

SwissAir 111 Memorial, Bayswater, Nova Scotia



“They have been joined to the sea and the sky.”

Every now and then, a glint of something grabs our attention: a place or image that is vaguely familiar, words we’ve heard somewhere before. Driving along the side of a bay on the eastern shores of Nova Scotia in summer, I spotted a sign for this memorial, commemorating the “all hands” loss of life from a Swiss Air crash in 1998. There was no town nearby, nor house. Only a narrow, worn, two-lane back road from nowhere to nowhere. With the gray Atlantic alongside, ever-present and inscrutable. The light was wan and the day was cool for summer.

It just so happened that the crash of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 in the Ukraine was in the news that week. Though on vacation and generally avoiding the news of the outside world, we were aware that that plane had allegedly been shot down, that there were no survivors, and that the crash sight had not been correctly secured. Far, far away and in the quietest, emptiest place, another plane had blown

to smithereens. (Though in the end, the cause was found to be a fast-moving fire in the cockpit, not an act of terrorism or collateral damage in wartime.) Screeching metal and swelling horror intruded on my imagination and we pulled over.

I recalled that I once read a long, detailed article about the Swiss Air flight in *Esquire Magazine* (which used to be a much better magazine; it used to publish writers of the caliber of Pete Hamill and Charles Pierce), “The Long Fall of 111-Heavy” by Michael Paternini. Paternini took some liberties with the story, or maybe it would be more fair to say that instead of strictly reporting on the calamity, he ranged into it, excavated and imagined it, entered the terror and mystery and grief.

Here’s an excerpt:

Late summer, a man and woman were making love in the eaves of a garishly painted house that looked out on the lighthouse — green light revolving, revolving — when a feeling suddenly passed into them, a feeling unrelated to their lovemaking, in direct physical opposition to it: an electrical charge so strong they could taste it, feel it, the hair standing on their arms, just as it does before lightning strikes. And the fishermen felt it, too, as they went to sea and returned, long ago resigned to the fact that you can do nothing to stop the ocean or the sky from what it will do. Now they too felt the shove and lock of some invisible metallic bit in their mouths. The feeling of being surrounded by towering waves.

Yes, something terrible was moving this way. There was a low ceiling of clouds, an intense, creeping darkness, that electrical taste. By the lighthouse, if you had been standing beneath the revolving green light on that early-September night, in that plague of clouds, you would have heard the horrible grinding sound of some wounded winged creature, listened to it trail out to sea as it came screeching down from the heavens, down through molecule and current, until everything went silent.

But what I remembered most from the article was the anecdote about a Swiss father, who not only flew to Nova Scotia to hold vigil while the salvagers and investigators did their difficult work, but stayed. His beautiful, accomplished 20-something daughter had been on that flight. He

could not bear to let her go or to leave. There was no body to bring home and bury. He ended up buying a small diner-like restaurant someplace on this sparsely populated peninsula and staying. I wondered now if that, and he, were still around, nearby. I wondered if he came often to the memorial, or to the adjacent cove. I wondered if he felt her spirit as he tried, I imagine, to get physically close to the place where her body was obliterated, to the place where she left this world. Is there a portal? Is there a trace?

The memorial is a wall with the names of those lost. Steps away there is a mass grave, now grown over with ragged grass and roped off; in the end, it was not possible to recover recognizable or intact bodies. We stood there, hands in pockets, sober and hushed, and squinted at the sea across the way. It was gray and heaving, but gave away nothing. The horizon was vague. Everyone was gone.

