

The Night of No Airplanes

by Alberto Ríos

On September 11, 2001, my son and I walked into the light dark of the evening outside our house. Those first steps we took were easy and not many, the two of us having walked out the front door together so many times through the years and for so many reasons. Even our intent was old: We were going out to look up. I had done this with my own father, looking up to the stars and the planets and the even further wonders unnamed.

Tonight, it was absence we would be looking at. What we saw, however, was no less real than on any other night. Tonight was the night of no airplanes.

A month later, the sky shows us its opposite. On the news, in discussions with friends, in warnings and instructions: Now the world is full of airplanes.

Not enough and too much. That's how this ongoing and overwhelming series of days has felt. We're suddenly made to imagine the regular, rather than the extremes.

One thought I had hearing the news on September 11 was how 40 years later all that elementary school practice of hiding under our desks finally made sense. I remember Civil Defense signs, and little CD stickers all over my bicycle. I suspected, at that age, that my bicycle might actually be able to save me one day. It had gotten me out of more than one scrape, after all. My bike and my dog.

But if I paid attention to every last detail in our practice bomb drills, and thought of many solutions and plans, and felt tough enough about things, the world soon changed.

One afternoon in 7th grade I was talking, too much and with perfect attention, to Janie Vinson, whom I loved but never told. Consequently, I did not hear my science teacher, Mr. Rochford, who said: Imagine if I were to say.

Instead, I heard simply what came next: Russian ICBM missiles were just launched and are right this moment headed in our direction. Stay calm and think about what you are going to do now. I suspected our town of Nogales would be a target because of all the missiles surrounding Tucson, which were a secret everyone knew about. The teacher's scenario continued, and my heart pounded. I marveled—I actually marveled—at the courage and comportment of my classmates. Mr. Rochford, bravely delivering this news, was like a movie star, unflustered and straight-talking. We were in this together. I felt goose bumps made of fear and sadness and ten or twelve thousand other things.

As he kept talking, I began to find suspect the courage around me. Casual conversations were starting, notes were being passed. The same old stuff. I slowly realized that I had missed something, and began to calm down. Of course, I could tell nobody, especially not Janie.

To this day I have carried that moment with me as a secret fear I felt. That night, I listened to, rather than simply watched, the evening news. Listening, apparently, was reasonably important. Everywhere and all the time. I understood even then that this lesson was not simply relegated to a 7th grade classroom.

Still, the moment was grounded in the dull, dreary everyday. The more we practiced our drills, the more we imagined big scenarios, the less we finally believed them. Today, as recent events confront us, we are still incredulous. This was never really going to happen.

Believing that this has happened—that is the work we are finding so difficult. Believing that we are the people on the news: It catches us just as we thought things were slowly moving in better directions, that the world was maybe ready to work things out.

I don't want to be on the receiving end of incoming missiles, and I don't want anyone else to be, either. I would like all of this to have been a childish misunderstanding. What happened, however, happened, and I am confused once more. I feel like I'm in that 7th grade classroom again, on that one day. Only this time, nobody is saying imagine if I were to say. The airplanes have come.

At this sitting, the numbers of people killed is still not known, but horrific. The numbers of people who may be killed is uncertain, but looming. Each of them has or had stories like mine. The job of the new century, now, will be to listen to all the stories we can. To listen and to hear and to remember.