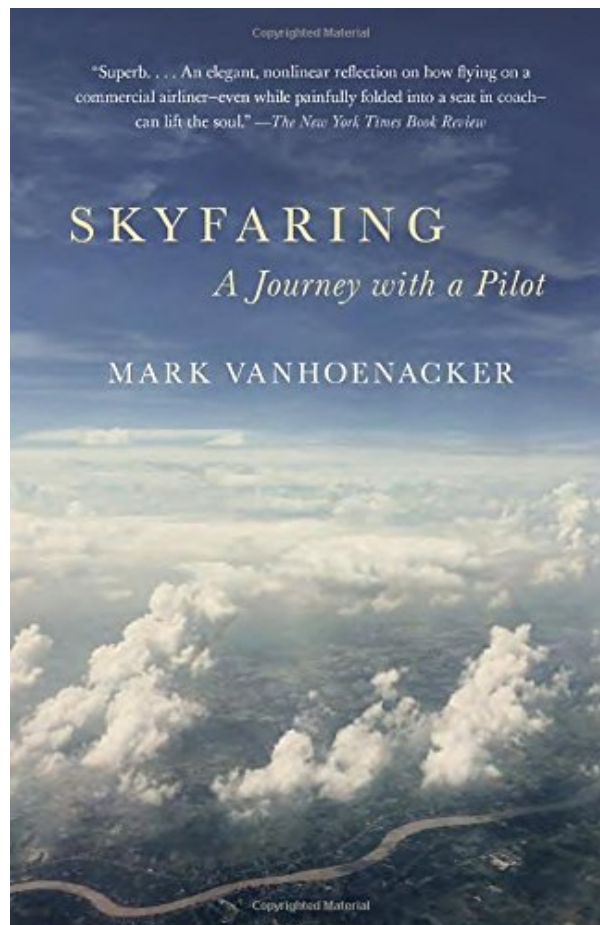
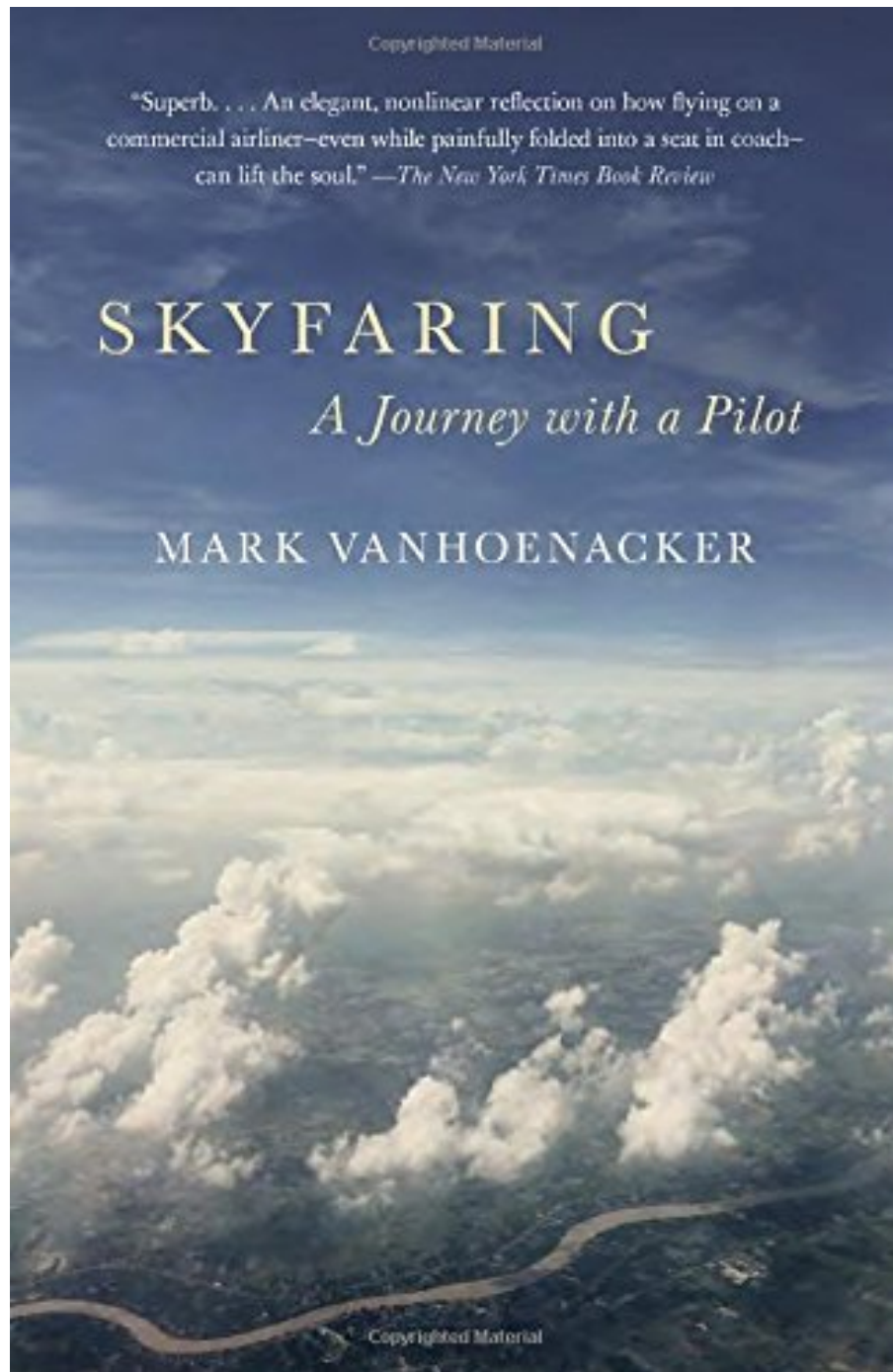


SKYFARING: A JOURNEY WITH A PILOT (VINTAGE DEPARTURES) BY MARK VANHOENACKER



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Lift

I've been asleep in a small, windowless room, a room so dark it's as if I'm below the waterline of a ship. My head is near the wall. Through the wall comes the sound of steady rushing, the sense of numberless particles slipping past, as water rounds a stone in a stream, but faster and more smoothly, as if the vessel parts its medium without touch.

I'm alone. I'm in a blue sleeping bag, in blue pajamas that I unwrapped on Christmas morning several years ago and many thousands of miles from here. There is a gentle swell to the room, a rhythm of rolling. The wall of the room is curved; it rises and bends up over the narrow bed. It is the hull of a 747.

When someone I've just met at a dinner or a party learns that I'm a pilot, he or she often asks me about my work. These questions typically relate to a technical aspect of airplanes, or to a view or a noise encountered on a recent flight. Sometimes I'm asked where I fly, and which of these cities I love best.

