

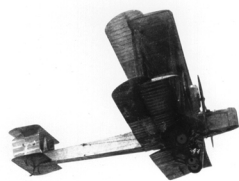


COLUM McCANN

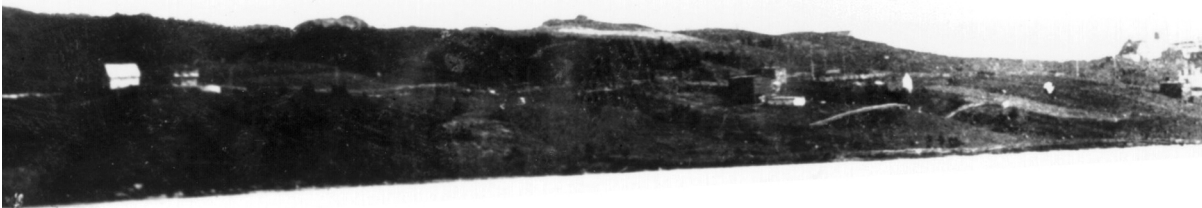
BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *LET THE GREAT WORLD SPIN*
WINNER OF THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

TransAtlantic

B L O O M S B U R Y



COLUM McCANN TransAtlantic



B L O O M S B U R Y
LONDON • NEW DELHI • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

No history is mute. No matter how much they own it, break it and lie about it, human history refuses to shut its mouth. Despite deafness and ignorance, the time that was continues to tick inside the time that is.

– EDUARDO GALEANO

2012

THE COTTAGE SAT AT THE EDGE OF THE LOUGH. SHE COULD HEAR the wind and rain whipping across the expanse of open water: it hit the trees and muscled its way into the grass.

She began to wake early in the morning, even before the children. It was a house worth listening to. Odd sounds from the roof. She thought, at first, that it might be rats scuttling across the slate, but she soon discovered that it was the gulls flying overhead, dropping oysters on the roof to break the shells open. It happened mostly in the morning, sometimes at dusk.

The shells pinged first, silent a moment as they bounced, followed by a jingling roll along the roof until they tumbled down into the long grass, spotted with whitewash.

When a shell tip hit directly, it cracked open, but if it dropped sideways through the sky it wouldn't break: it lay there like a thing unexploded.

The gulls swooped, acrobatic, upon the broken shells. Their hunger briefly solved, they flapped off towards the water once more, in squadrons of blue and grey.

Soon the rooms began to stir, the opening of windows, cupboards and doors, the wind off the lough moving through the house.

Book One

1919

c l o u d s h a d o w

IT WAS A MODIFIED BOMBER. A VICKERS VIMY. ALL WOOD AND LINEN and wire. She was wide and lumbering, but Alcock still thought her a nippy little thing. He patted her each time he climbed onboard and slid into the cockpit beside Brown. One smooth motion of his body. Hand on the throttle, feet on the rudder bar, he could already feel himself aloft.

What he liked most of all was rising up over the clouds and then flying in clean sunlight. He could lean out over the edge and see the shadowshift on the whiteness below, expanding and contracting on the surface of the clouds.

Brown, the navigator, was more reserved – it embarrassed him to make such a fuss. He sat forwards in the cockpit, keen on what clues the machine might give. He knew how to intuit the shape of the wind, yet he put his faith in what he could actually touch: the compasses, the charts, the spirit level tucked down at his feet.

IT WAS THAT time of the century when the idea of a gentleman had almost become myth. The Great War had concussed the world. The unbearable news of sixteen million deaths rolled off the great metal drums of the newspapers. Europe was a crucible of bones.

Alcock had piloted air-service fighters. Small bombs fell away from the undercarriage of his plane. A sudden lightness to the machine. A kick upwards into the night. He leaned out from his open cockpit and watched the mushroom of smoke rise below. His plane levelled out and turned towards home. At times like that, Alcock craved anonymity. He flew in the dark, his plane open to the stars. Then an airfield would appear below, the razor wire illuminated like the altar of a strange church.

Brown had flown reconnaissance. He had a knack for the mathematics of flight. He could turn any sky into a series of numbers. Even on the ground he went on calculating, figuring out new ways to guide his planes home.

BOTH MEN KNEW exactly what it meant to be shot down.

The Turks caught Jack Alcock on a long-range bombing raid over Suvla Bay and pierced the plane with machine-gun fire, knocked off his port propeller. He and his two crewmen ditched at sea, swam to shore. They were marched naked to where the Turks had set up rows of little wooden cages for prisoners of war. Open to the weather. There was a Welshman beside him who had a map of the constellations, so Alcock practised his navigation skills, stuck out under the nailheaded Turkish night: just one glance at the sky and he could tell exactly what time it was. Yet what Alcock wanted more than anything was to tinker with an engine. When he was moved to a detention

camp in Kedos, he swapped his Red Cross chocolate for a dynamo, traded his shampoo for tractor parts, built a row of makeshift fans out of scrap wire, bamboo, bolts, batteries.

