

# CRAIG NOVA

## Out Takes

*A writer will often cut a lot out of a book before it is published and will then keep these pieces of fiction, these out takes, around for one reason or another. Mostly, I think a writer does this because it's just too hard to throw away what you've put so much work into.*

*Anyway, when I was writing a book called Trombone, I had included a three hundred page section, in the middle, about one of the characters, Ray, who makes a trip to South America.*

*I always was intrigued by one chapter of this out take, which is a description of an airplane crash in a jungle, and so I thought I would include the chapter here.*

*The characters are Ray, a young man who wants to prove himself, Wofsey and Schlage, two men of dubious history and desires, and Hawkins, a pilot who has brought his DeHaviland float plane to South America to make some money.*

*Here's the crash:*

Hawkins started the engine of the DeHaviland when the bells were tolling for Uncle Goat's funeral. Ray sat on the back seat with Wofsey, and Schlage was in front, on the right hand side. Each of them had brought a small overnight bag, all of which were under the seats along with the shotguns, which they had bought the night before. They had gone up to the store and paid their money. There were some men who turned to look at Ray as he came out of the store, interrupting their stories of floods and drownings, of a gigantic, ugly and even deformed fish one of them had caught, and of a flying saucer that had stopped nearby for water. Ray walked home in the moonlight, which lay in a chalky film the road. There was the scent of charcoal left from people in town cooking an evening meal, and Schlage walked ahead, his figure marked in the moonlight by a few silver arcs in his hair and on the shine of his cheek. The shotguns had a long magazine, but there was a plug in it to limit how many shells it could take, and when they were inside, Schlage showed Ray

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how to remove the plug, which Schlage called a "widow maker." Ray removed his, too, thinking this was good advice or just common sense, but somehow, by taking it, he felt he was in deeper than before, and what was worse, he found he was looking for some more good advice, some more common sense, which he was now afraid would only bring the same result. He put the shotgun, with the action open, on the bed and packed his bag, carefully putting in the few things he'd need for a day, or perhaps an overnight, but even so he stuck in some canned sardines and a compass, some medicine and water purifier along with the money. Schlage packed his money along with a change of clothes and a pint of bourbon.

Hawkins slammed the door, which rattled in its latch, and then he threw some switches, the propeller slowly turning as the engine made a sucking noise and expelled small, ashy-colored puffs of exhaust. They were all silent as the plane taxied across the lagoon, and then it was difficult to talk as Hawkins turned into the wind and began the take off, reaching over to twist a wire that ran under the dash board to one of the gauges. The plane increased speed and rose up onto the step of the floats.

"Goddamn gauges," said Hawkins. "They're probably made in Korea now. Am I getting juice? Is the manifold really hot?"

The plane turned and went over the church, the pigeons around the bell tower taking to the air, their gray bodies streaming away, far below, over the church yard, where one man finished a grave. He stood in the rectangular hole, shoveling the dirt from the bottom and throwing it up, the dirt coming out in discreet, reddish clumps. Hawkins banked over the churchyard and headed east, over the jungle, pointing down at the grave and saying, "God have mercy on us all. Do you know your book of Common Prayer, Mr. Egan?"

"What's that?" said Ray.

"The Book Of Common Prayer," said Hawkins.

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"Yes, yes," said Ray, not understanding because of the noise, and then looking down. "The engine's pretty loud."

"Well," said Hawkins. "The DeHaviland never ran quiet. Not like a Cessna."

The engine had a variable drone, the change in pitch having about it a comforting regularity. From time to time the wings swung one way and then another, sometimes quickly in the thermals that rose like invisible bubbles from the jungle below. The canopy was completely closed, the texture of it like a green, coarsely knitted sweater.

"Sometimes, when I get up here I think, 'Jesus, was Lindbergh a brave man.'" said Hawkins. He reached over and tapped a gauge.

"What's that?" shouted Schlage. "I didn't hear."

"Lindbergh was brave," said Ray.

"We're not going over any water are we?" said Schlage.

"No," said Hawkins. "Just over a lot of green leaves. That's all."

The plane was suspended beneath the sky in the middle of a circle, one that crept toward the horizon. There was a comforting drone of the engine and the slight swaying of the wings in an up draft, the movement soporific, repeated, and Ray sat in a half trance, the warmth of the cockpit, the noise, the sea-like canopy below all contributing to his drowsiness. They flew for about an hour and then Hawkins reached over and pointed. In the distance, about twenty-five miles away, there was the first blue shimmer of a lake and a filament of smoke.