Three questions come up most often, in language that hardly varies. Is flying something I have always wanted to do? Have I ever seen anything "up there" that I cannot explain? And do I remember my first flight? I like these questions. They seem to have arrived, entirely intact, from a time before flying became ordinary and routine. They suggest that even now, when many of us so regularly leave one place on the earth and cross the high blue to another, we are not nearly as accustomed to flying as we think. These questions remind me that while airplanes have overturned many of our older sensibilities, a deeper part of our imagination lingers and still sparks in the former realm, among ancient, even atavistic, ideas of distance and place, migrations and the sky.

Flight, like any great love, is both a liberation and a return. Isak Dinesen wrote in *Out of Africa*: "In the air you are taken into the full freedom of the three dimensions; after long ages of exile and dreams I've been asleep in a small, windowless room, a room so dark it's as if I'm below the waterline of a ship. My head is near the wall. Through the wall comes the sound of steady rushing, the sense of numberless particles slipping past, as water rounds a stone in a stream, but faster and more smoothly, as if the vessel parts its medium without touch.

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Flight, like any great love, is both a liberation and a return. Isak Dinesen wrote in *Out of Africa*: “In the air you are taken into the full freedom of the three dimensions; after long ages of exile and dreams the homesick heart throws itself into the arms of space.” When aviation began, it was worth watching for its own sake; it was entertainment, as it still is for many children on their early encounters with it.

Many of my friends who are pilots describe airplanes as the first thing they loved about the world. When I was a child I used to assemble model airplanes and hang them in my bedroom, under a ceiling scattered with glow-in-the-dark stars, until the day skies were hardly less busy than Heathrow’s, and at night the outlines of the dark jets crossed against the indoor constellations. I looked forward to each of my family’s occasional airplane trips with an enthusiasm that rarely had much to do with wherever we were going. I spent most of my time at Disney World awaiting the moment we would board again the magical vessel that had brought us there.

At school nearly all my science projects were variations on an aerial theme. I made a hot-air balloon from paper, and sanded wings of balsa wood that jumped excitedly in the slipstream from a hairdryer, as simply as if it were not air but electricity that had been made to flow across them. The first phone call I ever received from someone other than a friend or relative came when I was thirteen. My mom passed me the telephone with a smile, telling me that a vice president from Boeing had asked to speak with me. He had received my letter requesting a videotape of a 747 in flight, to show as part of a science project about that airplane. He was happy to help; he wished only to know whether I wanted my 747 to fly in VHS or Betamax format.

I am the only pilot in my family. But all the same, I feel that imaginatively, at least, airplanes and flying were never far from home. My father was completely enthralled by airplanes—the result of his front-row seat on the portion of the Second World War that took place in the skies above his childhood home in West Flanders. He learned the shapes of the aircraft and the sounds of their engines. “The thousands of planes in the sky were too much competition for my schoolbooks,” he later wrote. In the 1950s, he left Belgium to work as a missionary in the Belgian Congo, where he first flew in a small airplane. Then he sailed to Brazil, where in the 1960s he was one of surely not very many priests with a subscription to *Aviation Week* magazine. Finally he flew to America, where he met my mother, went to business school, and worked as a manager in mental health services. Airplanes fill his old notes and slides.

My mother, born under the quieter skies of rural Pennsylvania, worked as a speech therapist and had no particular interest in aviation. Yet I feel she was the one who best understood my attachment to the less tangible joys of flight: the old romance of all journeys, which she gave to my brother and me in the form of stories like *Stuart Little* and *The Hobbit*, but also a sense of what we see from above or far away—the gift, the destination, that flying makes not of a distant place but of our home. Her favorite hymn was “For the Beauty of the Earth,” a title, at least, that we agreed might be worth printing on the inside of airplane window blinds.

My brother is not a pilot. His love is not for airplanes but for bicycles. His basement is full of bikes that are works in progress, that he’s designing and assembling from far-gathered parts, for me or for a grateful friend. When it comes to his bike frames, he is as obsessed with lightness as any aeronautical engineer. He likes to make and fix bikes even more than he likes to ride them, I think.

If I see my brother working on one of his two-wheeled creations, or notice that he's reading about bikes on his computer while I am next to him on the couch reading about airplanes, I may remember that the Wright brothers were bicycle mechanics, and that their skyfaring skills began with wheels, a heritage that suddenly becomes clear when you look again at their early airplanes. When I see pictures of such planes I think, if I had to assemble anything that looked like this, I would start by calling on the skills of my brother—even though there was the time I got him in trouble with our parents for skipping his chores, and so he taped firecrackers to one of my model airplanes and lit the fuses and waited just the right number of seconds before throwing the model from an upstairs window, in a long arc over the backyard.

As a teenager I took a few flying lessons. I thought that I might one day fly small airplanes as a hobby, on weekend mornings, an aside to some other career. But I don't remember having a clear wish to become an airline pilot. No one at school suggested the career to me. No pilots lived in our neighborhood; I don't know if there were any commercial pilots at all in our small town in western Massachusetts, which was some distance from any major airport. My dad was an example of someone who enjoyed airplanes whenever he encountered them, but who had decided not to make them his life's work. I think the main reason I didn't decide earlier to become a pilot, though, is because I believed that something I wanted so much could never be practical, almost by definition.

In high school I spent my earnings from a paper route and restaurant jobs on summer homestay programs abroad, in Japan and Mexico. After high school I stayed in New England for college but also studied in Belgium, briefly reversing the journey my father had made. After college I went to Britain to study African history, so that I could live in Britain and, I hoped, in Kenya. I left that degree program when I finally realized that I wanted to become a pilot. To repay my student loans and save the money I expected to need for flight training, I took a job in Boston, in the field—management consulting—that I thought would require me to fly most often.

In high school I certainly wanted to see Japan and Mexico, and to study Japanese and Spanish. But really, what attracted me most to such adventures was the scale of the airplane journeys they required. It was the possibility of flight that most drew me to far-off summer travels, to degree programs in two distant lands, to the start of the most literally high-flying career I could find in the business world, and at last—because none of even those endeavors got me airborne nearly often enough—to a career as a pilot.

When I was ready to start my flight training, I decided to return to Britain. I liked many aspects of the country's historic relationship with aviation, its deep tradition of air links with the whole world, and the fact that even some of the shortest flights from Britain are to places so very different from it. And, not least, I liked the idea of living near the good friends I'd made as a postgraduate there.

I began to fly commercially when I was twenty-nine. I first flew the Airbus A320 series airliners, a family of narrow-bodied jets used on short- to medium-distance flights, on routes all around Europe. I'd be woken by an alarm in the 4 a.m. darkness of Helsinki or Warsaw or Bucharest or Istanbul, and there would be a brief bleary moment, in the hotel room whose shape and layout I'd already forgotten in the hours since I'd switched off the light, when I'd ask myself if I'd only been dreaming that I became a pilot. Then I would imagine the day of flying ahead, crossing back and forth in the skies of Europe, almost as excitedly as if it was my first day. I now fly a larger airplane, the Boeing 747. On longer flights we carry additional pilots so that each of us can take a legally prescribed break, a time to sleep and dream, perhaps, while Kazakhstan or Brazil or the Sahara rolls steadily under the line of the wing.