Teddy Brown, too, had become a prisoner of war, forced to land in France while out on photographic reconnaissance. A bullet shattered his leg. Another ruptured the fuel tank. On the way down he threw out his camera, tore up his charts, scattered the pieces. He and his pilot slid their B.E.2c into a muddy wheatfield, cut the engine, held their hands up. The enemy came running out of the forest to drag them from the wreck. Brown could smell petrol leaking from the tanks. One of the Krauts had a lit cigarette in his lips. Brown was known for his reserve. *Excuse me*, he called out, but the German kept coming forwards, the cigarette flaring. *Nein, nein*. A little cloud of smoke came from the German's mouth. Brown's pilot finally lifted his arms and roared: *For fucksake, stop!*

The German paused in midstride, tilted his head back, paused, swallowed the burning cigarette, ran towards the airmen again.

It was something that made Brown's son, Buster, laugh when he heard the story just before he, too, went to war, twenty years later. *Excuse me. Nein, nein*. As if the German had only the flap-end of his shirt sticking out, or had somehow neglected to tie his shoelace properly.

BROWN WAS SHIPPED home before the armistice, then lost his hat high in the air over Piccadilly Circus. The girls wore red lipstick. The hems of their dresses rose almost to their knees. He wandered along the Thames, followed the river until it crawled upwards to the sky.

Alcock didn't make it back to London until December. He watched men in black suits and bowler hats pick their way amid the rubble. He joined in a game of football in an alley off the Pimlico Road, knocking

a round pigskin back and forth. But he could already sense himself aloft again. He lit a cigarette, watched the smoke curl high and away.

WHEN THEY MET for the first time in the Vickers factory in Brooklands, in early 1919, Alcock and Brown took one look at each other and it was immediately understood that they both needed a clean slate. The obliteration of memory. The creation of a new moment, raw, dynamic, warless. It was as if they wanted to take their older bodies and put their younger hearts inside. They didn't want to remember the bombs that had dudged out, or the crash or burn, or the cell blocks they had been locked into, or what species of abyss they had seen in the dark.

Instead they talked about the Vickers Vimy. A nippy little thing.

THE PREVAILING WINDS blew east from Newfoundland, pushing hard and fast across the Atlantic. Eighteen hundred miles of ocean.

The men came by ship from England, rented rooms in the Cochran Hotel, waited for the Vimy to arrive at the docks. It came boxed in forty-seven large wooden crates. Late spring. A whip of frost still in the air. Alcock and Brown hired a crew to drag the crates up from the harbour. They strapped the boxes to horses and carts, assembled the plane in the field.

The meadow sat on the outskirts of St John's, on a half-hill, with a level surface of three hundred yards, a swamp at one end and a pine forest at the other. Days of welding, soldering, sanding, stitching. The bomb bays were replaced by extra petrol tanks. That's what pleased Brown the most. They were using the bomber in a brand-new way: taking the war out of the plane, stripping the whole thing of its penchant for carnage.

To level out the meadow, they crimped blasting caps to fuses, shattered boulders with dynamite, levelled walls and fences, removed hillocks. It was summertime but still there was a chill in the air. Flocks of birds moved fluidly across the sky.

After fourteen days the field was ready. To most people it was simply another patch of land, but to the two pilots it was a fabulous aerodrome. They paced the grass runway, watched the breeze in the trees, looked for clues in the weather.

CROWDS OF RUBBERNECKERS flocked to see the Vimy. Some had never ridden in a motorcar, let alone seen a plane before. From a distance it looked as if it had borrowed its design from a form of dragonfly. It was 42.7 feet long, 15.25 feet high, with a wingspan of 68 feet. It weighed 13,000 pounds when the 870 gallons of petrol and the 40 gallons of oil were loaded. Eleven pounds per square foot. The cloth framework had thousands of individual stitches. The bomb spaces were replaced by enough fuel for 30 hours of flying. It had a maximum speed of 103 miles per hour, not counting the wind, a cruising speed of 90 mph and a landing speed of 45 mph. There were two water-cooled Rolls-Royce Eagle VIII engines of 360 horsepower and a turnover rate of 1,080 revs per minute, with twelve cylinders in two banks of six, each engine driving a four-bladed wooden propeller.

The onlookers ran their hands along the struts, tapped the steel, pinged the taut linen of the wings with their umbrellas. Kids crayoned their names on the underside of the fuselage.

