

A Hundred Things

by Bryan Quickmire

A Remarkable Step Off The Remarkables

My host and I stand on the edge of the precipice, awaiting the breeze. Then it arrives. "Go!" We run together towards empty space. One step, two steps, three steps on snow. The fourth step is on air. The mountain is gone, left behind. We are a bird, one with the wind.

The tandem hang glider slides silently through the air, moving effortlessly away from the snow covered rock where we had stood a moment earlier. When earthbound this now graceful flyer had been awkward, clumsy, out of its element. It had fought the wind, needed restraining. Now it rode with the wind. It was home.

And I? I had been scared on the twisting, tortuous climb up the mountain. The icy road had neither guardrail nor safety net. I had looked over the edge and wondered how I could not slip. I had wondered what it would be like to fall thousands of feet bouncing from rock to rock. Now I was content, in my place. I too was home.

Lying comfortably flat in the harness we fly along the ridge, tracing the contours of the mountain. After a time we turn out away from the rock and reverse course back towards our launch point. We curve along in silence, exchanging few words. When the range ends we swing around and head south for another pass.

We cruise back and forth, back and forth, easing the control bar to either side to turn, easing it fore or aft to point the nose higher or lower. Sometimes the breeze blows us gently upwards, sometimes we sink as it takes a breath.

Sometimes we pass above the point from which we had strode. We look down on the footsteps in the snow, footsteps which go to the edge and don't come back.

Sometimes we pass below the point and visit the only tree on the mountain, coming almost close enough to reach out and pat it, congratulating it on its tenacity, asking it how it got here.

The world beside us, a few feet away, is monochrome, rock and snow. It's New Zealand in June, the beginning of winter. This weekend the ski lifts will start their endless circling.

The world below, a few thousand feet away, is a beautiful vibrant green. The snow line though is creeping

inexorably down the mountain side. Soon the green will sleep under a blanket of white.

At our feet Queenstown is laid out for us alone to see. Houses dot the hillside, sparse near the summit, dense at the shoreline. Lake Wakatipu is a blue serpentine shape wending through the snow-capped peaks of the Southern Alps. Fifty miles long and a thousand feet deep it has tides every five minutes. The ancient Maoris saw the rhythmic pulsing and thought the lake was haunted.

The mountain range whose face we are soaring protects Wakatipu's eastern shore and dominates the Queenstown skyline. I had heard of it in Australia and decided I must see it for myself. Nearby ranges have names like Livingstone Mountains or Skippers Range. This range is simply named The Remarkables.

The Remarkables define our current existence. Jagged peaks tower above, often hidden in cloud yet even then their presence is tangible. The slope to the valley floor is precipitous.

We fly like hawk or eagle, without instrumentation, without technology, with just the wind on our cheeks. We fly without a fuel tank for a time I cannot quantify, an eternity perhaps. This is truly purity of flight.

A snow storm is moving in. Earlier it was 50 miles west in Milford Sound, then it reached Glenorchy, then it traveled the length of Wakatipu as we watched. Now the peaks above are obliterated and light snow is swirling around us. We must descend.

We turn to leave The Remarkables behind, heading away from the support of wind on rock. It's time to land. Our runway? A green field, three thousand feet below. A mere postage stamp from here, but quite large enough when near, dotted with sheep and cows.

We spiral down, exploring our wing's ability to turn without ailerons or rudder or elevator. When the bank is shallow, we make broad, sweeping, lazy circles. When the bank is steep, we corkscrew tightly, bodies flung to the outside of the turn, attached to our life support by a single strap. We go fast and slow, we zoom and dive, descending below the snow.

The ground nears. Because we're two, it's too risky to flare. We're going too fast to run, too fast to land on our feet. We'll land on the wheels at the corners of the triangular control bar. Our bodies will remain horizontal in their flight position.

Check the wind. Set up the approach. Cross the field in a descending two seventy. Angle steeply down final. Level out.

Blades of grass whistle by inches from our noses. I suck in my tummy. The wheels touch. Our fingers, wrapped around the control bar, barely clear the ground. Our toes bounce along behind, like the tail skid on an ancient biplane.

We come to a stop, unhook, stand. Oh what a feeling! Elation, jubilation, exaltation!

Why is this so remarkable? Many have flown this way. Because for me it's a first? No. Because I stepped without doubt, without hesitation, off a three thousand foot cliff.

With certainty, I knew I could fly. Sometime it had happened, earthling had become skyling. When?

Sometime since that first solo in Air Cadets. Perhaps in a sailplane, perhaps in a yellow biplane. Maybe while going low and slow in an ultralight, maybe while doing two hundred in a head first free fall. Possibly on a clear blue day in brilliant sunshine, possibly on a dark night in a wet cloud.

Sometime in a quarter century of flight there was a transformation. When exactly? I don't know. But that remarkable day, at last, I realized it was so.