The Flyers of Gy
An Interplanary Tale
by Ursula K. Le Guin

The people of Gy look pretty much like people from our plane except that they have plumage, not hair. A fine, fuzzy down on the heads of infants becomes a soft, short coat of speckled dun on the fledglings, and with adolescence this grows out into a full head of feathers. Most men have ruffs at the back of the neck, shorter feathers all over the head, and tall, erectile crests. The head-plumage of males is brown or black, barred and marked variously with bronze, red, green, and blue. Women's plumes usually grow long, sometimes sweeping down the back almost to the floor, with soft, curling, trailing edges, like the tail-plumes of ostriches; the colors of the feathers of women are vivid—purple, scarlet, coral, turquoise, gold. Gyr men and women are downy in the pubic region and pit of the arm and often have short, fine plumage over the whole body. People with brightly colored bodyfeathers are a cheerful sight when naked, but they are much troubled by lice and nits.

Moulting is a continuous process, not seasonal. As people age, not all the moulted feathers grow back, and patchy baldness is common among both men and women over forty. Most people, therefore, save the best of their headfeathers as they moult out, to make into wigs or false crests as needed. Those whose plumage is scanty or dull can also buy feather wigs at special shops. There are fads for bleaching one's feathers or spraying them gold or crimping them, and wig shops in the cities will bleach, dye, spray, or crimp one's plumage and sell headdresses in whatever the current fashion is. Poor women with specially long, splendid headfeathers often sell them to the wig shops for a fairly good price.

The Gyr write with quill pens. It is traditional for a father to give a set of his own stiff ruff-quills to a child beginning to learn to write. Lovers exchange feathers with which to write love letters to one another, a pretty custom, referred to in a famous scene in the play The Misunderstanding by Inuinui:

O my betraying plume, that wrote his love
To her! His love—my feather, and my blood!

The Gyr are a staid, steady, traditional people, uninterested in innovation, shy of strangers. They are resistant to technological invention and novelty; attempts to sell them ballpoint pens or airplanes, or to induce them to enter the wonderful world of electronics, have failed. They go on writing letters to one another with quill pens, calculating with their heads, walking afoot or riding in carriages pulled by large, doglike animals called ugnunu, learning a few words in foreign languages when absolutely necessary, and watching classic stage plays written in iambic pentameter. No amount of exposure to the useful technologies, the marvelous gadgets, the advanced scientific knowledge of other planes—for Gy is a fairly popular tourist stop—seems to rouse envy or greed or a sense of inferiority in the Gyran bosom. They go on doing exactly as they have always done, not stodgily, exactly, but with a kind of dullness, a polite indifference and impenetrability, behind which may lie supreme self-satisfaction, or something quite different.

The crasser kind of tourists from other planes refer to the Gyr, of course, as birdies, birdbrains, featherheads, and so on. Many visitors from livelier planes visit the small, placid cities, take rides out into the country in ugnunu-chaises, attend sedate but charming balls (for the Gyr like to dance), and enjoy an old-fashioned evening at the theater without losing one degree of their contempt for the natives. "Feathers but no wings," is the conventional

judgment that sums it up.

Such patronizing visitors may spend a week in Gy without ever seeing a winged native or learning that what they took for a bird or a jet was a woman on her way across the sky.

The Gyr don't talk about their winged people unless asked. They don't conceal them, or lie about them, but they don't volunteer information. I had to ask questions fairly persistently to be able to write the following description.

Wings never develop before late adolescence. There is no sign at all of the propensity until suddenly a girl of eighteen, a boy of nineteen, wakes up with a slight fever and a terrible aching in the shoulder blades.

After that comes a year or more of extreme physical stress and pain, during which the subject must be kept quiet, warm, and well fed. Nothing gives comfort but food—the nascent flyers are terribly hungry most of the time—and being wrapped or swaddled in blankets, while the body restructures, remakes, rebuilds itself. The bones lighten and become porous, the whole upper body musculature changes, and bony protuberances, developing rapidly from the shoulder blades, grow out into immense alar processes. The final stage is the growth of the wingfeathers, which is not painful. The primaries are, as feathers go, massive, and may be a meter long. The wingspread of an adult male Gyr is about four meters, that of a woman usually about a half meter less. Stiff feathers sprout from the calves and ankles, to be spread wide in flight.