Hawkins reached under the dashboard and twisted a gauge's wire. The plane swept from side to side in a thermal, but Hawkins kept looking at the gauges, half of which sat with their needles dead, each one looking like a volt meter, say, that wasn't being used.

The engine missed, lost power, and ran with a banging sound like someone popping paper bags. Ray stretched his arm toward the back of

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Hawkins' seat, the movement of his fingers, of the back of his hand, of his wrist in his bright yellow shirt seeming to him as a gesture he had been making for an hour, as though he had been repeating it again and again. It seemed, too, that he had been trying to speak for a long time, the effort to do so leaving him with a fatigue, so much so that when he finally touched the back of Hawkins' seat he could only say, the word escaping like the breath of a man lifting a heavy weight, "Well?"

"I don't know," said Hawkins. He hammered the dashboard. The gauges were the same as before.

"What's going on?" said Schlage.

The lake shimmered in the distance, the surface of it the same white-blue as the sky. There were no birds below, nothing at all aside from that gently undulating, roughly textured canopy, the color of it, in the bright sun, like pond scum at noon. The propeller turned slowly as Hawkins tried to start the engine again, the thing making a sucking sound or a kind of gasp. There was a harsh, metallic odor in the cockpit, and Hawkins said, "Come on. Come on."

Ray pulled on the back of Hawkins' seat and spoke, the words coming into the chaos of movement, of the plane swinging from side to side in the thermals, the propeller hardly spinning now and the endless and repeated sound of the engine turning over but not catching. Ray pointed at the lake.

"Can we get that far?"

"Listen to me," said Hawkins. "I want you to turn around and grab everything back there that's loose, anything that can fly around, you understand, my tools, anything hard, anything with an edge on it, anything heavy and then you throw it out the window. The latch is right there."

The horizon made a slow, sea-sawing motion. Ray undid his seat belt and climbed into the back, where he picked up the jugs of oil, a tool box, a clipboard and maps, a tent with aluminum poles, metal plates, cups, forks and

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spoons, a Coleman stove, all of which he passed forward to Wofsey, who put them out the window quickly, the collection of objects streaming away, the tool box opening and spilling its contents, ratchet wrenches and sockets and extensions all turning end over end in the bright stream of discarded things. Hawkins took the things from the shelf under the dashboard, a calculator, pencils, maps, a metal match box, and the framed photograph of the mountains around Shasta, which Hawkins glanced at and then discarded with a backhand toss.

"What's the big deal?" said Schlage.

"If this stuff flies around in the cockpit when you go down it can kill you," said Hawkins.

"You're not throwing out our bags are you?" said Schlage.

"No," said Ray.

Wofsey wedged the shotguns with the short barrels and pistols grips under the seats.

"What about those Remingtons?" said Hawkins.

"They're O.K.," said Wofsey.

"Get rid of them," said Hawkins.

"It's all right," Wofsey.

"How come you can't just glide for awhile?" said Ray. "You can see a little water up there."

"If you stretch the glide you'll stall."

"What does that mean?" said Schlage.

"It means you go into the trees nose first."

As the plane lost altitude, they couldn't see the lake anymore and the smoke near it blended into the low, gray mist that hung over the top of the trees. Hawkins choked the engine. The propeller turned again, the engine making that coughing, sucking noise, the white exhaust coming away in knots,

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in small balls of smoke that disappeared as the plane glided forward. Then Hawkins pushed in the choke and switched off the engine.

"You didn't throw out the bags, did you?" said Schlage. "The money is in the bags. Remember?"

"I remember," said Ray.

"We can't do shit without the money," said Schlage. He looked around, eyes wide, neck trembling. "Now that's the truth. Right?"

Hawkins hit the dashboard around the gauges with the heel of his hand.

"We got no power. I bet we were running off the battery."

The plane lost altitude, the wings swinging from side to side, the previously fine texture of the canopy now becoming rougher. The trees which were taller than the others looked like some eruption, some fuzzy disturbance in a microscopic photograph of mold.

Hawkins turned toward Ray. It was hot in the airplane with the sun beating on it and Hawkins was sweating, the beads on his upper lip as clear as vodka.

"Pull your seat belt so tight it hurts," said Hawkins.

They pulled their seat belts tight, their arms straining, each of them grasping the end of the strap with both hands.

"What kind of chance have we got?" said Ray.

"Don't bother me," said Hawkins. "I got things on my mind. Think about the Book of Common Prayer."