Frequent travelers, in the first hours or days of a trip, may be familiar with the experience of jet lag or a hotel

wake-up call summoning them from the heart of night journeys they would otherwise have forgotten. Pilots are often woken at unusual points in their sleep cycles and perhaps, too, the anonymity and nearly perfect darkness of the pilot's bunk form a particularly clean slate for the imagination. Whatever the reason, I now associate going to work with dreaming, or at least, with dreams recalled only because I am in the sky.

A chime sounds in the darkness of the 747's bunk. My break is over. I feel for the switch that turns on a pale-yellow beam. I change into my uniform, which has been hanging on a plastic peg for something like 2,000 miles. I open the door that leads from the bunk to the cockpit. Even when I know it's coming—and it's frequently hard to know, depending as it does on the season, the route, the time, and the place—the brightness always catches me off guard. The cockpit beyond the bunk is blasted with a directionless daylight so pure and overwhelming, so alien to the darkness I left it in hours ago and to the gloom of the bunk, that it is like a new sense.

As my eyes adjust, I look forward through the cockpit windows. At this moment it's the light itself, rather than what it falls upon, that is the essential feature of the earth. What the light falls upon is the Sea of Japan, and far across this water, on the snowcapped peaks of the island nation we are approaching. The blueness of the sea is as perfect as the sky it reflects. It is as if we are slowly descending over the surface of a blue star, as if all other blues are to be mined or diluted from this one.

As I move forward in the cockpit to my seat on the right side of it, I think briefly back to the trip I made to Japan as a teenager, about two decades ago, and to the city this plane left only yesterday, though yesterday isn't quite the right word for what preceded a night that hardly deserves the name, so quickly was it undone by our high latitudes and eastward speed.

I remember that I had an ordinary morning in the city. I went to the airport in the afternoon. Now that day has turned away into the past, and the city, London, lies well beyond the curve of the planet.

As I fasten my seat belt I remember how we started the engines yesterday. How the sudden and auspicious hush fell in the cockpit as the airflow for the air-conditioning units was diverted; how air alone began to spin the enormous techno-petals of the fans, spin them and spin them, faster and faster, until fuel and fire were added, and each engine woke with a low rumble that grew to a smooth and unmistakable roar—the signature of one of our age's most perfect means of purifying and directing physical power.

In legal terms a journey begins when “an aircraft moves under its own power for the purpose of flight.” I remember the aircraft that moved ahead of us for this purpose and lifted ahead of us into the London rain. As that preceding aircraft taxied into position its engines launched rippling gales that raced visibly over the wet runway, as if from some greatly speeded-up video recording of the windswept surface of a pond. When takeoff thrust was set the engines heaved this water up in huge gusting night-gray cones, new clouds cast briefly skyward.

I remember our own takeoff roll, an experience that repetition hasn't dulled: the unfurling carpet of guiding lights that say here, the voice of the controller that says now; the sense, in the first seconds after the engines reach their assigned power and we begin to roll forward, that this is only a curious kind of driving down an equally curious road. But with speed comes the transition, the gathering sense that the wheels matter less, and the mechanisms that work on the air—the control surfaces on the wings and the tail—more. We feel the airplane's dawning life in the air clearly through the controls, and with each passing second the jet's presence on the ground becomes more incidental to how we direct its motion. Yesterday we were flying on

the earth, long before we left it.

On every takeoff there is a speed known as V1. Before this speed we have enough room left ahead of us on the runway to stop the takeoff. After this speed we may not. Thus committed to flight, we continued for some time along the ground, gathering still more speed to the vessel. A few long seconds after V1 the jet reached its next milestone of velocity and the captain called: "Rotate." As the lights of the runway started to alternate red and white to indicate its approaching end, as the four rivers of power that summed to nearly a quarter of a million pounds of thrust unfurled over the runway behind us, I lifted the nose.

As if we had only pulled out of a driveway, I turned right, toward Tokyo.

London, then, was on my side of the cockpit. The city grew bigger before it became smaller. From above, still climbing, you realize that this is how a city becomes its own map, how a place becomes whole before your eyes, how from an airplane the idea of a city and the image of a city itself can overlay each other so perfectly that it's no longer possible to distinguish between them. We followed London's river, that led the vessels of a former age from their docks to the world, as far as the North Sea. Then the sea turned, and Denmark, Sweden, Finland passed beneath us, and night fell—the night that both began and ended over Russia. Now I'm in the new day's blue northwest of Japan, waiting for Tokyo to rise as simply as the morning.

I settle myself into my sheepskin-covered seat and my particular position above the planet. I blink in the sun, check the distance of my hands and feet from the controls, put on a headset, adjust the microphone. I say good morning to my colleagues, in the half-ironic sense that long-haul pilots will know well, that means, on a light-scrambling journey, I need a minute to be sure where it is morning, and for whom—whether for me, or the passengers, or the place below us on the earth, or perhaps at our destination. I ask for a cup of tea. My colleagues update me on the hours I was absent; I check the computers, the fuel gauges. Small, steady green digits show our expected landing time in Tokyo, about an hour from now. This is expressed in Greenwich Mean Time. In Greenwich it is still yesterday. Another display shows the remaining nautical miles of flight, a number that drops about one mile every seven seconds. It is counting down to the largest city that has ever existed.

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The New York Times • San Francisco Chronicle • The Economist • Kirkus Reviews

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Flight, like any great love, is both a liberation and a return. Isak Dinesen wrote in *Out of Africa*: “In the air you are taken into the full freedom of the three dimensions; after long ages of exile and dreams I’ve been asleep in a small, windowless room, a room so dark it’s as if I’m below the waterline of a ship. My head is near the wall. Through the wall comes the sound of steady rushing, the sense of numberless particles slipping past, as water rounds a stone in a stream, but faster and more smoothly, as if the vessel parts its medium without touch.

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Many of my friends who are pilots describe airplanes as the first thing they loved about the world. When I was a child I used to assemble model airplanes and hang them in my bedroom, under a ceiling scattered with glow-in-the-dark stars, until the day skies were hardly less busy than Heathrow's, and at night the outlines of the dark jets crossed against the indoor constellations. I looked forward to each of my family's occasional airplane trips with an enthusiasm that rarely had much to do with wherever we were going. I spent most of my time at Disney World awaiting the moment we would board again the magical vessel that had brought us there.