Any attempt to interfere, to prevent or halt the growth of wings, is useless and harmful or fatal. If the wings are not allowed to develop, the bones and muscles begin to twist and shrivel, causing unendurable, unceasing pain. Amputation of the wings or the flightfeathers, at any stage, results in a slow, agonizing death.

Among some of the most conservative, archaic peoples of the Gyr, the tribal societies living along the icy coasts of the north polar regions and the herdsfolk of the cold, barren steppes of the far south, this vulnerability of the winged people is incorporated into religion and ritual. In the north, as soon as a youth shows the fatal signs, he or she is captured and handed over to the tribal elders. With rituals similar to their funeral rites, they fasten heavy stones to the victim's hands and feet, then go in procession to a cliff high above the sea and push the victim over, shouting, "Fly! Fly for us!"

Among the steppe tribes, the wings are allowed to develop completely, and the youth is carefully, worshipfully attended all that year. Let us say that it is a girl who has shown the fatal symptoms. In her feverish trances she functions as a shaman and soothsayer. The priests listen and interpret all her sayings to the people. When her wings are full grown, they are bound down to her back. Then the whole tribe set out to walk with her to the nearest high place, cliff, or crag—often a journey of weeks, in that flat, desolate country.

On the heights, after days of dancing and imbibing hallucinatory smoke from smudge-fires of byubyu wood, the priests go with the young woman, all of them drugged, dancing and singing, to the edge of the cliff. There her wings are freed. She lifts them for the first time, and then like a falcon leaving the nest, leaps stumbling off the cliff into the air, wildly beating those huge, untried wings. Whether she flies or falls, all the men of the tribe, screaming with excitement, shoot at her with bow and arrow or throw their razor-pointed hunting spears. She falls, pierced by dozens of spears and arrows. The women scramble down the cliff, and if there is any life left in her they beat it out with stones. They then throw and heap stones over the body till it is buried

under a cairn.

There are many cairns at the foot of every steep hill or crag in all the steppe country; the ancient cairns furnish stones for the new ones.

Such young people may try to escape their fate by running away from their people, but the weakness and fever that attend the development of wings cripple them, and they never get far.

There is a folktale in the South Marches of Merm of a winged man who leapt up into the air from the sacrificial crag and flew so strongly that he escaped the spears and arrows and disappeared into the sky. The original story ends there. The playwright Norwer used it as the base for a romantic tragedy. In his play Transgression, the young man has appointed a tryst with his beloved, and flies there to meet with her; but she has unwittingly betrayed him to another suitor, who lies in wait. As the lovers embrace, the suitor hurls his spear and kills the winged one. The maiden pulls out her own knife and kills the murderer and then—after exchanging anguished farewells with the not quite expired winged one—stabs herself. It is melodramatic, but if well staged, very moving; everybody has tears in their eyes when the hero first descends like an eagle, and when, dying, he enfolds his beloved in his great bronze wings.

A version of Transgression was performed a few years ago on my plane, in Chicago, at the Actual Reality Theater. It was probably inevitably, but unfortunately, translated as Sacrifice of the Angels. There is absolutely no mythology or lore concerning anything like our angels among the Gyr. Sentimental pictures of sweet little cherubs with baby wings, hovering guardian spirits, or grander images of divine messengers would strike them as a hideous mockery of something every parent and every adolescent dreads: a rare but fearful deformity, a curse, a death sentence.

Among the urbanized Gyr, that dread is mitigated to some degree, since the winged ones are treated not as sacrificial scapegoats but with tolerance and even sympathy, as people with a most unfortunate handicap.

This might seem odd. To soar over the heads of the earthbound, to race with eagles and soar with condors, to dance on air, to ride the wind, not in a noisy metal box or on a contraption of plastic and fabric and straps but on one's own vast, strong, splendid, outstretched wings—how could that be anything but a joy, a freedom? How stodgy, sullen-hearted, leaden-souled the Gyr must be, to think that people who can fly are cripples!