Photographers pulled black hoods over their lenses. Alcock mugged for the camera, shaded his hand to his eyes like an ancient explorer. *Tally-ho!* he shouted, before jumping the nine feet to the wet grass below.

THE NEWSPAPERS SAID anything was possible now. The world was made tiny. The League of Nations was being formed in Paris.

W. E. B. Du Bois convened the Pan-African Congress with delegates from fifteen countries. Jazz records could be heard in Rome. Radio enthusiasts used vacuum tubes to transmit signals hundreds of miles. Some day soon it might be possible to read the daily edition of the *San Francisco Examiner* in Edinburgh or Salzburg or Sydney or Stockholm.

In London, Lord Northcliffe of the *Daily Mail* had offered £10,000 to the first men to land on one side of the Atlantic or the other. At least four other teams wanted to try. Hawker and Grieve had already crashed into the water. Others, like Brackley and Kerr, were positioned in airfields along the coast, waiting for the weather to turn. The flight had to be done in seventy-two hours. Nonstop.

There were rumours of a rich Texan who wanted to try, and a Hungarian prince and, worst of all, a German from the *Luftstreitkräfte* who had specialized in long-range bombing during the war.

The features editor of the *Daily Mail*, a junior of Lord Northcliffe's, was said to have developed an ulcer thinking about a possible German victory.

— A Kraut! A bloody Kraut! God save us!

He dispatched reporters to find out if it was possible that the enemy, even after defeat, could possibly be ahead in the race.

On Fleet Street, down at the stone, where the hot type was laid, he paced back and forth, working the prospective headlines over and over. On the inside of his jacket his wife had stitched a Union Jack, which he rubbed like a prayer cloth.

— Come on boys, he muttered to himself. Hup two. On home now, back to Blighty.

EVERY MORNING THE two airmen woke in the Cochrane Hotel, had their breakfast of porridge, eggs, bacon, toast. Then they drove through the steep streets, out the Forest Road, towards a field of grass sleeved with ice. The wind blew bitter blasts off the sea. They rigged wires into their flight suits so they could run warmth from a battery, and they stitched extra fur on the inside flaps of their helmets, their gloves, their boots.

A week went by. Two weeks. The weather held them back. Cloud. Storm. Forecast. Every morning the men made sure they were carefully shaved. A ritual they performed at the far end of the field. They set up a steel washbasin under a canvas tent with a little gas burner to heat the water. A metal hubcap was used as a mirror. They put razor blades in their flight kits for when they landed: they wanted to make sure that if they were to arrive in Ireland, they would be fresh, decently shaved, presentable members of Empire.

In the lengthening June evenings, they fixed their ties, sat under the wingtips of the Vimy and spoke eloquently to the Canadian, American and British reporters who gathered for the flight.

Alcock was twenty-six years old. From Manchester. He was lean, handsome, daring, the sort of man who looked straight ahead but stayed open to laughter. He had a head of ginger hair. A single man, he said he loved women but preferred engines. Nothing pleased him more than to pull apart the guts of a Rolls-Royce, then put her back together again. He shared his sandwiches with the reporters: often there was a thumbprint of oil on the bread.

Brown sat on the wooden crates alongside Alcock. He already seemed old at thirty-two. His bum leg forced him to carry a walking stick. He had been born in Scotland, but raised near Manchester. His parents were American and he had a slight Yankee accent that he

cultivated as best he could. He thought of himself as a man of the mid-Atlantic. He read the antiwar poetry of Aristophanes and admitted to the idea that he would happily live in constant flight. He was solitary but did not enjoy loneliness. Some said he looked like a vicar, but his eyes flared a far blue, and he had recently got engaged to a young beauty from London. He wrote Kathleen love letters, telling her that he wouldn't mind throwing his walking stick at the stars.

– Good God, said Alcock, you really told her that?

– I did, yes.

– And what did she say?

– Said I could lose the walking stick.

– Ah! Smitten.

At the press briefings, Alcock took the helm. Brown navigated the silence by fiddling with his tie clip. He kept a flask of brandy in his inside pocket. Occasionally he turned away, opened the flap of his tunic, took a nip.

Alcock drank, too, but loudly, publicly, happily. He rested against the bar in the Cochrane Hotel and sang *Rule, Britannia* in a voice so out of tune that it was loaded with whimsy.

The locals – fishermen mostly, a few lumberjacks – banged on the wooden tables and sang songs about loved ones lost at sea.

The singing went on late into the night, long after Alcock and Brown had gone to bed. Even from the fourth floor they could hear sad rhythms breaking into waves of laughter and then, later still, the *Maple Leaf Rag* hammered out on a piano.

