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Wowo

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For hours, Art Smith, The Bird Boy of Fort Wayne, in his capacity as a test pilot, circled Langley Field in a modified DH-4 daylight bomber. Reading over and over from a list of single-syllable words into a radio microphone, he transmitted the signal to the receiving ground station below. The antenna, a hundred-foot length of wire made of fine phosphor-bronze strands, like gossamer, weighing just an ounce and a half, had been spooled out beyond the tail upon takeoff. The experiment was to ascertain what words would broadcast well from aloft. He repeated, “Maim, maim, main, main, make, make, man, man, map, map, mar, mar, mask, mask, match, match, mate, mate, maul, maul, maze, maze, mean, mean...” Smith did not have a receiver. The engine’s roar and the wind swaddling the open cockpit made hearing anything in return impossible. In the static between the words’ echoing, both the small sizzle produced by the radio and the larger ambient howling swirling around him, he pictured the injection of his stuttering speech into the invisible stream of the space between space. Of course, he had no way of knowing then of electromagnetic troughs and waves, that his broadcast was and would become a component of the leading edge of that initial radio pulse, pulsing still and still expanding outward into the greater galaxy. No, lulled by his recited litany, he imagined something more along the lines of a leaf falling, switching back and forth on some unseen current, still a creature connected to gravity, as he was, and not flying off weightlessly, in all directions, out into empty space.

W O W O W O W O

In April of 1925, Art Smith returned home to Fort Wayne, contracted to advertise the new commercial radio station, WOWO, broadcasting then on 1320 kHz. Chester Keen, who also owned the Main Auto Supply Company, owned the station, and Smith was paid for the job with parts he would use to customize his airmail Curtiss and his own airplane. He employed as an orienting landmark the downtown intersections of the city's rail lines where the yards of the Pennsylvania and Wabash meshed. There, Smith stitched together the call letters, the Ws' undulations mimicking the amplitude of radio waves. Below him, he could see the many steam engines shunting back and forth on the tracks, making their own visible smoke and steam, more telegraphic than sonic, the dots and dashes blooming along the lines as if their semaphoring was a kind of response to his own. But silent, all of this in silence, as his altitude and the constant crash of wind muted the reports of the whistles blowing when the engines picked up speed or changed directions. Seeing the bursts of smoke below him, Art Smith summoned up that sound—that familiar wail of it, its panting exhaustion, its depressed minor key, that accumulating and crashing of the sound, wave after wave after wave.