from Jake and the children is dissolved into her typing shoes and reading a story; when Jake breaks down and literally locks himself away from her, he finally returns and crawls into bed with her and they hold hands: “she feels safe again” (170). When the couple are old and Jake has to accept that he can no longer drive, Alice lies in bed that night musing: Not able to stop herself, she reviews the losses of the day, the little deaths that creep upon you when you’re not looking. The Victrola. Jake’s driving. Nixon. She turns her mind, a right angle, and thinks about how tickled Mrs. Benton was with her party premiums, the glow of goldenrod lighting up the ditch, the quiet of sitting by the river. She thinks of her loved ones and prayers, as she does every night, for their safety and happiness. (206)

At one point, “Alice can’t remember a time when she felt certain that she could protect her family. Who can, when you never know what’s waiting around the corner? There’s so much that can go wrong” (161). However, Alice knows then—and always knows—that having the family to protect means that even when things go wrong, there is still something right since she has someone to love and pray for that things do not go wrong.

Like its predecessor The Floor of the Sky, this novel is set on the plains of Nebraska that mirror the successes and failures of the humans in the novel. Farmers will lose their crops to hail and drought, but on a morning, a farmer “hangs over the post of a barbed-wire fence and watches the morning cloaked in royal colors, pink and rose and gold, and thinks, not for the first time, that sunrise is when God tips his hand and lets the whole world know he’s not the uptight bastard most assume him to be” (41). Plains provide the opportunity for seeing things, both tangible and intangible. The “plain” sense of things is that land and life and people are worth the risk, the hard times, because in the end, what arises is beautiful.


W. Scott Olsen and I have a few things in common. We’re both English college instructors, live in Minnesota, and enjoy writing. However, we do have one glaring difference: he is in love with flying and I hate it. For me, flying is always fraught with danger—turbulence, high buildings, thunderstorms, take-offs, landings. No matter how smooth the flight or soft the landings, I am nervously gripping the arms of the seat or the hand of whoever has to sit next to me. For Olsen, amateur pilot, flying is an adventure, a means for playing and exploration. I focus on how flying can

*The Plain Sense of Things* is a book about losses, little deaths that wear away at people and at families, but these little deaths aren’t the real story. What is the real story is how the people handle these little deaths with some kind of perpetual hope and resilience, a sense that having someone to care for, to come back to, to hurt with, gives all failures and “little deaths” meaning. People survive, families survive, love survives because of the “heart, aching and full of yearning to keep those [they] love near” (220).

The book’s opening is misleading since it begins with Gramp going to pick up Billy after his mother’s death. Naturally readers assume that the book is Billy’s story. Then we assume that the story belongs to Mary, Billy’s aunt, whom we see in the next chapter burying her second husband. It’s Alice, Mary’s stepdaughter, however, who achieves the starring role in this book. When she falls in love with and marries Mary’s brother Jake, Gramp’s son, the story really begins. However, the opening segments aren’t superfluous; they introduce the characters, their interrelationships, the rural Nebraska setting, and the fact that life is hardships, but people are meant to endure. Life is surviving and moving ahead, but never losing sight of what is in the past so that what is coming has meaning.

Alice and Jake become masters at survival. They rent their farmland, so they are constantly at the mercy of the landlords. When crops don’t prosper, they move to another plot of land, and when that doesn’t work, they move again. They keep trying despite the fact that they keep failing. Arguments, illnesses, job failures and the consequent economic difficulties, and problems with their children are often met with anger, frustration, a terrible lashing out at the ones that they love, and a desire to escape. When Jake decides to go hunting rather than help Alice care for their three children plus three other children suddenly left in her care, she dreams of leaving:

She sees herself out the door, up the road, swinging her arms. A melody rises in her throat. She breaks into a run, and she doesn’t stop, not for him, not for fences, not for ditches, not for miles. She flies out the door like a wild woman, a witch on a broom, her rage rolling her like a tumbleweed. She rises on the crescent moon, she splits into a glowing sun just before she sits down to tie Robert’s shoe and read all four boys a story. (111)

Then, as indicated in the last half of the last sentence from the above quote, Joern tempers all of these moments with a gesture that contradicts the times of rage and despair. The mad flight on her broomstick away
from Jake and the children is dissolved into her tying shoes and reading a story; when Jake breaks down and literally locks himself away from her, he finally returns and crawls into bed with her and they hold hands: “she feels safe again” (170). When the couple are old and Jake has to accept that he can no longer drive, Alice lies in bed that night musing:

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