Oh go 'way man

I can hypnotize dis nation

I can shake de earth's foundation

with the Maple Leaf Rag

ALCOCK AND BROWN rose at sun up, then waited for a clear sky. Turned their faces to the weather. Walked the field. Played gin rummy. Waited some more. They needed a warm day, a strong moon, a benevolent wind. They figured they could make the flight in under twenty hours. Failure didn't interest them, but in secret Brown wrote out a will, gave everything he owned to Kathleen, kept the envelope in the inside pocket of his tunic.

Alcock didn't bother with a will. He recalled the terrors of the war, still surprised at times that he could wake at all.

– There's puff all else they can throw at me now.

He slapped the side of the Vimy with his palm, took a look at the clouds massing far off in the west.

– Except, of course, some more ruddy rain.

ONE GLANCE DOWN takes in a line of chimneys and fences and spires, the wind combing tufts of grass into silvery waves, rivers vaulting the ditches, two white horses running wild in a field, the long scarves of tarmac fading off into dirt roads – forest, scrubland, cowsheds, tanneries, shipyards, fishing shacks, cod factories, commonwealth, we're floating on a sea of adrenaline and – Look! Teddy, down there, a scull on a stream, and a blanket on the sand, and a girl with pail and shovel, and the woman rolling the hem of her skirt, and over there, see, that young chap, in the red jersey, running the donkey along the shore, go ahead, give it one more turn, thrill the lad with a bit of shadow . . .

ON THE EVENING of the 12th of June they take another practice run, this one at night so Brown can test out his Sumner charts. Eleven

thousand feet. The cockpit is open to the sky. The cold is fierce. The men hunker behind the windscreen. Even the tip ends of their hair begin to freeze.

Alcock tries to feel the plane, her weight, her dip, her centre of gravity, while Brown works on his mathematics. Below, the reporters wait for the plane to return. The field has been outlined with candles in brown paper bags to make a runway. When the Vimy lands, the candles blow over and burn briefly in the grass. Local boys run out with buckets to douse the flames.

The airmen climb down off the plane to scattered applause. They are surprised to learn that a local reporter, Emily Ehrlich, is the most serious of all. She never asks a single question, but stands around in a knit hat and gloves, scribbling in her notebook. Short and unfashionably large. In her forties or fifties perhaps. She moves with a hefty gait across the muddy airfield. Carrying a wooden cane. Her ankles are terribly swollen. She looks like the type of woman who might be working in a cake shop, or behind a country-store counter, but she has, they know, an incisive pen. They have seen her in the Cochrane Hotel, where she has lived for many years with her daughter, Lottie. The seventeen-year-old wields a camera with surprising ease and style, a flirtation. Unlike her mother, she is tall, thin, sprightly, curious. She is quick to laugh and whisper in her mother's ear. An odd team. The mother stays silent; the daughter takes the photos and asks the questions. It infuriates the other reporters, a young girl in their territory, but her questions are sharp, quick. *What sort of wind pressure can the wing fabric withstand? What is it like to have the sea disappear beneath you? Do you have a sweetheart in London, Mr Alcock?* Mother and daughter like to stride across the fields together at the end of the day, Emily to the hotel room where she sits and writes her reports, Lottie towards the tennis courts where she plays for hours on end.

Emily's name banners the Thursday edition of the *Evening Telegram*, nearly always accompanied by one of her daughter's photos. Once a week she has a mandate to cover whatever she wants: fishing disasters, local disputes, political commentary, the lumber industry, the suffragettes, the horrors of the war. She is famous for her odd tangents. Once, in the middle of an article on a local trade union, she darted off on a two-hundred-word recipe for pound cake. Another time, in an analysis of a speech by the governor of Newfoundland, she strayed into the subtle art of preserving ice.

Alcock and Brown have been warned to be on their guard, since the mother and daughter have, by all accounts, a tendency towards nostalgia and fiery Irish tempers. But they like them both, Emily and Lottie, the odd edge they give to the crowd, the mother's strange hats, her long dresses, her curious bouts of silence, her daughter's tall, quick stride through the town, the tennis racquet banging against her calf.

Besides, Brown has seen Emily's reports in the *Evening Telegram* and they are amongst the best he has read: *Today the sky was truant over Signal Hill. Hammer blows ring across the airfield like so many bells. Each night the sun goes down looking more and more like the moon.*

THEY ARE DUE to leave on Friday the 13th. It's an airman's way of cheating death: pick a day of doom, then defy it.

