

December 17, 1903

WINGING IT

Two brothers scanned the cold front stalled northeast.  
Not promising at all, and yet their blood  
Was humming yes! --their bones agreeing, genes  
Evolved beyond the wax and feather stage,  
The Icaros infection now afire  
Inside a circuit rider's gangling sons.

Here where a continental splinter spared  
The Carolina coast from Neptune's wrath,  
Here where his aviary wintered, bred,  
A new breed waited for its fledging time.  
No more a cold pretender, now a bird,  
Warm-blooded thirst for fuel in its craw.

The wind increased as Orville thought of past  
Debacles-- men he held in awe, who knew  
Much more, and yet they clung to principles  
Now proven false if he could dare believe  
His own. He thought how Wilbur's first box made  
The Outer Bankers laugh: A kite, a toy

To lift a man and let him guide it down.  
Then came a larger one. They set it free--  
No lines to grounded hands-- a managed arch  
Responsive to their afterthought of rudder  
And shifting body weight. Its shallow glide  
Was like a petrel's outspread, unflapped wings.

"Good lads but daft--" The Bankers winked and watched  
The brothers sweat two summers on the beach.  
One day a wizened fisherman had warned:  
"You Wright boys had your triumph. Sailed the sky  
Like seamen rolling combers in a skiff.  
"It's time you set your minds on solid things."

Home in their cluttered shop when flight seemed doomed,  
An artist's misbegotten fiction/farce,  
Those words were added drag on Orville's hope.  
But he, the uncured optimist, would spark  
Once more the re-ignition of them both.  
Today he revved his faith to soar again.

(cont.)

The coast guard station men came out to help,  
No longer snickerers, but not convinced.  
So many things gone wrong, so many times.  
The shapes, the shafts, the theories of lift.  
Just yesterday the half-tamed hawk had failed  
When guards helped pulley Flyer up the hill.

It blundered down Kill Devil, broke a skid.  
But now with gawkers gone-- today-- today  
Could unchain history from gravity,  
Could free man from the limits of his lot.  
As Orville's big Ohio hand lay on his dream,  
He felt it thrum with life, its substance sound.

Fresh winds concaved the dunes as Orville prayed,  
An upturned-head, an unclosed-eyes petition.  
Then Wilbur slowly nodded, yanked his cap  
And hurried up the strand where Flyer stood  
A hulking hawk with wings of forty feet,  
Repaired, impatient to perform its role.

Old Bankers cooked fish stew and mended nets.  
Out on its tracks, the hawk was warm, intent  
On lifting its own weight with man along  
To hold it true. And Orville mounted, prone,  
The trembling species growling to be freed  
Upwind, his leanness part of Flyer's form.

The hybrid, flesh and fabric, wire and oil,  
Left wooden rails and climbed its element  
As startled gulls veered from the creature's path.  
And high as they fled, cheers went higher still.  
In flight for thirteen seconds--but enough!  
It vindicated its design, its name.

As Orville grinned, his brother ran to meet  
The clumsy crate he rode. To take his turn  
To keep the noisy dream aloft, inhale  
Its fumes, extend its reach, exceed the time.  
Twice each, the brothers broke an earthly law  
Until almost a minute Flyer flew.

It claimed the air and arced the emptiness,  
Its altitude eight-hundred-fifty feet  
For half a mile above the ancient shore  
Of Hatteras, above the tossed-up caps  
And shouts of coast guards plus one Dayton "boy,"  
Half-owner of the dream he pushed so high.

--Glenna Holloway