
An Attempt to Fly in Song of Solomon

In literature, what does it mean for somebody to fly? Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, chronicles of Greco-Roman mythology dating over 2000 years ago, depicts the failure of flight through the fates of Icarus and Phaeton, victims of hubris. Written by Toni Morrison and published in 1977, *Song of Solomon* opens and ends with the image of attempted flight. An array of paradoxical connotations emerges from this image such as triumph and failure, heroism and cowardice, and life and death. One can justify those dichotomies as a direct result to Morrison's decision to leave the reasoning behind Robert Smith and Milkman's leap into the air open to interpretation. Although it is unclear as to why Smith and Milkman attempt to fly, the readers discover the deterrent of flight through Milkman and Guitar's observation and interlocution about the grounded, ostentatious peacock. The conclusion is "the shit weighs you down" (179). To realize what it means to fly in this novel, this "shit" must be defined, as well. In *Song of Solomon*, images of flight reflect elements of past, present, and future: appreciation of one's origin, escape from societal domestication, and resurrection of the human spirit.

Whether it be a bird or plane, anything that can soar in the air must have its origin from the ground. Hence, before one can fly, one must be rooted. From the moment Milkman realizes that humans cannot fly, he detaches himself from the community as a consequence of this disheartening recognition. Although he befriends Guitar Bains, meets his enchanted aunt Pilate, and has coition with his cousin Hagar, Milkman is still aloof, for his desire to fly compels him to enervate and eventually abandon these human connections on the ground. When the Dead family's Packard rolls sedately through the city on Sunday afternoons, Milkman feels troubled because his sight is restricted to what he can see out of the rear window, illustrating Milkman's tragic flaw of depreciating the past in an attempt to catch a glimpse of what will pass. To watch the passing scenery he kneels on the seat, but "riding backward made him uneasy. It was like flying blind, and not knowing where he was going - just where he had been - troubled him" (32). The past should be one's cushion, not discomfort.

In a dream, Pilate sees her father and her father tells her, "You just can't fly on off and leave a body" (147). Jake's admonition suggests that one can only fly once all earthly affairs are resolved, for Pilate still has not interred the bones that she had been carrying for all those years. And only after Pilate buries her father's bones on Solomon's Leap can Pilate fly.

Milkman's odyssey to ascertain the origins of his name and family meets opposition with his conflicting desire to remain ignorant, for in ignorance he finds a superficial happiness and security. When Milkman is in the airplane for the first time in his life, the feeling of freedom he finds in the air is only a pale illusion, for Milkman still thinks freedom can be found only outside

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of reality and apart from his past. Milkman cannot fly without embracing his past as the air underneath his wings.

Raised by a man who talks black, lives white and thinks green, Milkman cannot see beyond the money, the house, and the Packard, for materialism and vanity is the "shit" that weighs him down from flying. For Milkman to truly fly, he must relinquish all that corrupts one's mind to disregard the values of identity and culture and instead embrace humanity. The peacock serves as the icon of societal domestication. Only once the peacock releases the heavy, ornate feathers on its tail will the peacock be able to soar freely without constraint. While belittling Pilate through his anecdote about the baby snake that eventually ate its caretaker, Macon Dead also teaches Milkman "the one important thing you'll ever need to know: Own things" (55). Macon Dead was not born into wealth, so he had to work with just ambition to reach the pinnacle of the black hierarchy; however, Milkman was born into wealth and took it for granted, which is even worse. Society corrupted Macon Dead's mind to such an extent that Macon Dead believes "money is freedom. The only real freedom there is" (163). Milkman adopts this principle, when he writes the word "gratitude" and includes money in a breakup letter to Hagar so that he can be liberated from Hagar's love. Money is not freedom or a liberator, especially in opposition to love. The laws of man may revolve around money but the statute of the skies does not acknowledge the value of materialism. As Milkman's journey develops and the layers of his family history begin to peel away, Milkman's money and possessions quickly become useless, for the fortune is not gold but rather the past and its people. "Without ever leaving the ground she could fly" because Pilate realized that no earthly possession held any value in her heart, which the reader learns through Pilate's disregard for her hair and social conventions (336). Milkman cannot fly until he strips off the weight of materialism and vanity on his back.

Although Robert Smith and Milkman leap into the air with no evidence of success, Pilate, even after her death, soars via the birds carrying her name in the air, which insinuates a spiritual resurrection. Death is not the end of the cycle for those whose spirits were pure. Resembling Christ's birth, life, and death, Pilate enters the world through her dead mother's womb unaided, carries the bones of her father as society condemns her a pariah, and dies with love as her last words for the sins of Milkman and Guitar's fatal ambition toward wealth. Yet she flies. Milkman regards Pilate's death as a graceful flight of freedom: "Now he knew why he loved her so. Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly" (336). Not only does Pilate resemble the life cycle of Christ, but she is an example of a human that came from the earth, for she is born without a bellybutton, eats what she grows, and is aware of her origins, which all contrast with Macon Dead, a man of society rather than earth. Robert Smith's letter about his scheduled flight from Mercy to Lake Superior bears resemblance to Christ's journey. His departure from Mercy connotes that Smith no longer wanted to be at the mercy of society, so he flew to Lake Superior, the symbol of haven or even heaven. Convicted for claiming to be the Son of God, Christ did not receive clemency from the throng of Jewish people and eventually was crucified,

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but He did rise from the dead and ascended to heaven. Hence, flight can be perceived as resurrection. After Guitar murders Pilate, Milkman realizes that only in death will Milkman be able to rise from the dead and fly like Solomon and Pilate, so he asks Guitar, "You want my life? You need it? Here" (337). He leaps off the cliff. Milkman realizes that "if you surrendered to the air, you could ride it" (337). Pilate's rooted flight arises out of her true knowledge and recognition of the entangled feelings of love, animosity, faith, and anguish that define the existence of herself and her people; embracing the contradictions of humanity allows Pilate to live and die in joyful freedom. Seeking this freedom, Milkman takes flight at last.

If one attempts to fly solo without human connections, without knowledge of the past, and without true love, then not only is that one capable of killing others but also one's identity and culture. In order for Milkman to see the future, he must recognize, recollect, and reconcile himself to the past. Staring death, via Guitar, in its catlike eyes, Milkman gives everything for love, knowing that love is not a burden or oppression but freedom. Although the final image of flight in *Song of Solomon* lacks a definitive conclusion, one must not meddle with the question of whether he lives or dies, but rather whether he dies or flies.

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