The compasses are swung, the transverse tables calculated, the wireless primed, the shock-absorbers wrapped round the axles, the ribs shellacked, the fabric dope dried, the radiator water purified. All the rivets, the split pins, the stitches are checked and rechecked. The pump control handles. The magnetos. The batteries to warm their flight suits. Their shoes are polished. The Ferrostat flasks of hot tea and Oxo are prepared. The carefully cut sandwiches are packed away. Lists are carefully ticked off. Horlicks Malted Milk. Bars of Fry's

Chocolate. Four sticks of liquorice each. One pint-sized bottle of brandy for emergencies. They run sprigs of white heather on the inside of their fur-lined helmets for luck, and place two stuffed animals – black cats, both – one in the well beneath the windscreen, the other tied to a strut behind the cockpit.

Then the clouds curtsy in, the rain kneels upon the land, and the weather knocks them back a whole day and a half.

AT THE POST office in St John's, Lottie Ehrlich skips across a cage of shadow on the floor, steps to the three-barred window where the clerk tips up his black visor to look at her. She slips the sealed envelope across the counter.

She buys the fifteen-cent Cabot stamp and tells the clerk that she wants to get a one-dollar overprint for the transatlantic post.

– Oh, he says, there aren't no more of them, young lady, no. They sold out a long time ago.

AT NIGHT BROWN spends a lot of his time downstairs in the lobby of the hotel, sending messages to Kathleen. He is timid with the telegraph, aware that others may read his words. There's a formality to him. A tightness.

He is slow on the stairs for a man in his thirties, the walking stick striking hard against the wooden floor. Three brandies rolling through him.

An odd disturbance of light falls across the banister and he catches sight of Lottie Ehrlich in the ornate wooden mirror at the top of the stairs. The young girl is, for a moment, ghostly, her figure emerging into the mirror, then growing clearer, taller, red-headed. She wears a dressing gown and nightdress and slippers. They are both a little startled by the other.

– Good evening, says Brown, slurring a little.

– Hot milk, says the young girl.

– Excuse me?

– I’m bringing my mother hot milk. She can’t sleep.

He nods and tips at an imaginary brim, moves to step past her.

– She never sleeps.

Her cheeks are flushed red, a little embarrassed to be caught out in the corridor in her dressing gown, he thinks. He tips the nonexistent hat again and pushes the pain through his bad leg, climbs three more steps, the brandies jaggling his mind. She pauses two steps below him and says with more formality than it requires: Mr Brown?

– Yes, young lady?

– Are you ready for the unification of the continents?

– Quite honestly, says Brown, I could do with a good telephone line first.

She takes one step farther down the stairs, puts her hand to her mouth as if about to cough. One eye higher than the other, as if a very stubborn question got lodged in her mind a long time ago.

– Mr Brown.

– Miss Ehrlich?

– Do you think it would be a terrible imposition?

A quick eye-flick to the floor. She pauses as if she has just propped a number of stray words on the tip of her tongue, odd little things with no flow to them at all, no way to get them out. She stands, balancing them, wondering if they will topple. Brown imagines that she, like everyone in St John’s, would like a chance to sit in the cockpit if there is another practice run. An impossibility, of course; they cannot bring anybody up in the air, least of all a young woman. They have not even allowed the reporters to sit in the plane while it waits in the field. It is a ritual, a superstition, it is not something that he will be able to do, he

wonders how he will tell her, he feels trapped now, a victim of his own late-night strolls.

– Would it impose greatly, she says, if I gave you something?

– Of course not.

She negotiates the stairs and runs down the corridor towards her room. The youth of her body moving in the white of the dressing gown.

He tightens his eyes, rubs his forehead, waits. Some good-luck charm perhaps? A memento? A keepsake? Silly that, to have allowed her a chance to speak at all. Should have just said no. Let it be. Gone to his room. Disappeared.

She appears at the end of the corridor, moving sharply and quickly. Her dressing gown exposes a triangle of white skin at her neck. He feels an acute and sudden pang of desire to see Kathleen and he is glad for the desire, the errancy of the moment, this odd curving staircase, this far-flung hotel, the too-much brandy. He misses his fiancée, pure and simple. He would like to be home. To nudge up against her slim body, watch the fall of hair along her clavicle.

He holds the banister a little too tight as Lottie approaches. A piece of paper in her left hand. He reaches out. A letter. That is all. A letter. He scans it. Addressed to a family in Cork. To Brown Street of all places.

– My mother wrote it.

– Is that so?

– Can you put it in the mail bag?

– No imposition at all, he says, turning on the stairs once more, slipping the envelope inside his tunic pocket.

IN THE MORNING they watch as Lottie emerges from the hotel kitchen, her red hair askew, her dressing gown fixed to the neck, tightened

high. She carries a tray of sandwiches wrapped in waxed butcher paper.

– Ham sandwiches, she says triumphantly, placing them down in front of Brown. I made them especially for you.

– Thank you, young lady.

