

PHILADELPHIA

I held hands with a stranger today, just reached across the aisle and tucked my clenched fist into his; his wedding ring pressed a mark into my bare knuckle. My right, his left, for the moment we were promised. A baby's cry rose above the querulous buzz; men fumbled for cell phones, banged their knees on the tray tables and cursed as the woman beside me whispered the Lord's Prayer and from the back, soft sobbing and one brave high pitched laugh, quickly hushed. The plane bucked and reared like a gut-twist horse, didn't roll over but wanted to, and we all felt it groan and strain against the wind and the air and all the nothingness out there, and when I looked past the praying woman through my window, cloud, and across the aisle through his window, green squares of farmland, another place I'll never see, and an overhead bin popped open and a woman shrieked, then, and the captain's words rolled over us like God's voice, that full of authority and doom; *brace*, and there was the stranger's hand, clutching the narrow armrest, pale and broad, thickly veined, and my eyes met his, my hand met his, and when it ended, finally, and the flight attendant pushed through the cabin, crisp and resolute, as if her makeup were not streaked with tears, as if she hadn't been just now head in hands, calling for her mother and her cat, then he made her wait and she waited patiently as he lifted my white fist to his dry lips and kissed each knuckle tenderly, set my hand back on my lap as carefully as you might set a fledgling on its branch, and turned again to his folded newspaper, and sighed.

- Anna Scotti