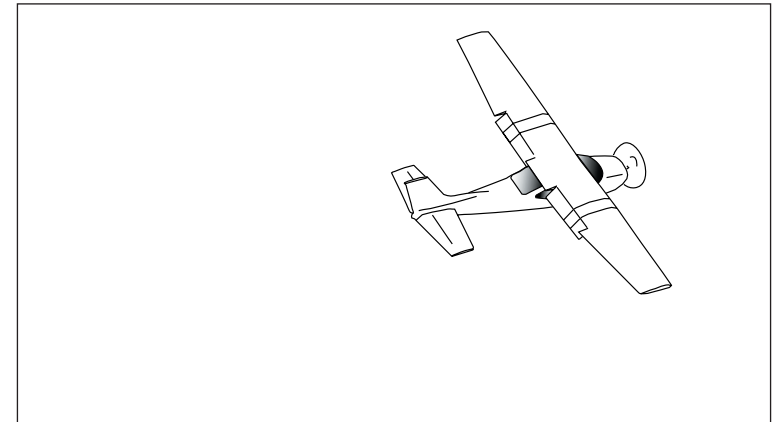
He told me all this 3,500 feet above an airstrip in the middle of a golf course, and then, just as quickly as we'd fallen 6,500 feet from an airplane, he let me play with the parachute toggles pointed out interesting landmarks.

I'd failed him. I'd failed at skydiving, at falling from a plane, I'd offended Carl, and I'd endangered both our lives. I think, because I wasn't wearing any parachute, because it was in Carl's hands that I'd placed my life, that I put more stock into his words than I should have. I think, because I jumped and he slowed me down, it was very important for me to please him. All I know is that at 3,500 feet, strapped to a man who jumped out of planes for a living, I felt like I'd disobeyed my father. I felt as if I owed Carl something. I felt as if I'd let him down.

We landed, apparently, more successfully than we'd fallen, and Paula put some t-shirts on the sawhorse we'd used to practice our arching. I bought two, one for myself, and one for the photographer, collected my notepad, and drove home. We learned, after we'd gotten the pictures back, that my photographer hadn't gotten the shot. He'd gotten a very nice picture of the floor of the airplane.

Everyone I'd told about the assignment wanted to know what happened. It was fine, I told them. It was everything I'd hoped for.

It took a few days before I could talk about what happened up there, 3,500 feet up, and once I did, once I put the day into words I felt less and less like a failure. The more I repeated exactly what had happened, the



she was a pretty heavy smoker. "I'm Paula. Carl went to get the plane."

"Oh, fine, fine." We stood there looking at each other for a minute. I got out my pen. "Where is the plane?"

She named a town forty miles east. The plane lived forty miles east, and every day Carl drove the forty miles to get the plane and flew it here. Then, once everyone had fallen out of the plane, he flew back to his car and drove back to the hangar.

The wind was low, but it made a constant buzz sound as it blew over the ridges in the metal. "My photographer's late," I said.

Paula showed me to a folding card table in one corner of the hangar and handed me some forms. The forms said I was about to void my life insurance policy. Some people came in while I was busy voiding, and I heard the high rattle of an airplane outside. Carl was back and John and Sarah, here to celebrate John's twenty-second birthday, had arrived.

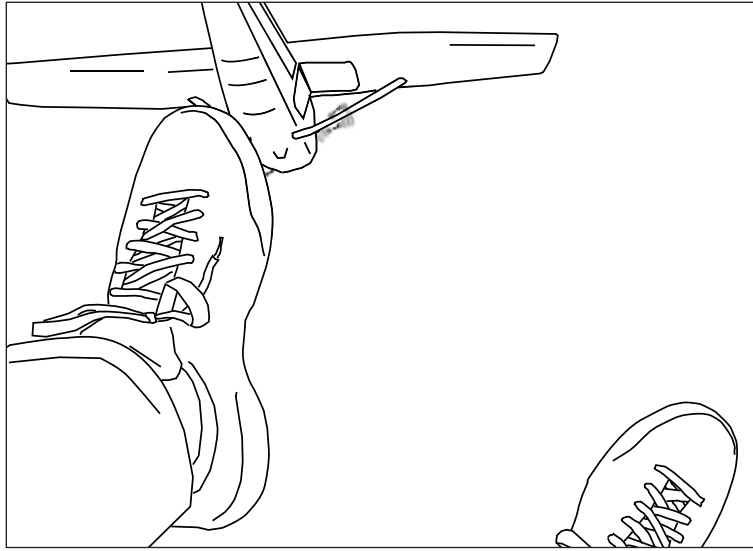
What better way to celebrate twenty-two than put twenty-three into question.