She crosses the restaurant floor, waving over her shoulder as she goes.

– That’s the reporter’s daughter?

– Indeed.

– They’re a little cuckoo, eh? says Alcock, pulling on his flight jacket, looking out the window at the fog.

A STRONG WIND arrives from the west in uneven gusts. They are twelve hours late already, but now is the time – the fog has lifted and the long-range weather reports are good. No clouds. The sky above seems painted in. The initial wind velocity is strong, but will probably calm to about twenty knots. There will, later, be a good moon. They climb aboard to scattered cheers, secure their safety belts, check the instruments yet again. A quick salute from the starter. Contact! Alcock opens the throttle and brings both engines to full power. He signals for the wooden chocks to be pulled clear from the wheels. The mechanic leans down, ducks under the wings, armpits the chocks, steps back, throws them away. He raises both arms in the air. A cough of smoke from the engines. The propellers whirl. The Vimy is pointed into the gale. A slight angle to the wind. Uphill. Go now, go. The waft of warming oil. Speed and lift. The incredible roar. The trees loom in the distance. A drainage ditch challenges on the far side. They say nothing. No *Great Scott*. No *Chin up, old sport*. They inch forwards, lumbering into the wind. Go, go. The weight of the plane rolls underneath them. Worrisome, that. Slower now than ever. Up the

incline. She's heavy today. So much petrol to carry. One hundred yards, one hundred and twenty, one hundred and seventy. They are moving too slowly. As if through aspic. The tightness of the cockpit. Sweat accumulating behind their knees. The motors strike hard. The wingtips flex. The grass beneath them bends and tears. Bumping along on the ground. Two hundred and fifty. The plane rises a little and then sighs again, jarring the soil. Good God, Jackie, lift her. The line of dark pine trees stands at the end of the airfield, looming closer, closer, closer still. How many men have died this way? Pull her back, Jackie boy. Skid her sideways. Abort. Now. Three hundred yards. Good Jesus above. A gust of wind lifts the left wing and they tilt slightly right. And then they feel it. A cold swell of air in their stomachs. We are rising, Teddy, we are rising, look! A slow grade of upwards, an ever so faint lift of the soul, and the plane is a few feet in the air, nosing up, the wind whistling through the struts. How tall are those trees? How many men died? How many of us fell? Brown converts the pines to possible noise in his mind. The slap of bark. The tangle of stems. The *ack-ack* of twigs. The smash-up. Hang on, hang on. The throat still tight with terror. They rise a little in their seats. As if that might loosen the weight of the plane beneath them. Higher now, go. The sky beyond the trees is an oceanic thing. Lift it, Jackie, lift it for godsake, lift her. Here, the trees. Here they come. Their scarves take first flight and then they hear the applause of branches below.

– THAT WAS a little ticklish! roars Alcock across the noise.

THEY HEAD STRAIGHT into the wind. The nose goes up. The plane slows. An agonizing climb over treetops and low roofs. Careful now not to stall. Keep her rising. Higher up, they begin a slight bank. Take

her easy, old chum. Bring her around. A stately turn all beauty, all balance, its own sort of confidence. They hold the altitude. Banking tighter now. Until the wind is behind them and the nose dips and they are truly leaving.

They wave down to the starter, the mechanics, the meteorological officers, the other few stragglers below. No Emily Ehrlich from the *Evening Telegram*, no Lottie: mother and daughter have already gone home, early, for the day. They have missed takeoff. Pity that, thinks Brown. He taps the inside of his jacket where the letter still sits.

Alcock wipes the sweat off his brow, then waves to the shadow of themselves on the last of the ground and steers the plane at half-throttle out to sea. A line of golden strand. Boats bobbing in St John's Harbour. Toys in a boy's bath.

Alcock picks up the rudimentary telephone, half-shouts into it: Hey, old man.

– Yes?

– Sorry about this.

– Sorry, what?

– Never told you.

– Never told me what?

Alcock grins and glances down at the water. They are eight minutes out, at one thousand feet, with a wind strength behind of thirty-five knots. They lurch over Conception Bay. The water, a moving mat of grey. Patches of sunlight and glare.

– Never learned to swim, me.

Brown is momentarily taken aback – the thought of ditching at sea, of flailing at the water, floating for a moment on a wooden strut, or clinging to the rolling tanks. But surely Alcock swam to safety after he was shot down over Suvla Bay? All those years ago. No, not years. Just months. It is odd to Brown, very odd, that not so long ago a bullet pierced his thigh and now, today, he is carrying that fragment over the

Atlantic towards a marriage, a second chance. Odd that he should be here at all, this height, this endless grey, the Rolls-Royce engines roaring in his ears, holding him aloft. Alcock can't swim? Surely that's not true. Perhaps, thinks Brown, I should tell him the truth. Never too late.

