



*Like every other person on that flight, he was desperate to live.*

# The Man in the Water

Roger Rosenblatt

THE UNKNOWN REBEL

As disasters go, this one was terrible but not unique, certainly not among the worst on the roster of U.S. air crashes. There was the unusual element of the bridge, of course, and the fact that the plane clipped it at a moment of high traffic, one routine thus intersecting another and disrupting both. Then, too, there was the location of the event. Washington, the city of form and regulations, turned chaotic, deregulated, by a blast of real winter and a single slap of metal on metal. The jets from Washington National Airport that normally swoop around the presidential monuments like famished gulls were, for the moment, emblemized<sup>1</sup> by the one that fell; so there was that detail. And there was the aesthetic clash<sup>2</sup> as well—blue-and-green Air Florida, the name a flying garden, sunk down among gray chunks in a black river. All that was worth noticing, to be sure. Still, there was nothing very special in any of it, except death, which, while always special, does not necessarily bring millions to tears or to attention. Why, then, the shock here?

Perhaps because the nation saw in this disaster something more than a mechanical failure. Perhaps because people saw in it no failure at all, but rather something successful about their makeup. Here, after all, were two forms of nature in collision: the elements and human character. Last Wednesday, the elements, indifferent as ever, brought down Flight 90. And on that same afternoon, human nature—groping and flailing in mysteries of its own—rose to the occasion.

Of the four acknowledged heroes of the event, three are able to account for their behavior. Donald Usher and Eugene Windsor, a park-police helicopter team, risked their lives every time they dipped the skids<sup>3</sup> into the water to pick up survivors. On television, side by side in

1. **emblemized** (em'bləm·īzd'): represented; symbolized.
2. **aesthetic** (es·thet'ik) **clash**: unpleasant visual contrast.
3. **skids**: long, narrow pieces used in place of wheels for aircraft landing gear.

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#### WORDS TO OWN

**flailing** (flā'līŋ) v.: waving wildly.

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## LITERATURE AND THE NEWS

### The Last Conversation: A Database

Roger Rosenblatt's essay focuses on one aspect of a news event. Here are other facts:

**Date:** Wednesday, January 20, 1982; late afternoon.

**Weather:** Wet snow flurries.

**Location:** Plane hit 14th Street Bridge, crushing five cars and one truck, crashed into Potomac River, Washington, D.C.

**Death toll:** seventy-eight, including four motorists. Of the seventy-nine people aboard the plane, only five survived (four passengers, one flight attendant).

**Probable cause of crash:** ice on wings.

*[Black box retrieved from wreckage of Air Florida Flight 90.]*

**COPILOT:** It's been a while since we've been de-iced.

**PILOT:** Think I'll go home and . . .

**COPILOT:** Boy . . . this is a losing battle here on trying to de-ice those things . . . a false sense of security, that's all that does.

**PILOT:** That, ah, satisfies the Feds. Right there is where the icing truck, they oughta have two . . .

**COPILOT:** Yeah, and you taxi through kinda like a carwash or something.

**PILOT:** Hit that thing with about eight billion gallons of glycol . . .

**COPILOT:** Slushy runway. Do you want me to do anything special for this or just go for it?



PILOT: Unless you got anything special you'd like to do.

COPILOT: . . . just take off the hose wheel early like a soft-field takeoff . . .

I'll pull it [the throttle] back to about one point five . . . supposed to be about one six depending on how scared we are . . . [Laughter]

*[The plane is cleared for takeoff at 3:59 P.M., 45 minutes after its last de-icing.]*

COPILOT: God, look at that thing.

COPILOT: That don't seem right, does it?

COPILOT: Ah, that's not right.

PILOT: Yes, it is, there's eighty.

COPILOT: Naw, I don't think that's right.

COPILOT: Ah, maybe it is.

PILOT: Hundred and twenty.

COPILOT: I don't know. . . .

PILOT: Come on, forward. . . .

PILOT: Just barely climb.

SPEAKER UNDETERMINED: Stalling, we're

[falling].  
COPILOT: Larry, we're going down, Larry.

PILOT: I know it. *[Sound of impact]*

bright blue jumpsuits, they described their courage as all in the line of duty. Lenny Skutnik, a 28-year-old employee of the Congressional Budget Office, said: "It's something I never thought I would do"—referring to his jumping into the water to drag an injured woman to shore. Skutnik added that "somebody had to go in the water," delivering every hero's line that is no less admirable for its repetitions. In fact, nobody had to go into the water. That somebody actually did so is part of the reason this particular tragedy sticks in the mind.