At school nearly all my science projects were variations on an aerial theme. I made a hot-air balloon from paper, and sanded wings of balsa wood that jumped excitedly in the slipstream from a hairdryer, as simply as if it were not air but electricity that had been made to flow across them. The first phone call I ever received from someone other than a friend or relative came when I was thirteen. My mom passed me the telephone with a smile, telling me that a vice president from Boeing had asked to speak with me. He had received my letter requesting a videotape of a 747 in flight, to show as part of a science project about that airplane. He was happy to help; he wished only to know whether I wanted my 747 to fly in VHS or Betamax format.

I am the only pilot in my family. But all the same, I feel that imaginatively, at least, airplanes and flying were never far from home. My father was completely enthralled by airplanes—the result of his front-row seat on the portion of the Second World War that took place in the skies above his childhood home in West Flanders. He learned the shapes of the aircraft and the sounds of their engines. "The thousands of planes in the sky were too much competition for my schoolbooks," he later wrote. In the 1950s, he left Belgium to work as a missionary in the Belgian Congo, where he first flew in a small airplane. Then he sailed to Brazil, where in the 1960s he was one of surely not very many priests with a subscription to *Aviation Week* magazine. Finally he flew to America, where he met my mother, went to business school, and worked as a manager in mental health services. Airplanes fill his old notes and slides.

My mother, born under the quieter skies of rural Pennsylvania, worked as a speech therapist and had no particular interest in aviation. Yet I feel she was the one who best understood my attachment to the less

tangible joys of flight: the old romance of all journeys, which she gave to my brother and me in the form of stories like *Stuart Little* and *The Hobbit*, but also a sense of what we see from above or far away—the gift, the destination, that flying makes not of a distant place but of our home. Her favorite hymn was “For the Beauty of the Earth,” a title, at least, that we agreed might be worth printing on the inside of airplane window blinds.

My brother is not a pilot. His love is not for airplanes but for bicycles. His basement is full of bikes that are works in progress, that he’s designing and assembling from far-gathered parts, for me or for a grateful friend. When it comes to his bike frames, he is as obsessed with lightness as any aeronautical engineer. He likes to make and fix bikes even more than he likes to ride them, I think.

If I see my brother working on one of his two-wheeled creations, or notice that he’s reading about bikes on his computer while I am next to him on the couch reading about airplanes, I may remember that the Wright brothers were bicycle mechanics, and that their skyfaring skills began with wheels, a heritage that suddenly becomes clear when you look again at their early airplanes. When I see pictures of such planes I think, if I had to assemble anything that looked like this, I would start by calling on the skills of my brother—even though there was the time I got him in trouble with our parents for skipping his chores, and so he taped firecrackers to one of my model airplanes and lit the fuses and waited just the right number of seconds before throwing the model from an upstairs window, in a long arc over the backyard.

As a teenager I took a few flying lessons. I thought that I might one day fly small airplanes as a hobby, on weekend mornings, an aside to some other career. But I don’t remember having a clear wish to become an airline pilot. No one at school suggested the career to me. No pilots lived in our neighborhood; I don’t know if there were any commercial pilots at all in our small town in western Massachusetts, which was some distance from any major airport. My dad was an example of someone who enjoyed airplanes whenever he encountered them, but who had decided not to make them his life’s work. I think the main reason I didn’t decide earlier to become a pilot, though, is because I believed that something I wanted so much could never be practical, almost by definition.

In high school I spent my earnings from a paper route and restaurant jobs on summer homestay programs abroad, in Japan and Mexico. After high school I stayed in New England for college but also studied in Belgium, briefly reversing the journey my father had made. After college I went to Britain to study African history, so that I could live in Britain and, I hoped, in Kenya. I left that degree program when I finally realized that I wanted to become a pilot. To repay my student loans and save the money I expected to need for flight training, I took a job in Boston, in the field—management consulting—that I thought would require me to fly most often.

In high school I certainly wanted to see Japan and Mexico, and to study Japanese and Spanish. But really, what attracted me most to such adventures was the scale of the airplane journeys they required. It was the possibility of flight that most drew me to far-off summer travels, to degree programs in two distant lands, to the start of the most literally high-flying career I could find in the business world, and at last—because none of even those endeavors got me airborne nearly often enough—to a career as a pilot.

When I was ready to start my flight training, I decided to return to Britain. I liked many aspects of the country’s historic relationship with aviation, its deep tradition of air links with the whole world, and the fact that even some of the shortest flights from Britain are to places so very different from it. And, not least, I liked the idea of living near the good friends I’d made as a postgraduate there.

I began to fly commercially when I was twenty-nine. I first flew the Airbus A320 series airliners, a family of

narrow-bodied jets used on short- to medium-distance flights, on routes all around Europe. I'd be woken by an alarm in the 4 a.m. darkness of Helsinki or Warsaw or Bucharest or Istanbul, and there would be a brief bleary moment, in the hotel room whose shape and layout I'd already forgotten in the hours since I'd switched off the light, when I'd ask myself if I'd only been dreaming that I became a pilot. Then I would imagine the day of flying ahead, crossing back and forth in the skies of Europe, almost as excitedly as if it was my first day. I now fly a larger airplane, the Boeing 747. On longer flights we carry additional pilots so that each of us can take a legally prescribed break, a time to sleep and dream, perhaps, while Kazakhstan or Brazil or the Sahara rolls steadily under the line of the wing.

Frequent travelers, in the first hours or days of a trip, may be familiar with the experience of jet lag or a hotel wake-up call summoning them from the heart of night journeys they would otherwise have forgotten. Pilots are often woken at unusual points in their sleep cycles and perhaps, too, the anonymity and nearly perfect darkness of the pilot's bunk form a particularly clean slate for the imagination. Whatever the reason, I now associate going to work with dreaming, or at least, with dreams recalled only because I am in the sky.

A chime sounds in the darkness of the 747's bunk. My break is over. I feel for the switch that turns on a pale-yellow beam. I change into my uniform, which has been hanging on a plastic peg for something like 2,000 miles. I open the door that leads from the bunk to the cockpit. Even when I know it's coming—and it's frequently hard to know, depending as it does on the season, the route, the time, and the place—the brightness always catches me off guard. The cockpit beyond the bunk is blasted with a directionless daylight so pure and overwhelming, so alien to the darkness I left it in hours ago and to the gloom of the bunk, that it is like a new sense.

As my eyes adjust, I look forward through the cockpit windows. At this moment it's the light itself, rather than what it falls upon, that is the essential feature of the earth. What the light falls upon is the Sea of Japan, and far across this water, on the snowcapped peaks of the island nation we are approaching. The blueness of the sea is as perfect as the sky it reflects. It is as if we are slowly descending over the surface of a blue star, as if all other blues are to be mined or diluted from this one.

