

weight were dropping off her ankles, as if the globe would go shrinking to the size of a ball, a convict's ball she had dragged and lost. Her body swayed, drunk with the shock of a discovery, and the craft rocked with her body, and it was the earth below that reeled with the rocking of her craft—the discovery that her life was now in her own hands, that there was no necessity to argue, to explain, to teach, to plead, to fight—nothing but to see and think and act. Then the earth steadied into a wide sheet that grew wider and wider as she circled, rising. When she glanced down for the last time, the lights of the field were extinguished, there was only the single beacon left and it looked like the tip of Kellogg's cigarette, glowing as a last salute in the darkness.

Then she was left with the lights on her instrument panel and the spread of stars beyond her film of glass. There was nothing to support her but the beat of the engine and the minds of the men who had made the plane. But what else supports one anywhere?—she thought.

The line of her course went northwest, to cut a diagonal across the state of Colorado. She knew she had chosen the most dangerous route, over too long a stretch of the worst mountain barrier—but it was the shortest line, and safety lay in altitude, and no mountains seemed dangerous compared to the dispatcher of Bradshaw.

The stars were like foam and the sky seemed full of flowing motion, the motion of bubbles settling and forming, the floating of circular waves without progression. A spark of light flared up on earth once in a while, and it seemed brighter than all the static blue above. But it hung alone, between the black of ashes and the blue of a crypt, it seemed to fight for its fragile foothold, it greeted her and went.

The pale streak of a river came rising slowly from the void, and for a long stretch of time it remained in sight, gliding imperceptibly to meet her. It looked like a phosphorescent vein showing through the skin of the earth—a delicate vein without blood.

When she saw the lights of a town, like a handful of gold coins flung upon the prairie, the brightly violent lights fed by an electric current, they seemed as distant as the stars and now as unattainable. The energy that had lighted them was gone, the power that created power stations in empty prairies had vanished, and she knew of no journey to recapture it. Yet these had been her stars—she thought, looking down—these had been her goal, her beacon, the aspiration drawing her upon her upward course. That which others claimed to feel at the sight of the stars—stars safely distant by millions of years and thus imposing no obligation to act, but serving as the tinsel of futility—she had felt at the sight of electric bulbs lighting the streets of a town. It was this earth below that had been the height she wanted to reach, and she wondered how she had come to lose it, who had made of it a convict's ball to drag through muck, who had turned its promise of greatness into a vision never to be reached. But the town was past, and she had to look ahead, to the mountains of Colorado rising in her way.

The small glass dial on her panel showed that she was now climbing. The sound of the engine, beating through the metal shell around her, trembling in the wheel against her palms, like the pounding of a heart

strained to a solemn effort, told her of the power carrying her above the peaks. The earth was now a crumpled sculpture that swayed from side to side, the shape of an explosion still shooting sudden spurts to reach the plane. She saw them as dented black cuts ripping through the milky spread of stars, straight in her path and tearing wider. Her mind one with her body and her body one with the plane, she fought the invisible suction drawing her downward, she fought the sudden gusts that tipped the earth as if she were about to roll off into the sky, with half of the mountains rolling after. It was like fighting a frozen ocean where the touch of a single spray would be fatal.

There were stretches of rest when the mountains shrank down, over valleys filled with fog. Then the fog rose higher to swallow the earth and she was left suspended in space, left motionless but for the sound of the engine.

But she did not need to see the earth. The instrument panel was now her power of sight—it was the condensed sight of the best minds able to guide her on her way. Their condensed sight, she thought, offered to hers and requiring only that she be able to read it. How had they been paid for it, they, the sight-givers? From condensed milk to condensed music to the condensed sight of precision instruments—what wealth had they not given to the world and what had they received in return? Where were they now? Where was Dwight Sanders? Where was the inventor of her motor?

The fog was lifting—and in a sudden clearing, she saw a drop of fire on a spread of rock. It was not an electric light, it was a lonely flame in the darkness of the earth. She knew where she was and she knew that flame: it was Wyatt's Torch.

She was coming close to her goal. Somewhere behind her, in the northeast, stood the summits pierced by the Taggart Tunnel. The mountains were sliding in a long descent into the steadier soil of Utah. She let her plane slip closer to the earth.

The stars were vanishing, the sky was growing darker, but in the bank of clouds to the east thin cracks were beginning to appear—first as threads, then faint spots of reflection, then straight bands that were not yet pink, but no longer blue, the color of a future light, the first hints of the coming sunrise. They kept appearing and vanishing, slowly growing clearer, leaving the sky darker, then breaking it wider apart, like a promise struggling to be fulfilled. She heard a piece of music beating in her mind, one she seldom liked to recall: not Halley's Fifth Concerto, but his Fourth, the cry of a tortured struggle, with the chords of its theme breaking through, like a distant vision to be reached.

She saw the Afton airport from across a span of miles, first as a square of sparks, then as a sunburst of white rays. It was lighted for a plane about to take off, and she had to wait for her landing. Circling in the outer darkness above the field, she saw the silver body of a plane rising like a phoenix out of the white fire and—in a straight line, almost leaving an instant's trail of light to hang in space behind it—going off toward the east.

Then she swept down in its stead, to dive into the luminous funnel of beams—she saw a strip of cement flying at her face, she felt the jolt of the wheels stopping it in time, then the streak of her motion