The Man in the Water
Roger Rosenblatt

As disasters go, this one was terrible but not unique, certainly not among the worst on the roster of U.S. air crashes. There was the unusual element of the bridge, of course, and the fact that the plane clipped it at a moment of high traffic, one routine thus intersecting another and disrupting both. Then, too, there was the location of the event. Washington, the city of form and regulations, turned chaotic, deregulated, by a blast of real winter and a single slap of metal on metal. The jets from Washington National Airport that normally swoop around the presidential monuments like famished gulls were, for the moment, emblemed by the one that fell; so there was that detail. And there was the aesthetic clash as well—blue-and-green Air Florida, the name a flying garden, sunk down among gray chunks in a black river. All that was worth noticing, to be sure. Still, there was nothing very special in any of it, except death, which, while always special, does not necessarily bring millions to tears or to attention. Why, then, the shock here?

Perhaps because the nation saw in this disaster something more than a mechanical failure. Perhaps because people saw in it no failure at all, but rather something successful about their makeup. Here, after all, were two forms of nature in collision: the elements and human character. Last Wednesday, the elements, indifferent as ever, brought down Flight 90. And on that same afternoon, human nature—groping and flailing in mysteries of its own—rose to the occasion.

Of the four acknowledged heroes of the event, three are able to account for their behavior. Donald Usher and Eugene Windsor, a park-police helicopter team, risked their lives every time they dipped the skids into the water to pick up survivors. On television, side by side in bright blue jumpsuits, they described their courage as all in the line of duty. Lenny Skutnik, a 28-year-old employee of the Congressional Budget Office, said: "It’s something I never thought I would do"—referring to his jumping into the water to drag an injured woman to shore. Skutnik added that “somebody had to go in the water,” delivering every hero’s line that is no less admirable for its repetitions. In fact, nobody had to go into the water. That somebody actually did so is part of the reason this particular tragedy sticks in the mind.

But the person most responsible for the emotional impact of the disaster is the one known at first simply as “the man in the water.” (Balding, probably in his 50s, an extravagant moustache.) He was seen clinging with five other survivors to the tail section of the airplane. This man was described by Usher and Windsor as appearing alert and in control. Every time they lowered a lifeline and flotation ring to him, he passed it on to another of the passengers. “In a mass casualty, you’ll find people like him,” said Windsor. “But I’ve never seen one with that commitment.” When the helicopter came back for him, the man had gone under. His selflessness was one reason the story held national attention; his anonymity another. The fact that he went unidentified invested him with a universal character. For a while he was Everyman, and thus proof (as if one needed it) that no man is ordinary.
Still, he could never have imagined such a capacity in himself. Only minutes before his character was tested, he was sitting in the ordinary plane among the ordinary passengers, dutifully listening to the stewardess telling him to fasten his seat belt and saying something about the “No Smoking” sign. So our man relaxed with the others, some of whom would owe their lives to him. Perhaps he started to read, or to doze, or to regret some harsh remark made in the office that morning. Then suddenly he knew that the trip would not be ordinary. Like every other person on that flight, he was desperate to live, which makes his final act so stunning.

For at some moment in the water he must have realized that he would not live if he continued to hand over the rope and ring to others. He had to know it, no matter how gradual the effect of the cold. In his judgment he had no choice. When the helicopter took off with what was to be the last survivor, he watched everything in the world move away from him, and he deliberately let it happen.

Yet there was something else about our man that kept our thoughts on him, and which keeps our thoughts on him still. He was there, in the essential, classic circumstance. Man in nature. The man in the water. For its part, nature cared nothing about the five passengers. Our man, on the other hand, cared totally. So the timeless battle commenced in the Potomac. For as long as that man could last, they went at each other, nature and man; the one making no distinctions of good and evil, acting on no principles, offering no lifelines; the other acting wholly on distinctions, principles, and, one supposes, on faith.

Since it was he who lost the fight, we ought to come again to the conclusion that people are powerless in the world. In reality, we believe the reverse, and it takes the act of the man in the water to remind us of our true feelings in this matter. It is not to say that everyone would have acted as he did, or as Usher, Windsor, and Skutnik. Yet whatever moved these men to challenge death on behalf of their fellows is not peculiar to them. Everyone feels the possibility in himself. That is the abiding wonder of the story. That is why we would not let go of it. If the man in the water gave a lifeline to the people gasping for survival, he was likewise giving a lifeline to those who observed him.

The odd thing is that we do not even really believe that the man in the water lost his fight. “Everything in Nature contains all the powers of Nature,” said Emerson. Exactly. So the man in the water had his own natural powers. He could not make ice storms, or freeze the water until it froze the blood. But he could hand life over to a stranger, and that is a power of nature too. The man in the water pitted himself against an implacable, impersonal enemy; he fought it with charity; and he held it to a standoff. He was the best we can do.

Making Meanings
The Man in the Water
Reading Check
a. Briefly describe the disaster.
b. What does Rosenblatt think the nation saw in this disaster?
c. Besides the man in the water, Rosenblatt mentions three other heroes. Who are they, and what did they do?
d. Describe what the man in the water looked like and what he did.
e. What ultimately happened to him?

First Thoughts
1. As you read the essay, what did you think or feel about the man in the water? First, describe each response in a phrase; then elaborate.

Shaping Interpretations
2. According to Rosenblatt, the man in the water symbolizes an “essential, classic circumstance”: the conflict between human beings and nature. How does Rosenblatt characterize nature? How does nature differ from the man in the water?

3. Summarize Rosenblatt’s most important points, and state his main idea. Which passages support this idea most effectively? Does Rosenblatt ever state the idea directly? (Be sure to check the chart you made while reading.)

4. Rosenblatt says that the man in the water is proof that “no man is ordinary.” What do you think he means by this? What other people have proved that we are “not ordinary”?

5. The final two paragraphs of the essay make specific points about human nature. Tell how you feel about the opinions Rosenblatt expresses there.

Connecting with the Text
6. How would you react in a situation in which you might save a stranger’s life but risk losing your own life? Would your behavior change if the person in danger was someone you loved? Talk about your responses to what the four heroes did.

Extending the Text
7. Twain satirizes the bad in human nature (see “The Lowest Animal”), and Rosenblatt praises the good. In what specific ways does Rosenblatt provide answers to Twain?

Challenging the Text
8. What do you think of the details the writer tells you—and doesn’t tell you—about the man in the water? (What questions would you like to ask Rosenblatt?)