As I move forward in the cockpit to my seat on the right side of it, I think briefly back to the trip I made to Japan as a teenager, about two decades ago, and to the city this plane left only yesterday, though yesterday isn't quite the right word for what preceded a night that hardly deserves the name, so quickly was it undone by our high latitudes and eastward speed.

I remember that I had an ordinary morning in the city. I went to the airport in the afternoon. Now that day has turned away into the past, and the city, London, lies well beyond the curve of the planet.

As I fasten my seat belt I remember how we started the engines yesterday. How the sudden and auspicious hush fell in the cockpit as the airflow for the air-conditioning units was diverted; how air alone began to spin the enormous techno-petals of the fans, spin them and spin them, faster and faster, until fuel and fire were added, and each engine woke with a low rumble that grew to a smooth and unmistakable roar—the signature of one of our age's most perfect means of purifying and directing physical power.

In legal terms a journey begins when “an aircraft moves under its own power for the purpose of flight.” I remember the aircraft that moved ahead of us for this purpose and lifted ahead of us into the London rain. As that preceding aircraft taxied into position its engines launched rippling gales that raced visibly over the wet runway, as if from some greatly speeded-up video recording of the windswept surface of a pond.

When takeoff thrust was set the engines heaved this water up in huge gusting night-gray cones, new clouds cast briefly skyward.

I remember our own takeoff roll, an experience that repetition hasn't dulled: the unfurling carpet of guiding lights that say here, the voice of the controller that says now; the sense, in the first seconds after the engines reach their assigned power and we begin to roll forward, that this is only a curious kind of driving down an equally curious road. But with speed comes the transition, the gathering sense that the wheels matter less, and the mechanisms that work on the air—the control surfaces on the wings and the tail—more. We feel the airplane's dawning life in the air clearly through the controls, and with each passing second the jet's presence on the ground becomes more incidental to how we direct its motion. Yesterday we were flying on the earth, long before we left it.

On every takeoff there is a speed known as V1. Before this speed we have enough room left ahead of us on the runway to stop the takeoff. After this speed we may not. Thus committed to flight, we continued for some time along the ground, gathering still more speed to the vessel. A few long seconds after V1 the jet reached its next milestone of velocity and the captain called: "Rotate." As the lights of the runway started to alternate red and white to indicate its approaching end, as the four rivers of power that summed to nearly a quarter of a million pounds of thrust unfurled over the runway behind us, I lifted the nose.

As if we had only pulled out of a driveway, I turned right, toward Tokyo.

London, then, was on my side of the cockpit. The city grew bigger before it became smaller. From above, still climbing, you realize that this is how a city becomes its own map, how a place becomes whole before your eyes, how from an airplane the idea of a city and the image of a city itself can overlay each other so perfectly that it's no longer possible to distinguish between them. We followed London's river, that led the vessels of a former age from their docks to the world, as far as the North Sea. Then the sea turned, and Denmark, Sweden, Finland passed beneath us, and night fell—the night that both began and ended over Russia. Now I'm in the new day's blue northwest of Japan, waiting for Tokyo to rise as simply as the morning.

I settle myself into my sheepskin-covered seat and my particular position above the planet. I blink in the sun, check the distance of my hands and feet from the controls, put on a headset, adjust the microphone. I say good morning to my colleagues, in the half-ironic sense that long-haul pilots will know well, that means, on a light-scrambling journey, I need a minute to be sure where it is morning, and for whom—whether for me, or the passengers, or the place below us on the earth, or perhaps at our destination. I ask for a cup of tea. My colleagues update me on the hours I was absent; I check the computers, the fuel gauges. Small, steady green digits show our expected landing time in Tokyo, about an hour from now. This is expressed in Greenwich Mean Time. In Greenwich it is still yesterday. Another display shows the remaining nautical miles of flight, a number that drops about one mile every seven seconds. It is counting down to the largest city that has ever existed.

Most helpful customer reviews

33 of 34 people found the following review helpful.

Beautiful piece of writing...

By Jill Meyer

Okay, you know who you are. You're the passenger who always chooses a window seat, so you can gaze out during the flight, looking on as the world on the ground passes smoothly beneath you. Maybe you like traveling at night, so you can see the lights of cities large and small twinkling below, reminding you that the world is a series of lights. Maybe you wish the inflight entertainment monitors would show the takeoffs and

landings so you could see what the pilots can see. And even though you might find it difficult to put yourself completely in the hands of those at the airplane's controls, you love to fly. It's for those fliers - and I'm including myself - that Mark Vanhoenacker has written "Skyfaring: A Journey with a Pilot".

Mark Vanhoenacker is American born and raised and is pilot with British Airways. Now in his 40's, he took up piloting somewhat later in life than most; he didn't become a commercial pilot until he was 29. But he had always loved flying and airplanes and traveling, and had known from an early age that he wanted to fly commercially. Vanhoenacker has flown two plane types in his career; an Airbus which flew the "short" routes in and out of London, and the 747, the plane for long flights. London to Tokyo, London to Cape Town, London to Mumbai, to name a few.

"Skyfaring" is not a conventional book about flying airplanes. Vanhoenacker takes the reader on voyages through the air while talking about both the mundane and the magic of flying. Dividing the book into a series of chapters, some of which are "Lift", "Water", "Encounters", and "Return", the author takes the reader up in the air with him. "Encounters" is about the connections - both personal and job-related - that Vanhoenacker makes while flying. It's one of the best chapters because he talks about meeting old friends on planes and on layovers, and making new ones who he will see...whenever. He also makes the comparison between travel by water and travel by air. Many of the terms of both ships and airplanes are similar. Even "souls" - who are generally referred to when a plane crashes or a ship sinks - is used in the same way.

But most of what Mark Vanhoenacker writes about is the "magic" of piloting a huge plane full of people, whether traveling for business or pleasure. So, if you've ever sat in your seat in a plane and wondered if the guy flying it has the same feeling of wonderment you have, yes, he probably does.

This is one of the best work of non-fiction I've read this year. Buy it and savor it.

100 of 108 people found the following review helpful.

An exceptional book on the pilot's experience of flight

By Michael J. Edelman

Many years ago I had a friend whose brother in law was a Navy fighter pilot- or "aviator," as he preferred to be known. He hated the regimentation of the military, he hated long carrier cruises that took him away from his family- in fact, he hated just about everything about the Navy save for one: Flying F-14s off a carrier. For him, the thrill of the catapult launch, the ability to climb like a rocket, and to soar in the sky, unfettered by gravity- all that made it worth putting up with everything else. I have other friends, hobby pilots you might call them, who have more prosaic jobs, and who fly on the weekends, or on vacation. For most of them, their regular job is just a way to earn a living; it's not until they step into a plane- their plane- that they feel truly alive.