But they do have their reasons. The fact is that the winged Gyr can't trust their wings.

No fault can be found in the actual design of the wings. They serve admirably, with a little practice, for short flights, for effortless gliding and soaring on updrafts and, with more practice, for stunts and tumbling, aerial acrobatics. When winged people are fully mature, if they fly regularly they may achieve great stamina. They can stay aloft almost indefinitely. Many learn to sleep on the wing. Flights of over two thousand miles have been recorded, with only brief hover-stops to eat. Most of these very long flights were made by women, whose lighter bodies and bone structure give them the advantage over distance. Men, with their more powerful musculature, would take the speed-flying awards, if there were any. But the Gyr, at least the wingless majority, are not interested in records or awards, certainly not in competitions that involve a high risk of death.

The problem is that flyers' wings are liable to sudden, total, disastrous failure. Flight engineers and medical investigators on Gyr and elsewhere have

not been able to account for it. The design of the wings has no detectable fault; their failure must be caused by an as yet unidentified physical or psychological factor, an incompatibility of the alar processes with the rest of the body. Unfortunately no weakness shows up beforehand; there is no way to predict wing failure. It occurs without warning. A flyer who has flown his entire adult life without a shadow of trouble takes off one morning and, having attained altitude, suddenly, appallingly, finds his wings will not obey him—shuddering, closing, clapping down along his sides, paralyzed. And he falls from the sky like a stone.

The medical literature states that as many as one flight in twenty ends in failure. Flyers I talked to believed that wing failure was not nearly as frequent as that, citing cases of people who had flown daily for decades. But it was not a matter they wanted to talk about with me, or perhaps even with one another. They seemed to have no preventive precautions or rituals, accepting it as truly random. Failure may come on the first flight or the thousandth. No cause has been found for it—heredity, age, inexperience, fatigue, diet, emotion, physical condition. Every time a flyer goes up, the chance of wing failure is the same.

Some of course survive the fall. But they never fall again, because they can never fly again. Once the wings have failed, they are useless. They remain paralyzed, dragging along beside and behind their owner like a huge, heavy feather cape.

Foreigners ask why flyers don't carry parachutes in case of wing failure. No doubt they could. It is a question of temperament. Winged people who fly are those willing to take the risk of wing failure. Those who do not want the risk do not fly. Or perhaps those who consider it a risk do not fly, and those who fly do not consider it a risk.

As amputation of the wings is invariably fatal, and surgical removal of any part of them causes acute, incurable, crippling pain, the fallen flyers and those who choose not to fly must drag their wings about all their lives, through the streets, up and down the stairs. Their changed bone structure is not well suited to ground life; they tire easily walking, and suffer many fractures and muscular injuries. Few non-flying flyers live to sixty.

Those who do fly face their death every time they take off. Some of them, however, are still alive and still flying at eighty.

It is a quite wonderful sight, takeoff. Human beings aren't as awkward as I would have expected, having seen the graceless flapping of such masters of the air as pelicans and swans getting airborne. Of course it is easiest to launch from a perch or height, but if there's no such convenience handy, all they need is a run of twenty or twenty-flve meters, enough for a couple of lifts and downbeats of the great extended wings, and then a step that doesn't touch the ground, and then they're up, aloft, soaring—maybe circling back overhead to smile and wave down at uplifted faces before arrowing off above the roofs or over the hills.

They fly with the legs close together, the body arched a little backward, the legfeathers fanning out into a hawklike tail as needed. As the arms have no integral muscular connection to the wings—winged Gyr are six-limbed creatures—the hands may be kept down along the sides to reduce wind resistance and increase speed. In a leisurely flight, they may do anything hands do—scratch the head, peel a fruit, sketch an aerial view of the landscape, hold a baby. Though the latter I only saw once, and it troubled me.

I talked several times with a winged Gyr named Ardiadia; what follows is all

in his own words, recorded, with his permission, during our conversations.

