

Pilot Stars

BY PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH SHEROD SANTOS

Open window; eucalyptus scent; the ever-slightly slackening heat. Given the way the day has gone, she's waited awhile to turn off the lamp in the guest room which, she remembers, had once been the room her mother kept when the two of them were fighting. She has come home to visit her father, an Air Force pilot retired for years, who lives alone, and who, he'd written her late last week, was "discovered with a form of cancer." Her father hasn't wanted to speak of it; she has tried to press him. Like most people of her generation, unlike those of his, she believes such talks are compulsory, some tested proof of a power in words all evening she'd kept insisting on, to the point that they have argued in ways (and, most likely, from similar needs) they had throughout what he still calls her "college days." Three hours later, and she can't help feeling . . . what?—angry, frightened, ashamed of herself for upsetting him when she'd really only wanted to comfort.

It just doesn't have to be like this. And yet of course she knows it does. Knows what's set in motion now will be there at the end. And so, lying in bed with the lamp still on, she closes her eyes and tries to sleep, closes her eyes and watches the way the blood wells up behind the lids and, mixed with tiny specks of light, becomes a night sky flecked with stars. And it's as if through the dark of memory they've come, all sensed and intended and pointing a way when the frozen compass locks in place in the green-glow cockpit's chill, where it's 1956 and she's sailing above the ocean ten thousand feet

in her father's lap, sustained by an ancient spine-ticking shine and watching his free hand check them off on a night map figured with a sextant: Lyra, Cygnus, Aquila, resetting the crosshairs, then banking west toward a hunter's moon, and like another constellation purred out on the dark, the islands slowly rolling over the far-flung boundaries of the southern sky. And it's on her skin as she's lying there, the salt and shine of leaning into him through the tight half-circle of that moonward bend, then leveling it out, leveling the world in one loosening turn for a girl lightheaded at the prospect of a life taken up somehow on the scattered narratives of all those names, those heart-logged syllables by which her father had found a way (*o, how far the fall from childhood seems*) to chart his passage between heaven and earth. From the quiet in the house, her father might've been asleep by then. It was after one. The heavy air of late September still hung stock-still in the lamplit room. Then as had happened for the last two nights—had she not stayed awake to listen? would she not stay awake for nights to come?—the footsteps began, back and forth in the upstairs room, the slow, incessant, solitary dying that would go on another eighteen months, and by which it seemed some terrible mourning had already begun to extinguish the light-points one by one, until the dark like the dark she fell through then was suddenly storyless, boundless, and blank.

Excerpted from *The Pilot Star Elegies: Poems* by Sherod Santos. ©1999 by Sherod Santos. With permission of the publisher, W.W. Norton & Company, Inc. Santos, whose current book was nominated for a National Book Award, directs the Program in Creative Writing and the Center for Literary Arts at MU.

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