To those of us whose only exposure to flight is as passengers, x-rayed, groped by the TSA, and crammed into an aluminum tube, listening to a pilot wax eloquently about the great romance of flight reminds us that there's something magical, something romantic, about it. Writers like Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Ernest K. Gann, Richard Bach and others have written of the transcendent experience of flight, of how it allows mere humans to escape what poet John Gillespie MacGee Jr. called "the surly bonds of earth" and "touch[ed] the face of God." More recently, William Langewiesche's "Inside the Sky" has tried to put the reader inside the mind of the pilot, to feel what he feels as he flies cross country, taking in privileged view of the Earth below.

Mark Vanhoenacker writes very much in the spirit of those earlier poets of flight. Like them (and especially like Langewiesche), his job as an airline pilot seems almost mundane to the traveller, repeatedly flying fixed routes in an aircraft largely under the control of automation. But Vanhoenacker is a writer with a writer's ear

for language and for metaphor; he sees poetry in the initialization of an inertial navigation system- a "moment of Zen," as the pilot brings the frame of the aircraft into alignment with the rest of the world- a sort of aviation Tao, if you like. Much of this book concerns what the uninitiated reader may think of as the routine, repetitive aspect of airline flying- checklists, taxiing, navigation- but to the author these are as much a part of the experience of flight as is climbing through the clouds at a thousand feet per second.

"Skyfaring" is loosely structured around the various stages of a typical airliner flight, and from that framework Vanhoenacker hangs his discussions of aircraft, engines, navigation, history, his autobiography, as well as the intangibles- the pure romance of flight. The result is a book that is both didactic- the reader will learn a tremendous amount of what goes into the flight of an airliner- as well as romantic.

I'm not a pilot, but I've been fascinated by flight since I was a child, and while I've read a great many books on the subject, and this stands out as one of the best on what it means to be a pilot. Vanhoenacker manages to convey the technical details of flight along with the romantic aspects, and do so with great style and grace. A worthy addition to the literature of de Saint-Exupery, Bach, and MacGee.

43 of 44 people found the following review helpful.

A Pilot's Meditation

By Yours Truly

This is a gorgeous piece of nonfiction, in a class with work by John McPhee and Peter Hessler, both of whom I admire. It's more meditation than memoir, a young 747 pilot's reflections of all kinds of associations he makes as he flies the world's skies. Divided into topics like Air, Water, Night, he free associates in a very disciplined way about his childhood path to his chosen career, about the lives of his parents and his brother, about the places they, and he, have lived. His scientific dissections of the phenomenon of flying, of the planet's atmosphere, land and bodies of water; of our galaxy and universe are deft and often beautiful. But what makes them memorable are his ability to make them fresh and literary, seemingly personal but not self-centered. One notion I like a lot is his take on that common feeling of What am I doing in Shanghai when only yesterday I was in Atlanta? He calls this place-lag and here's how he describes it: "the imaginative drag that results from our jet-age displacements over every kind of distance; from the inability of our deep old sense of place to keep up with our airplanes." This will be a sure hit among pilots, but I think it will have resonance for those of us who fly less frequently. As a matter of fact, I can't think of a better book to take on your next trip.

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SKYFARING: A JOURNEY WITH A PILOT (VINTAGE DEPARTURES) BY MARK VANHOENACKER PDF

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Review

A New York Times Notable Book

A Best Book of the Year

San Francisco Chronicle • The Economist • GQ • Kirkus Reviews

“Superb. . . . An elegant, nonlinear reflection on how flying on a commercial airliner—even while painfully folded into a seat in coach—can lift the soul.” —The New York Times Book Review

“A beautifully observed collection of details, scenes, emotions and facts from the world above the world.” —The Economist

“Remarkable. . . . [Skyfaring] lifts the thoughts and spirits.” —James Fallows, The Atlantic

“Marvelously literate. . . . Vanhoenacker . . . can put one in mind of Henry James. . . . A big-hearted book.” —The New York Times

“Gorgeous and captivating. . . . Skyfaring artfully demystifies the fascinating technical aspects of commercial flight while delivering poetic insights straight from the cockpit.” —San Francisco Chronicle

“Masterly, beautifully written.” —The Times Literary Supplement

“[Vanhoenacker is] an exceptionally lucid and philosophically minded writer.” —The Wall Street Journal

“Not since Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s classic *Vol de Nuit* . . . has there been such a fantastic book about flying. . . . Skyfaring takes the genre to a whole new level.” —Condé Nast Traveller

“Imagine Henry David Thoreau reflecting on the wonders of the lights of Oman as seen from the cockpit of a 747, and you begin to have something of the fresh magic of this exceptional debut.” —Pico Iyer, author of *The Man Within My Head*

“Riveting. . . . Vanhoenacker paints humanity seen from the aviator’s perch, woven together with a fascinating layman’s account of the mechanics of flight. . . . [He] invokes philosophers, music, history, and his own past and family to convey the sense of discovery and disorientation that he feels crisscrossing the globe.” —The Times (London)

“A love letter to flight. . . . Vanhoenacker slips easily between poetic meditation into the nature of travel and technical explanations of the mechanisms of the 747, and I found all of it fascinating. It is a delight to encounter someone so unabashedly enamored of the romance of his profession.” —Emily St. John Mandel, *The Millions*

“[A] revelatory work of observation, thought, and expression.” —James Fallows, author of *China Airborne*

“Flying, a century after Kitty Hawk, can seem both scary and banal, the realm of underwear bombers and miniature mouthwashes, but Vanhoenacker recovers its metaphysics.” —*The New Yorker*

“Vanhoenacker’s passionate and beautifully written book will remind even the most jaded traveller of the wonder of flight.” —*The Sunday Times* (UK)

“A masterpiece of time, distance, palm trees, frosty mornings, lofty ambition and self-effacing charm.” —*Monocle*

“A 747 pilot with a poetic streak. . . . The writing makes flying feel as amazing as it really is.” —*Wired.com*

“A description of what it’s like to fly by a commercial pilot who is also a master prose stylist and a deeply sensitive human being. . . . This couldn’t be more highly recommended.” —Alain de Botton, author of *How Proust Can Change Your Life*

“Vanhoenacker makes [flying] wondrous again.” —*London Evening Standard*

“[Skyfaring] never loses sight of how beautiful it is to soar above the clouds. . . . [Vanhoenacker’s] writing is fluid and elegant.” —*The New Statesman* (UK)

“An author of real distinction with a genuinely poetic sensibility as well as a memorable turn of phrase.” —*The Spectator*

“Vanhoenacker makes [flying] wondrous again.” —*London Evening Standard*

“A skilful meditation on the glories of traversing the earth at the helm of mankind’s greatest technological achievement. . . . You’ll quickly find yourself in thrall to Vanhoenacker’s marvellous prose.” —*GQ* (UK)

“Through prose as passionate and erudite as it is informative, [Vanhoenacker] describes not merely the mechanical workings of flight, but will rekindle, in those who care to listen, a lost appreciation for the marvel of global air travel.” —Patrick Smith, author of *Cockpit Confidential*

About the Author

Mark Vanhoenacker is a pilot and writer. A regular contributor to *The New York Times* and *Slate*, he has also written for *Wired*, the *Financial Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and *The Independent*. Born in Massachusetts, he trained as a historian and worked as a management consultant before starting his flight training in Britain in 2001. His airline career began in 2003. He now flies the Boeing 747 from London to major cities around the world.