He leans into the mouthpiece of the phone, decides against it.

THEY RISE EVENLY. Side by side in the open cockpit. The air rushing frigid around their ears. Brown taps out a message on the transmitter key to the shore: *All well and started.*

The telephone is a series of wires wrapped round their necks to pick up speech vibration. To listen, they have earpieces tucked beneath their soft helmets.

Twenty minutes into the flight, Alcock reaches under his hat and rips the cumbersome earpieces out, throws them down into the blueness. Too bloody sore, he mimics.

Brown gives a simple thumbs-up. A shame that. They will have no other means of communication now – just scribbled notes and gestures, but they have long ago mapped their minds onto each other's movements: every twitch a way of speaking, the absence of voice a presence of body.

Their helmets, gloves, jackets and knee boots are lined with fur. Underneath, they wear Burberry overalls. At any height, even behind the sloping windscreen, it is going to be freezing.

In preparation, Alcock has spent three evenings in a walk-in fridge in St John's. One night he lay down on a pile of wrapped meat and failed to sleep. A few days later Emily Ehrlich wrote in the *Evening Telegram* that he still smelled like a freshly cut side of beef.

SHE STANDS WITH her daughter at the third-floor window, hands on the wooden frame. They are sure at first that it is an illusion, a bird in the foreground. But then she hears the faint report of the engines, and they both know they have missed the moment – no photograph either – yet there is also a strange exaltation about seeing it from a distance, the plane disappearing into the east, silver, not grey, framed by the lens of a hotel window. *This is a human victory over war, the triumph of endurance over memory.*

Out there, the blue sky lies cloudless and uninterrupted. Emily likes the sound of the ink rising into her fountain pen, the noise of its body being screwed shut. *Two men are flying nonstop across the Atlantic to arrive with a sack of mail, a small white linen bag with 197 letters, specially stamped, and if they make it, it will be the first aerial post to cross from the New World to the Old.* A brand-new thought: *Transatlantic airmail.* She tests the phrase, scratching it out on the paper, over and over, *transatlantic, trans atlas, transatlantic.* The distance finally broken.

FLOATING ICEBERGS BELOW. The roughly furrowed sea. They know there will be no turning back. It is all mathematics now. To convert the fuel into time and distance. To set the throttle for the optimum burn. To know the angles and the edges, and the spaces in between.

Brown wipes the moisture from his goggles, reaches into the wooden compartment behind his head, grabs the sandwiches, unwraps the waxed paper. He passes one to Alcock who keeps one gloved hand on the yoke. It is one of the many things that brings a smile to Alcock's lips: how extraordinary it is to be munching on a ham-and-butter sandwich put together by a young woman in a St John's hotel more than a thousand feet below. The sandwich is made

more delicious by how far they have already come. Wheat bread, fresh ham, a light mustard mixed in with the butter.

He reaches back for the hot flask of tea, unscrews the cap, allows a wisp of steam to emerge.

The noise rolls through their bodies. At times they make a music of it – a rhythm that conducts itself from head to chest to toes – but then they are lifted from the rhythm, and it becomes pure noise again. They are well aware that they could go deaf on the flight and that the roar could lodge itself inside them for ever, their bodies carrying it like human gramophones, so that if they ever make it to the other side they will still, always, somehow hear it.

KEEPING TO THE prescribed course is a matter of genius and magic. Brown must navigate by any means possible. The Baker navigation machine sits on the floor of the cockpit. The course and distance calculator is clasped to the side of the fuselage. The drift indicator is fitted in under the seat, along with a spirit level to measure bank. The sextant is clipped to the dashboard. There are three compasses, each of which will illuminate in the dark. Sun, moon, cloud, stars. If all else fails, he will have dead reckoning.

Brown kneels on his seat and looks over the edge. He twists and turns, makes calculations using the horizon, the seascape and the position of the sun. On a notepad he scribbles: *Keep her nearer 120 than 140*, and as soon as he shoves the note across the tiny cockpit, Alcock adjusts the controls ever so slightly, trims the plane, keeps it at three-quarter throttle, keen not to push the engines too hard.

It is so much like handling a horse, the way the plane changes over a long journey, the shift in her weight from the burn-off of petrol, the gallop of her engines, her rein-touch at the controls.

Every half hour or so Brown notices that the Vimy is a little heavier

in the nose, and he watches Alcock exert backward pressure on the yoke to level the plane out.

At all times Alcock's body is in contact with the Vimy: he cannot lift his hands from the controls, not even for a second. He can already feel the pain in his shoulders and the tips of his fingers: not even a third of the way there and it has lodged itself hard in every fibre.