I set my forms down on the card table, grabbed my notebook, and went out of the hangar onto the asphalt.

"I'm Todd," I said, "from the newspaper."

"I'm Carl from the skydiving place." He shook my hand and I was about to tell him about my photographer, but he kept walking toward the hangar and the couple there to celebrate John's birthday. I walked after him with my notebook.

I spent four and a half hours at that airstrip, and in that time I never once felt comfortable around Carl, the man in whose hands I would later place my life. He walked over to the card table and picked up the six pages of forms I'd left there. Then, he drew back his lips and breathed in hard through his teeth as he scanned through them, stopping on page five. He turned the page around flat on



finger on the spot. Carl made a heavy nod with his chin. He turned the corners of his mouth up so that his scars crinkled. I looked at the spot where the pilot still had his index finger. It said ten thousand feet.

I knew from my 38 pages of notes that the others had gone up to 8,500. I looked back at the door of the plane, shut my eyes, and rested my head against the cool metal. Paul sat down opposite me in the rear of the plane and the pilot took off and began his circles.

There is absolutely nothing that prepares you for an open door on and airplane in flight. It's an image that clashes with everything you think should be happening up there. Doors stay closed. Passengers stay inside.

Seatbelts remain securely fastened.

On the Cessna, the door folds up and underneath the wing, which cuts across above the cabin door and the pilot. I can see down 10,000 feet from the open door of an airplane, and I'm not wearing a parachute. If I were to fall right now, I would fall and keep falling until I flattened one of those little trees below us. I am inches away from this door. Noise from the wind and the engine flood the little cabin. My photographer unfastens his safety belt.

I inch backward on my knees toward the rear of the cabin until I'm snug against Carl's chest like he told me to. It feels very intimate, a little uncomfortable, and I feel a pull in my shoulders under the arms as Carl snaps into each metal loop on my harness. In my head, my brain is

To be fair, Carl did make remarks about my note taking during this time, saying I should pay more attention to his demonstrations (he was holding a badminton shuttlecock above his head and dropping it to the floor when he said this). I'm not certain what he thought I might be writing in my notebook. I am certain I made a note of the shuttlecock and of how it bounced.

Also in fairness' interest, many remarks were made about the fail-proof nature of our upcoming dives throughout our two-hour training with Carl. Many remarks implied that we could not screw this up.

John went first. It was his birthday, and it seemed to make sense to do things that way. Sarah would go second and I, because I'd brought no money, would go last.

Carl clapped his hands. Our training complete, he walked over to a metal cabinet, pulled out a thin nylon harness from inside, and held it up so John could step into it.

This is what I meant when I was talking about the parachute in the beginning. We don't wear a parachute. We wear a harness, Carl wears a parachute, and Carl clips himself to our harness right before we jump out of the plane. The idea is that as Carl's parachute slows him down from 210 mph to 15, it will slow us down too, via five reinforced metal loops sewn

into the back of our harness.

The whole thing, the whole idea of not having any cord to pull or straps to tighten, made me nervous. At the time, I thought this was because of the thickness of the nylon, or because of the tensile strength of the reinforced metal loops. Now I think that it was Carl. I was about to jump from a plane, and I'm not sure I trusted him to stop me before I hit the ground.

The plane took off with John and Carl and the pilot in it, and I stayed on the ground with Paula and Sarah and the high school kid Carl and Paula paid to pack the chutes. The drop zone is almost directly above the airfield, so to get there they have to fly in a big spiral. The spiral takes about twenty minutes. I tried to get some quotes from Paula, tried to figure out if she and Carl were, you know, together, but she wouldn't say.

Around this time, my photographer showed up and I introduced him to Paula and Sarah. I would've introduced him to the kid packing the next chute, but I never met him in the first place, and he didn't look up while I introduced him to the others.

"This is my photographer," I said, passing him around. They all shook hands.

The loudspeaker riveted to the side of the hangar crackled and said John and Carl would jump in 30 seconds. There was a radio in the plane,