"Oh, yes, when I first found out—when it started happening to me, you know—I was floored. Terrified! I couldn't believe it. I'd been so sure it wouldn't happen to me. When we were kids, you know, we used to joke about so-and-so being 'flighty,' or say 'he'll be taking off one of these days'—but me? Me grow wings? It wasn't going to happen to me. So when I got this headache, and then my teeth ached for a while, and then my back began to hurt, I kept telling myself it was a toothache, I had an infection, an abscess.… But when it really began there was no more fooling myself. It was terrible. I really can't remember much about it. It was bad. It hurt. First like knives running back and forth between my shoulders, and claws digging up and down my spine. And then all over, my arms, my legs, my fingers, my face.… And I was so weak I couldn't stand up. I got out of bed and fell down on the floor and I couldn't get up. I lay there calling my mother, 'Mama! Mama, please come!' She was asleep. She worked late, waiting in a restaurant, and didn't get home till way after midnight, and so she slept hard. And I could feel the floor getting hot underneath me, I was so hot with fever, and I'd try to move my face to a cooler place on the floor.…

"Well, I don't know if the pain eased off or I just got used to it, but it was a bit better after a couple of months. It was hard, though. And long, and dull, and strange. Lying there. But not on my back. You can't lie on your back, ever, you know. Hard to sleep at night. When it hurt, it always hurt most at night. Always a little fevery, likely to think strange thoughts, have funny ideas. And never able to think a thought through, never able quite to hold on to an idea. I felt as if I myself really couldn't think any more. Thoughts just came into me and went through me and I watched them. And no plans for the future any more, because what was my future now? I'd thought of being a schoolteacher. My mother had been so excited about that, she'd encouraged me to stay in school the extra year, to qualify for teachers' college.… Well, I had my nineteenth birthday lying there in my little room in our three-room flat over the grocery on Lacemakers Lane. My mother brought some fancy food from the restaurant and a bottle of honey wine, and we tried to have a celebration, but I couldn't drink the wine, and she couldn't eat because she was crying. But I could eat, I was always starving hungry, and that cheered her up.… Poor Mama!

"Well, so, I came out of that, little by little, and the wings grew in, great ugly dangling naked things, disgusting, to start with, and even worse when they started to fledge, with the pinfeathers like great pimples—but when the primaries and secondaries came out, and I began to feel the muscles there, and to be able to shudder my wings, shake them, raise them a little—and I wasn't feverish any more, or I'd got used to running a fever all the time, I'm not really sure which it is—and I was able to get up and walk around, and feel how light my body was now, as if gravity couldn't affect me, even with the weight of those huge wings dragging after me … but I could lift them, get them up off the floor.…

"Not myself, though. I was earthbound. My body felt light, but I wore out even trying to walk, got weak and shaky. I'd used to be pretty good at the broad jump, but now I couldn't get both feet off the ground at once.

"I was feeling a lot better, but it bothered me to be so weak, and I felt closed in. Trapped. Then a flyer came by, a man from uptown, who'd heard about me. Flyers look after kids going through the change. He'd looked in a couple of times to reassure my mother and make sure I was doing all right. I was grateful for that. Now he came and talked to me for a long time, and showed me the exercises I could do. And I did them, every day, all the time—hours and hours. What else did I have to do? I used to like reading, but it didn't seem

to hold my attention any more. I used to like going to the theater, but I couldn't do that, I still wasn't strong enough. And places like theaters, they don't have room for people with unbound wings, you take up too much space, you cause a fuss. I'd been good at mathematics in school, but I couldn't fix my attention on the problems any more. They didn't seem to matter. So I had nothing to do but the exercises the flyer taught me. And I did them. All the time.

"The exercises helped. There really wasn't enough room even in our sitting room, I never could do a vertical stretch fully, but I did what I could. I felt better, I got stronger. I finally began to feel like my wings were mine. Were part of me. Or I was part of them.

"Then one day I couldn't stand being inside any more. Thirteen months I'd been inside, in those three little rooms, most of them just in the one room, thirteen months! Mama was out at work. I went downstairs. I walked the first ten steps down and then I lifted my wings. Even though the staircase was way too narrow, I could lift them some, and I stepped off and floated down the last six steps. Well, sort of. I hit pretty hard at the bottom, and my knees buckled, but I didn't really fall. It wasn't flying, but it wasn't quite falling.