"What's he saying?" said Schlage.

The horizon tipped back and forth, like a sea-saw.

"Hey," said Schlage, turning to the pilot. "I asked a question. How bad is it?"

"I'm thinking," said Hawkins. "I'm busy."

They went on gliding for awhile, the sun swinging back and forth in the cockpit, and the shadows of the supports, of the joints in the windshield had a

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geometric shape. When Hawkins exhaled his breath came in a long, shaky rush.

"Listen," he said. "I've know people who walked away after going into the trees."

"That's all?" said Schlage. "That's what you've got to say?"

The plane went into the trees. It appeared as though they had landed in a green sea, the leaves splashing around them like water. The limbs of the crowns came toward the windshield and the sides of the plane with a whipping motion, the leaves on them shattering, simply exploding as the windshield cracked and then seemed to explode, too, as the stump of a broken limb came through it. The seat seemed very hard, as though Ray had dropped, in a sitting position, onto a piece of concrete, the impact of it running through his back: his spine seemed like a long pile of wooden thread spools which were suddenly knocked together. The shock ran from his hips to his head and his jaw snapped shut with a loud click.

If before it had seemed that the airplane had gone into the ocean, it now appeared it had sunk. As the plane began the long leaf-shrouded descent along the trunk of a tree the light changed from the brilliance of the tropical sun to an underwater green. The bits of glass from the broken windshield floated for a few moments, the small bits appearing, as they hung around Hawkins' head, like bubbles that came from trapped air or from all that was left after the first, long scream of protest, of refusal. The plane kept falling, and in the grating sound and pounding vibration of its descent along a tree trunk, it sunk into the green and gray-brown depths.

Even though they had thrown things out of the airplane, the air was still filled with objects, which the shock and the pounding descent had discovered, no matter where the things had been hidden. There were some empty oil containers which spun end over end, the levitation of them adding a sense of disorientation, as did the suspension of other things that floated in the cockpit,

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the long strings of glass, bits of paper, a pen that Hawkins had in his shirt pocket, some buttons, and some small, plastic bottles, which had been in the blue, metal first aid kit and which now spilled their contents like long strings of pearls.

One of the Remingtons was loose, and it hung in the air, the blued metal spinning with that same underwater sluggishness. Ray raised his arms in a gesture both of protection and of amazed resistance. In the things that floated around him, in the hard grating of the aluminum against the trees and the sound as a wing buckled and snapped off, making the plane lurch to one side, and in the half stifled shouts of disbelief in the frenzied claustrophobia of the fall, Ray still insisted, while he trembled, on his own presence, on the speck of his own perception. Ray didn't speak so much as make, through his closed mouth a surprised, insistent noise, an "Ah Ah Ah," like someone having a seizure. The shotgun barrel revolved with the motion of a baton tossed above a football field.

In fact, everything happened much faster than this, and Ray realized with a thrill at still being alive that he wasn't experiencing the things around him so much as remembering them. Then the shreds of leaves and bits of bark and glass, the needles and thread from the sewing kit that had been lost under the dashboard, the pills from the first aid kit and the other things in the thick collection of junk in the air suddenly disappeared, just sunk to the floor of the airplane as it came down with a jar as hard as the one when it had first gone into the trees: the plane came down on the side where the wing had been shorn off, the door being crushed and the supports of the now non-existent windshield crumpling against the base of a tree, the aluminum buckling against Hawkins in one large, uneven collapse. The shotgun barrel stopped spinning, and when it fell to the floor, it hit Wofsey on the side of the head, above the ear, striking him with a metallic clung, cutting him and then dropping onto the dirty, oil stained carpet beneath his feet.

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The plane sat on the floor of the rain forest. The rear seat was higher than the front one, and Ray blinked and opened his mouth, gasping like a fish, trying to get his breath back. He didn't recall how it had been knocked out. He opened his mouth and felt the catch when he tried to breathe. It left him straining, hanging against the seat belt.

Things fell around the airplane. Bits of bark, leaves, limbs, stems, chips of boughs and pieces of yellow, torn aluminum, too, and some rivets and screws and torn lengths of wire came to rest, not to mention the bright pieces of shattered glass which came down like strings of rain-water. It all fell with a tinkling or a slight tapping or rustle, indistinguishable from which was the sound of blood that dripped onto the leather seat from the hand Wofsey held to the side of his head.