But the person most responsible for the emotional impact of the disaster is the one known at first simply as "the man in the water." (Balding, probably in his 50s, an extravagant moustache.) He was seen clinging with five other survivors to the tail section of the airplane. This man was described by Usher and Windsor as appearing alert and in control. Every time they lowered a lifeline and flotation ring to him, he passed it on to another of the passengers. "In a mass casualty, you'll find people like him," said Windsor. "But I've never seen one with that commitment." When the helicopter came back for him, the man had gone under. His selflessness was one reason the story held national attention; his anonymity another. The fact that he went unidentified invested him with a universal character. For a while he was Everyman, and thus proof (as if one needed it) that no man is ordinary.

Still, he could never have imagined such a capacity in himself. Only minutes before his character was tested, he was sitting in the ordinary plane among the ordinary passengers, dutifully listening to the stewardess telling him to fasten his seat belt and saying something about the "No Smoking" sign. So our man relaxed with the others, some of whom would owe their lives to him. Perhaps he started to read, or to doze, or to regret some harsh remark made in the office that morning. Then suddenly he knew that the trip would not be ordinary. Like every other person on that flight, he was desperate to live, which makes his final act so stunning.

For at some moment in the water he must have realized that he would not live if he contin-



A park-police helicopter team airlifts one of the five survivors of Air Florida Flight 90 from the Potomac River's icy waters on January 20, 1982.

ued to hand over the rope and ring to others. He *had* to know it, no matter how gradual the effect of the cold. In his judgment he had no choice. When the helicopter took off with what was to be the last survivor, he watched everything in the world move away from him, and he deliberately let it happen.

Yet there was something else about our man that kept our thoughts on him, and which keeps our thoughts on him still. He was *there*, in the essential, classic circumstance. Man in nature. The man in the water. For its part, nature cared nothing about the five passengers. Our

man, on the other hand, cared totally. So the timeless battle commenced in the Potomac. For as long as that man could last, they went at each other, nature and man; the one making no distinctions of good and evil, acting on no principles, offering no lifelines; the other acting wholly on distinctions, principles, and, one supposes, on faith.

Since it was he who lost the fight, we ought to come again to the conclusion that people are powerless in the world. In reality, we believe the reverse, and it takes the act of the man in the water to remind us of our true feelings in

this matter. It is not to say that everyone would have acted as he did, or as Usher, Windsor, and Skutnik. Yet whatever moved these men to challenge death on behalf of their fellows is not peculiar to them. Everyone feels the possibility in himself. That is the abiding wonder of the story. That is why we would not let go of it. If the man in the water gave a lifeline to the people gasping for survival, he was likewise giving a lifeline to those who observed him.

The odd thing is that we do not even really believe that the man in the water lost his fight. "Everything in Nature contains all the powers of Nature," said Emerson. Exactly. So the man in

the water had his own natural powers. He could not make ice storms, or freeze the water until it froze the blood. But he could hand life over to a stranger, and that is a power of nature too. The man in the water pitted himself against an implacable, impersonal enemy; he fought it with charity; and he held it to a standoff. He was the best we can do.

#### WORDS TO OWN

**abiding** *adj.*: continuing; lasting.

**pitted** *v.*: placed in competition.

**implacable** (*im·plā'kə·bəl*) *adj.*: relentless; not affected by attempts at change.

## MEET THE WRITER

### Searching for the Good

**Roger Rosenblatt** (1940– ) has had a career's worth of practice in writing short opinion essays, first as the author of a weekly column for *The New Republic*, then as an editorial writer and columnist for *The Washington Post*, then as a commentator on Public Television's *MacNeill/Lehrer Newshour*.

After receiving a bachelor's degree from New York University and master's and doctoral degrees from Harvard, Rosenblatt taught literature for several years before turning to journalism. His 1983 book, *Children of War*, covers his journey through five war-torn countries—Ireland, Israel, Lebanon, Cambodia, and Vietnam. In each he interviewed children who had experienced war as a way of life.

Two years later, he followed that publication with *Witness: The World Since Hiroshima*. Both books, like "The Man in the Water," show Rosenblatt's search for the redeeming aspects of human existence.



Rosenblatt says that an expression of mystery characterizes his best essays and stories.

“Often I will wait to write till the last possible minute before deadline, hoping not to solve a particular mystery, but to feel it more deeply. ‘The Man in the Water’ . . . was written in forty-five minutes, but I brooded about it for many days.

. . . Three full days that air crash led the evening news. I came to believe that the man in the water was the reason, yet no one had said so because he had done something people could not understand.

In too many ways the piece shows that it was written in forty-five minutes, but it resonated with readers at the time because it dwelt on the mystery of an act that people did not understand, or want to understand. Certain stories people do not want to understand. The mystery makes them feel closer to one another than would any solution.”

THE UNKNOWN ROSEL