AS A CHILD, Brown went to the racecourse in Manchester to watch the horses. On weekdays, when the jockeys were training, Brown ran on the inside of the Salford track, round and round, widening his circle the older he got, pushing the circumference outwards.

The summer he was seven the Pony Express riders came from America and set up their Wild West show along the Irwell River. His people. From his mother and father's country. Americans. Brown wanted to know who exactly he was.

Cowboys stood in the fields, swirling their lassoes. There were broncos, buffaloes, mules, donkeys, trick ponies, a number of wild elk. He wandered around the huge painted backdrops of prairie fires, dust storms, tumbleweeds, tornadoes. But most amazing of all were the Indians who paraded around the tea shops of Salford in ornate headdresses. Brown trailed behind, looking for their autographs. Charging Thunder was a member of the Blackfoot tribe. His wife, Josephine, was a sharp-shooting cowgirl who wore elaborate leather coats and six-shooter holsters. Towards the end of summer their daughter, Bessie, came down with diphtheria, and when she got out of hospital they moved to Thomas Street in Gorton, right beside Brown's aunt and uncle.

On Sunday afternoons, Brown cycled out to Gorton and tried to stare into the window of the house, hoping to see the shine of the headdress coins. But Charging Thunder had cut his hair short and his wife stood in an apron making Yorkshire pudding on the stove.

A COUPLE OF hours into the flight Brown hears a light snap. He puts on his goggles, leans over the fuselage, watches the small propeller on the wireless generator spin uselessly for a second, shear, then break away. No radio now. No contact with anyone. Soon there will be no heating in their electric suits. But not just this. One snap might lead to another. One piece of metal fatigue and the whole plane might come apart.

Brown can close his eyes and see the chessboard of the plane. He knows the gambits inside out. A thousand little moves that can be made. He likes the idea of himself as a centre pawn, slow, methodical, moving forwards. There is a form of attack in the calm he maintains.

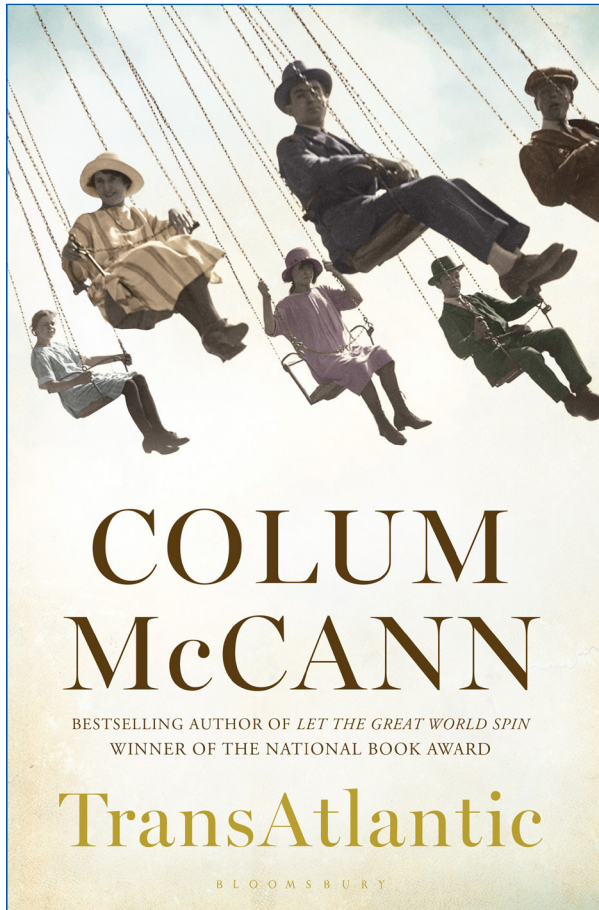
An hour later there is the chatter of what sounds to Alcock like a Hotchkiss machine gun. He glances at Brown, but he has figured it out already. Brown points out towards the starboard engine where a chunk of exhaust pipe has begun to split and tear. It glows red, then white, then almost translucent. A flock of sparks flares from the engine as a piece of protective metal breaks away. It flies upwards a moment, almost faster than the plane itself, and shoots away into their slipstream.

It is not fatal, but they glance at the severed pipe together and, as if in response, the noise of the engine doubles. They will have to live with it for the rest of the trip now, but Alcock knows how the engine roar can make a pilot fall asleep, that the rhythm can lull a man into nodding off before he hits the waves. It is fierce work – he can feel the machine in his muscles. The sheer tug through his body. The exhaustion of the mind. Always avoiding cloud. Always looking for a line of sight. Creating any horizon possible. The brain inventing phantom turns. The inner ear balancing the angles until the only thing that can truly be trusted is the dream of getting there.

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