Ray started breathing again. He undid his seat belt and slid forward, onto the back of Hawkins' seat, and he lay against the sun-warmed leather, not quite awake, or quite asleep, either, although he half-imagined, as he heard the rain-like patter of the falling debris on the airplane, that he was back in his parent's house, curled up on his bed while listening to a soft, California spring shower. Then he pushed himself up and said, "Let's get out before it burns."

He looked out the window. The debris continued to fall, the bits and pieces coming down with the disorder of dust shaken from a dry mop. Outside it was dark as an aquarium, and here or there something radiant, fish-like and erratic, turned in the one ray of light that came through the hole the airplane had made in the canopy.

"Open the door," said Ray.

"O, Jesus, O, Jesus," said Schlage.

"Here," said Ray. He reached across the seat and opened the door. "Get out."

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Schlage slipped down to the ground, where he sat in the steady rain of dust and leaves. Wofsey got out, too, and stood next to the plane, holding his head with both hands.

"Ray, Ray," he said, not looking up, "How bad is my head cut?"

"It's not bad," said Ray.

Ray climbed out, too, pulling his bag with him. He took the other bags out, too.

"What about the shotguns?" said Schlage.

Ray reached back in and pulled out two of them and the box of ammunition, and then all of them sat on the brown, thin humus of the jungle floor. Ray's legs were shaky. Then he shook his head and watched as bits of debris continued to drift around him in the odd half-lighted and apparently submarine-like world.

"Are you sure it's not too bad, Ray," said Wofsey. "Are you sure?"

Ray stood and took Wofsey's hand away. It was a deep cut and it bled a lot. Ray took a shirt from Wofsey's bag and sponged the wound, seeing the gray-purple bone.

"It's O.K." said Ray. "Push this against it."

The airplane was wedged against a tree. The propeller was bent and had a vaguely comic air as it curved back toward the crushed engine cowling. The windshield was gone, or what there was left of it hung in ice-colored shreds. Ray walked through the clutter, stepped over some gray limbs that had fallen there, and went around to Hawkins' side of the airplane. The float had been ripped off on Hawkins' side, and the stump of the broken strut that had held it was as sharp as the edge of an opened tin that held a canned ham. The cockpit wasn't far off the ground, just opposite Ray's chest. He looked through the crumpled and glassless windshield. Then he looked away quickly.

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"Yeah," said Hawkins, breathing quickly, "I'll bet I'm not pretty to see. This." He touched his broken nose. "I don't think that's a piece of aluminum stuck there. I think it's bone."

Ray pulled on the door, but it was crushed shut. The fuselage was still warm from the sun, and Ray kept his hand on it, the heat there bringing with it some memory, like the touch of a young woman's sunburn when Ray had run his hand over her back after she had peeled away the straps of her bathing suit, the white skin coming in a definite contrast with the red. While the debris fell around Ray, the erratic movement of it like bits of ash out of a chimney, he tried to remember whose back he had touched and that moment when there had been all the time in the world to touch the warm skin: he closed his eyes, trembling, not wanting to abandon that memory and a voice that had said, "O, your hands feels good there..." Then he stood back with a start, looking around, the bits of bark and leaf and metal collecting in his hair, brushing the skin of his face, the back of his hands. He leaned forward, closer to Hawkins and said, his voice not quite a whisper, but intense, "What are we going to do?"

"Do?" said Hawkins. "O, Mr. Egan, that's for you to decide."

Ray had one hand on the window frame of the door, the broken glass of which was a series of interlocking spider webs, the long lines of them all sweeping away from pulverized, snow colored centers where a limb or a bit of wing or some other object had struck the glass. Ray looked up, over the roof at the trunks of trees, in some of which there was a net-like collection of creepers, and as he stood he felt almost dizzy, or as though he were trying to balance on a piece of iron-work of a half built skyscraper, and he had, almost as a physical sensation, the awareness of the possibility of panic, over the abyss of which he seemed barely suspended. For a moment the lightest touch, the slightest wind, the most inconsequential impulse was capable, or so it seemed, of pushing him one way or the other, toward panic or away from it. He waited, breathing quickly, feeling from time to time the light tickle of debris, and as the grit of it

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collected on his shoulders and on the ground around him, there was, at the back of his mind, as he seemed to sway between impulses, the certainty that whatever happened was irreversible, and so the lightest touch, the half calming, half panic making sense of memory, while nothing in themselves, still carried an enormous weight.

"What's it going to be, Mr. Egan?" said Hawkins. "Are you going to die here?"

"No," said Ray, exhausted from the one word. He leaned against the tree where the plane was wedged.