"I went outside. The air was wonderful. I felt like I hadn't had any air for a year. Actually, I felt like I'd never known what air was in my whole life. Even in that narrow little street, with the houses hanging over it, there was wind, there was the sky, not a ceiling. The sky overhead. The air. I started walking. I hadn't planned anything. I wanted to get out of the lanes and alleys, to somewhere open, a big plaza or square or park, anything open to the sky. I saw people staring at me but I didn't much care. I'd stared at people with wings, when I didn't have them. Not meaning anything, just curious. Wings aren't all that common. I used to wonder a little about what it felt like to have them, you know. Just ignorance. So I didn't care if people looked at me now. I was too eager to get out from under the roofs. My legs were weak and shaky but they kept going, and sometimes, where the street wasn't crowded with people, I'd lift my wings a little, loft them, get a feel of the air under the feathers, and for a little while I'd be lighter on my feet.

"So I got to the Fruit Market. The market had shut down, it was evening, the booths were all shoved back, so there was a big space in the middle, cobblestones. I stood there under the Assay Office for a while doing exercises, lifts and stretches—I could do a vertical all the way for the first time, and it felt wonderful. Then I began to trot a little as I lofted, and my feet would get off the ground for a moment, and so I couldn't resist, I couldn't help it, I began to run and to loft my wings, and then beat down, and loft again, and I was up! But there was the Weights and Measures Building right in front of me, this grey stone facade right in my face, and I actually had to fend off, push myself away from it with my hands, and drop down to the pavement. But I turned around and there I had the full run ahead of me, clear across the marketplace to the Assay Office. And I ran, and I took off.

"I swooped around the marketplace for a while, staying low, learning how to turn and bank, and how to use my tailfeathers. It comes pretty natural, you feel what to do, the air tells you … but the people down below were looking up, and ducking when I banked too steep, or stalled … I didn't care. I flew for over an hour, till after dark, after all the people had gone. I'd got way up over the roofs by then. But I realized my wing muscles were getting tired and I'd better come down. But that was hard. I mean, landing was hard because I didn't know how to land. I came down like a sack of rocks, bam! Nearly sprained my ankle, and the soles of my feet stung like fire. If anybody saw it they must have laughed. But I didn't care. It was just hard to be on the

ground. I hated be down. Limping home, dragging my wings that weren't any good here, feeling weak, feeling heavy.

"It took me quite a while to get home, and Mama came in just a little after me. She looked at me and said, 'You've been out,' and I said, 'I flew, Mama,' and she burst into tears.

"I was sorry for her but there wasn't much I could say.

She didn't even ask me if I was going to go on flying. She knew I would. I don't understand the people who have wings and don't use them. I suppose they're interested in having a career. Maybe they were already in love with somebody on the ground. But it seems … I don't know. I can't really understand it. Wanting to stay down. Choosing not to fly. Wingless people can't help it, it's not their fault they're grounded. But if you have wings …

"Of course they may be afraid of wing failure. Wing failure doesn't happen if you don't fly. Of course it doesn't happen, how can it? How can something fail that never worked?

"I suppose being safe is important to some people. They have a family or commitments or a job or something that makes it important. I don't know. You'd have to talk to one of them. I'm a flyer."

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I asked Ardiadia how he made his living. Like many flyers, he worked part-time for the postal service. He mostly carried governmental correspondence and despatches on long flights, even overseas. Evidently he was considered a gifted and reliable employee. For particularly important despatches, he told me that two flyers were always sent, in case one suffered wing failure.
He was thirty-two. I asked him if he was married, and he told me that flyers never married; they considered it, he said, beneath them—"Affairs on the wing," he said, with a slight smile. I asked if the affairs were always with other flyers, and he said, "Oh, yes, of course," unintentionally revealing his surprise or disgust at the idea of making love to a non-flyer. His manners were pleasant and civil, he was most obliging, but he could not quite hide his sense of being apart from, different from the wingless, having nothing really to do with them. How could he help but look down on us?