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Lift

I've been asleep in a small, windowless room, a room so dark it's as if I'm below the waterline of a ship. My head is near the wall. Through the wall comes the sound of steady rushing, the sense of numberless particles slipping past, as water rounds a stone in a stream, but faster and more smoothly, as if the vessel parts its medium without touch.

I'm alone. I'm in a blue sleeping bag, in blue pajamas that I unwrapped on Christmas morning several years ago and many thousands of miles from here. There is a gentle swell to the room, a rhythm of rolling. The wall of the room is curved; it rises and bends up over the narrow bed. It is the hull of a 747.

When someone I've just met at a dinner or a party learns that I'm a pilot, he or she often asks me about my work. These questions typically relate to a technical aspect of airplanes, or to a view or a noise encountered on a recent flight. Sometimes I'm asked where I fly, and which of these cities I love best.

Three questions come up most often, in language that hardly varies. Is flying something I have always wanted to do? Have I ever seen anything "up there" that I cannot explain? And do I remember my first flight? I like these questions. They seem to have arrived, entirely intact, from a time before flying became ordinary and routine. They suggest that even now, when many of us so regularly leave one place on the earth and cross the high blue to another, we are not nearly as accustomed to flying as we think. These questions remind me that while airplanes have overturned many of our older sensibilities, a deeper part of our imagination lingers and still sparks in the former realm, among ancient, even atavistic, ideas of distance and place, migrations and the sky.

Flight, like any great love, is both a liberation and a return. Isak Dinesen wrote in *Out of Africa*: "In the air you are taken into the full freedom of the three dimensions; after long ages of exile and dreams I've been asleep in a small, windowless room, a room so dark it's as if I'm below the waterline of a ship. My head is near the wall. Through the wall comes the sound of steady rushing, the sense of numberless particles slipping past, as water rounds a stone in a stream, but faster and more smoothly, as if the vessel parts its medium without touch.

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was entertainment, as it still is for many children on their early encounters with it.

Many of my friends who are pilots describe airplanes as the first thing they loved about the world. When I was a child I used to assemble model airplanes and hang them in my bedroom, under a ceiling scattered with glow-in-the-dark stars, until the day skies were hardly less busy than Heathrow's, and at night the outlines of the dark jets crossed against the indoor constellations. I looked forward to each of my family's occasional airplane trips with an enthusiasm that rarely had much to do with wherever we were going. I spent most of my time at Disney World awaiting the moment we would board again the magical vessel that had brought us there.

At school nearly all my science projects were variations on an aerial theme. I made a hot-air balloon from paper, and sanded wings of balsa wood that jumped excitedly in the slipstream from a hairdryer, as simply as if it were not air but electricity that had been made to flow across them. The first phone call I ever received from someone other than a friend or relative came when I was thirteen. My mom passed me the telephone with a smile, telling me that a vice president from Boeing had asked to speak with me. He had received my letter requesting a videotape of a 747 in flight, to show as part of a science project about that airplane. He was happy to help; he wished only to know whether I wanted my 747 to fly in VHS or Betamax format.

I am the only pilot in my family. But all the same, I feel that imaginatively, at least, airplanes and flying were never far from home. My father was completely enthralled by airplanes—the result of his front-row seat on the portion of the Second World War that took place in the skies above his childhood home in West Flanders. He learned the shapes of the aircraft and the sounds of their engines. “The thousands of planes in the sky were too much competition for my schoolbooks,” he later wrote. In the 1950s, he left Belgium to work as a missionary in the Belgian Congo, where he first flew in a small airplane. Then he sailed to Brazil, where in the 1960s he was one of surely not very many priests with a subscription to *Aviation Week* magazine. Finally he flew to America, where he met my mother, went to business school, and worked as a manager in mental health services. Airplanes fill his old notes and slides.

My mother, born under the quieter skies of rural Pennsylvania, worked as a speech therapist and had no particular interest in aviation. Yet I feel she was the one who best understood my attachment to the less tangible joys of flight: the old romance of all journeys, which she gave to my brother and me in the form of stories like *Stuart Little* and *The Hobbit*, but also a sense of what we see from above or far away—the gift, the destination, that flying makes not of a distant place but of our home. Her favorite hymn was “For the Beauty of the Earth,” a title, at least, that we agreed might be worth printing on the inside of airplane window blinds.

My brother is not a pilot. His love is not for airplanes but for bicycles. His basement is full of bikes that are works in progress, that he's designing and assembling from far-gathered parts, for me or for a grateful friend. When it comes to his bike frames, he is as obsessed with lightness as any aeronautical engineer. He likes to make and fix bikes even more than he likes to ride them, I think.

If I see my brother working on one of his two-wheeled creations, or notice that he's reading about bikes on his computer while I am next to him on the couch reading about airplanes, I may remember that the Wright brothers were bicycle mechanics, and that their skyfaring skills began with wheels, a heritage that suddenly becomes clear when you look again at their early airplanes. When I see pictures of such planes I think, if I had to assemble anything that looked like this, I would start by calling on the skills of my brother—even though there was the time I got him in trouble with our parents for skipping his chores, and so he taped firecrackers to one of my model airplanes and lit the fuses and waited just the right number of seconds before throwing the model from an upstairs window, in a long arc over the backyard.

As a teenager I took a few flying lessons. I thought that I might one day fly small airplanes as a hobby, on weekend mornings, an aside to some other career. But I don't remember having a clear wish to become an airline pilot. No one at school suggested the career to me. No pilots lived in our neighborhood; I don't know if there were any commercial pilots at all in our small town in western Massachusetts, which was some distance from any major airport. My dad was an example of someone who enjoyed airplanes whenever he encountered them, but who had decided not to make them his life's work. I think the main reason I didn't decide earlier to become a pilot, though, is because I believed that something I wanted so much could never be practical, almost by definition.

In high school I spent my earnings from a paper route and restaurant jobs on summer homestay programs abroad, in Japan and Mexico. After high school I stayed in New England for college but also studied in Belgium, briefly reversing the journey my father had made. After college I went to Britain to study African history, so that I could live in Britain and, I hoped, in Kenya. I left that degree program when I finally realized that I wanted to become a pilot. To repay my student loans and save the money I expected to need for flight training, I took a job in Boston, in the field—management consulting—that I thought would require me to fly most often.