"Listen," said Hawkins. "Have you got a compass?"

"Yes," said Ray.

"You walk two days, maybe three," said Hawkins. "You might make it."

He gave Ray a heading. Then he went back to breathing shallowly.

Schlage came over, too, and glanced into the airplane.

"Jesus, look at him," he said.

"Leave him alone," said Ray.

"Why should I?" said Schlage. He leaned toward the broken window.

"You got us into this, didn't you? Why for two cents..."

Schlage stood and glared into what was left of the cockpit.

"Pssst. Hey," said Hawkins. "Hey, jailbird, get the fuck away from me while I die."

"I don't like people talking to me like that," said Schlage.

"Psssst. Psssst," said Hawkins. "Come closer."

Schlage stepped back.

"That's all right," said Schlage.

He went to the other side of the airplane and sat down next to Wofsey.

Ray leaned in again and said to Hawkins, "I got some pain killer. You want it?"

Hawkins shook his head.

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"Can you give me the heading again," Ray said. "I want to make sure about it."

"Sure," said Hawkins, and then he gave Ray a different one than before.

"Listen," said Ray. "Listen to me."

"What is it?" said Hawkins. He looked at some leaves that twisted as they fell. His eyes were glassy and one pupil was much larger than another.

"Give me the right heading," he said.

"Heading?" said Hawkins. "O, Mr. Egan, don't you think you should pack up and go home before this place starts pulling on you?"

"Yeah," said Ray, looking down now. "That's a good idea. I'll do that."

"Will you?" said Hawkins. "That's good. Home. You ever see the mountains around Shasta?"

"Yes," said Ray.

"Shasta," said Hawkins.

After awhile he was quiet. Ray went back and sat with Wofsey and Schlage. The debris had stopped falling and the light hit the floor like an enormous spotlight. The three of them sat and rested, and then Schlage got up and walked to the airplane where he took Hawkins' wallet, saying, as he did so, "He doesn't need it where he's going. There's enough money in hell already, don't you think?"

Ray kept his head down.

"Yeah," he said, "I guess so."

After awhile, when Ray's legs didn't tremble so much, he took a compass from his bag and looked from it into the gray-green darkness. There wasn't so much growth under the canopy as just not much light, everything there appearing as though it was being seen at dawn. There was a vista, but it was impenetrable, comprised of lines of the tall tree trunks, gray and indistinct and beyond which there were the half-seen giant ferns and low growing plants with a green, very shiny leaf.

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"Maybe someone will find us," said Wofsey.

"Who?" said Schlage.

"I don't feel so good," said Wofsey. "I'm all shaky."

"I think we better start walking," said Ray.

"We're in shock, aren't we?" said Wofsey. "Jesus, can't we wait?"

"We haven't got much food," said Ray.

"I'm with you," said Schlage. "Let's get out of here."

"I feel sick," said Wofsey. "I can't carry anything. Ray, will you take my money?"

"I'll take it," said Schlage.

"I didn't ask you," said Wofsey.

"I'll remember that," said Schlage.

Wofsey pushed his bag over to Ray, who reached into the bottom and picked up the bills wrapped in plastic. There was some fungus growing inside, the color of it the same as the ink that the money was printed with.

They walked away from that one bright spot, and as they went the afternoon wind blew through the top of the canopy. Some leaves and twigs and oddly shaped pieces of aluminum swung back and forth as they fell, the debris having an erratic movement that blended perfectly with the slow flight of the butterflies, each of which rose like a tiny and perfectly symmetrical blue flame from around the wreckage.

"Are there headhunters up here?" said Wofsey.

"Now why did you have to go and say that?" said Schlage. "Leave it to you to say that."

"I was just wondering, that's all," said Wofsey.

"Well, keep it to yourself," said Schlage.

"Getting pissed off isn't going to make them not be here," said Wofsey.

"Goddamn it," said Schlage. "Do I have to get rough with you. Shall I smack you one?"

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"Come on," said Ray. "Let's go."

The men went forward, two of them carrying the shotguns with the pistol grips and the short barrels and those small overnight bags as they went into the perfume of the jungle, an odor that was both vital and decadent, a mixture of wild growth and things rotting in the moisture of the jungle's floor. Behind them, about three hundred yards away, there was that ray where the light came through the canopy, and even though it had been a while since the plane had crashed through the tree tops, the light was still filled with bits of dust and small pieces of bark and leaves that floated in the sunlight and turned, for one brief moment, into a fleck of gold which then drifted into the jade-colored shadows.