I pressed him a little about this feeling of superiority, and he tried to explain. "When I said it was as if I was my wings, you know?—that's it. Being able to fly makes other things seem uninteresting. What people do seems so trivial. Flying is complete. It's enough. I don't know if you can understand. It's one's whole body, one's whole self, up in the whole sky. On a clear day, in the sunlight, with everything lying down there below, far away …. Or in a high wind, in a storm—out over the sea, that's where I like best to fly. Over the sea in stormy weather. When the fishing boats run for land, and you have it all to yourself, the sky full of rain and lightning, and the clouds under your wings. Once off Emer Cape I danced with the waterspouts.… It takes everything to fly. Everything you are, everything you have. And so if you go down, you go down whole. And over the sea, if you go down, that's it, who's to know, who cares? I don't want to be buried underground." The idea made him shiver a little. I could see the shudder in his long, heavy, bronze-and-black wingfeathers.

I asked if the affairs on the wing sometimes resulted in children, and he said with indifference that of course they sometimes did. I pressed him a little about it and he said that a baby was a great bother to a flying mother, so that as soon as a baby was weaned it was usually left "on the ground," as he put it, to be brought up by relatives. Sometimes the winged mother got so attached to the child that she grounded herself to look after it. He told me this with some disdain.

The children of flyers are no more likely to grow wings than other children. The phenomenon has no genetic factor, but is a developmental pathology shared by all Gyr, which appears in less than one out of a thousand.

I think Ardiadia would not accept the word "pathology."

I talked also with a non-flying flyer, who let me record our conversation but asked that I not use his name. He is a member of a respectable law firm in a small city in Central Gy. He said, "I never flew, no. I was twenty when I got sick. I'd thought I was past the age, safe. It was a terrible blow. My parents had already spent a good deal of money, made sacrifices to get me into college. I was doing well in college. I liked learning. I had an intellect. To lose a year was bad enough. I wasn't going to let this business eat up my whole life. To me they are simply excrescences. Growths. Impediments to walking, dancing, sitting in a civilized manner on a normal chair, wearing decent clothing. I refused to let something like that get in the way of my education, my whole life. Flyers are stupid, their brains go all to feathers. I wasn't going to trade in my mind for a chance to flitter about over the rooftops. I'm more interested in what goes on under the roofs. I don't care for scenery. I prefer people. And I wanted a normal life. I wanted to marry, to have children. My father was a kind man; he died when I was sixteen, and I'd always thought that if I could be as good to my children as he was to us, it would be a way of thanking him, of honoring his memory.… I was fortunate enough to meet a beautiful woman who refused to let my handicap frighten her. In fact she won't let me call it that. She insists that all this"—he indicated his wings with a slight gesture of his head—"was what she first saw in me. Claims that when we first met, she thought I was quite a boring, stuffy young fellow, till I turned around."

His headfeathers were black with a blue crest. His wings, though flattened, bound, and belted down (as non-flyers' wings always are, to keep them out of the way and as unnoticeable as possible), were splendidly feathered in patterns of dark blue and peacock blue with black bars and edges.

"At any rate, I was determined to keep my feet on the ground, in every sense of the words. If I'd ever had any youthful notions about flitting off for a while, which I really never did, once I was through with the fever and delirium and had made peace with the whole painful, wasteful process—if I had ever thought of flying, once I was married, once we had a child, nothing, nothing could induce me to yearn for even a taste of that life, to consider it even for a moment. The utter irresponsibility of it, the arrogance—the arrogance of it is very distasteful to me."

We then talked for some while about his law practice, which was an admirable one, devoted to representing poor people against swindlers and profiteers. He showed me a charming portrait of his two children, eleven and nine years old, which he had drawn with one of his own quills. The chances that either child would grow wings was, as for every Gyr, a thousand to one.

Shortly before I left I asked him, "Do you ever dream of flying?"

Lawyerlike, he was slow to answer. He looked away, out the window.

"Doesn't everyone?" he said.

The End