In high school I certainly wanted to see Japan and Mexico, and to study Japanese and Spanish. But really, what attracted me most to such adventures was the scale of the airplane journeys they required. It was the possibility of flight that most drew me to far-off summer travels, to degree programs in two distant lands, to the start of the most literally high-flying career I could find in the business world, and at last—because none of even those endeavors got me airborne nearly often enough—to a career as a pilot.

When I was ready to start my flight training, I decided to return to Britain. I liked many aspects of the country's historic relationship with aviation, its deep tradition of air links with the whole world, and the fact that even some of the shortest flights from Britain are to places so very different from it. And, not least, I liked the idea of living near the good friends I'd made as a postgraduate there.

I began to fly commercially when I was twenty-nine. I first flew the Airbus A320 series airliners, a family of narrow-bodied jets used on short- to medium-distance flights, on routes all around Europe. I'd be woken by an alarm in the 4 a.m. darkness of Helsinki or Warsaw or Bucharest or Istanbul, and there would be a brief bleary moment, in the hotel room whose shape and layout I'd already forgotten in the hours since I'd switched off the light, when I'd ask myself if I'd only been dreaming that I became a pilot. Then I would imagine the day of flying ahead, crossing back and forth in the skies of Europe, almost as excitedly as if it was my first day. I now fly a larger airplane, the Boeing 747. On longer flights we carry additional pilots so that each of us can take a legally prescribed break, a time to sleep and dream, perhaps, while Kazakhstan or Brazil or the Sahara rolls steadily under the line of the wing.

Frequent travelers, in the first hours or days of a trip, may be familiar with the experience of jet lag or a hotel wake-up call summoning them from the heart of night journeys they would otherwise have forgotten. Pilots are often woken at unusual points in their sleep cycles and perhaps, too, the anonymity and nearly perfect darkness of the pilot's bunk form a particularly clean slate for the imagination. Whatever the reason, I now associate going to work with dreaming, or at least, with dreams recalled only because I am in the sky.

A chime sounds in the darkness of the 747's bunk. My break is over. I feel for the switch that turns on a pale-yellow beam. I change into my uniform, which has been hanging on a plastic peg for something like

2,000 miles. I open the door that leads from the bunk to the cockpit. Even when I know it's coming—and it's frequently hard to know, depending as it does on the season, the route, the time, and the place—the brightness always catches me off guard. The cockpit beyond the bunk is blasted with a directionless daylight so pure and overwhelming, so alien to the darkness I left it in hours ago and to the gloom of the bunk, that it is like a new sense.

As my eyes adjust, I look forward through the cockpit windows. At this moment it's the light itself, rather than what it falls upon, that is the essential feature of the earth. What the light falls upon is the Sea of Japan, and far across this water, on the snowcapped peaks of the island nation we are approaching. The blueness of the sea is as perfect as the sky it reflects. It is as if we are slowly descending over the surface of a blue star, as if all other blues are to be mined or diluted from this one.

As I move forward in the cockpit to my seat on the right side of it, I think briefly back to the trip I made to Japan as a teenager, about two decades ago, and to the city this plane left only yesterday, though yesterday isn't quite the right word for what preceded a night that hardly deserves the name, so quickly was it undone by our high latitudes and eastward speed.

I remember that I had an ordinary morning in the city. I went to the airport in the afternoon. Now that day has turned away into the past, and the city, London, lies well beyond the curve of the planet.

As I fasten my seat belt I remember how we started the engines yesterday. How the sudden and auspicious hush fell in the cockpit as the airflow for the air-conditioning units was diverted; how air alone began to spin the enormous techno-petals of the fans, spin them and spin them, faster and faster, until fuel and fire were added, and each engine woke with a low rumble that grew to a smooth and unmistakable roar—the signature of one of our age's most perfect means of purifying and directing physical power.

In legal terms a journey begins when “an aircraft moves under its own power for the purpose of flight.” I remember the aircraft that moved ahead of us for this purpose and lifted ahead of us into the London rain. As that preceding aircraft taxied into position its engines launched rippling gales that raced visibly over the wet runway, as if from some greatly speeded-up video recording of the windswept surface of a pond. When takeoff thrust was set the engines heaved this water up in huge gusting night-gray cones, new clouds cast briefly skyward.

I remember our own takeoff roll, an experience that repetition hasn't dulled: the unfurling carpet of guiding lights that say here, the voice of the controller that says now; the sense, in the first seconds after the engines reach their assigned power and we begin to roll forward, that this is only a curious kind of driving down an equally curious road. But with speed comes the transition, the gathering sense that the wheels matter less, and the mechanisms that work on the air—the control surfaces on the wings and the tail—more. We feel the airplane's dawning life in the air clearly through the controls, and with each passing second the jet's presence on the ground becomes more incidental to how we direct its motion. Yesterday we were flying on the earth, long before we left it.

On every takeoff there is a speed known as V1. Before this speed we have enough room left ahead of us on the runway to stop the takeoff. After this speed we may not. Thus committed to flight, we continued for some time along the ground, gathering still more speed to the vessel. A few long seconds after V1 the jet reached its next milestone of velocity and the captain called: “Rotate.” As the lights of the runway started to alternate red and white to indicate its approaching end, as the four rivers of power that summed to nearly a quarter of a million pounds of thrust unfurled over the runway behind us, I lifted the nose.

As if we had only pulled out of a driveway, I turned right, toward Tokyo.

London, then, was on my side of the cockpit. The city grew bigger before it became smaller. From above, still climbing, you realize that this is how a city becomes its own map, how a place becomes whole before your eyes, how from an airplane the idea of a city and the image of a city itself can overlay each other so perfectly that it's no longer possible to distinguish between them. We followed London's river, that led the vessels of a former age from their docks to the world, as far as the North Sea. Then the sea turned, and Denmark, Sweden, Finland passed beneath us, and night fell—the night that both began and ended over Russia. Now I'm in the new day's blue northwest of Japan, waiting for Tokyo to rise as simply as the morning.

I settle myself into my sheepskin-covered seat and my particular position above the planet. I blink in the sun, check the distance of my hands and feet from the controls, put on a headset, adjust the microphone. I say good morning to my colleagues, in the half-ironic sense that long-haul pilots will know well, that means, on a light-scrambling journey, I need a minute to be sure where it is morning, and for whom—whether for me, or the passengers, or the place below us on the earth, or perhaps at our destination. I ask for a cup of tea. My colleagues update me on the hours I was absent; I check the computers, the fuel gauges. Small, steady green digits show our expected landing time in Tokyo, about an hour from now. This is expressed in Greenwich Mean Time. In Greenwich it is still yesterday. Another display shows the remaining nautical miles of flight, a number that drops about one mile every seven seconds. It is counting down to the largest city that has ever existed.

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