

BEFORE A POET KNOWS WHAT SHE IS

Eyes as wild with light as a puma's,
blossoming breasts up-tilted to summer,
topaz and nectarine heraldry of Erato in jeans.

The marriage pleas began in high school,
mouths and arms she liked, bottled forest scent,
denim and leather always close.
New sums to sift at the deep waking.

The suitors spoke hoarsely of apartments
and TVs, beds, money, children.
And two promised a car of her own.
She ran alone to wrap night around her.

Without secret pages,
too unsure to say how warlock winds
hurried her blood, how river tongues rhymed
with hers and promised more. Too new

to tell how strings and reeds in minor keys
leaned her on shoulders of granite,
closed her eyes with pine breath
while wilderness sinew held her closer.

And her unnamed babies
already lay in an outgrown box
pressing blue gentians from ditches.

--Glenna Holloway,
MID-AMERICA REVIEW, 2002

STOPPING IN THE DESERT ALONE

Did I drive 1200 miles just to sit here staring
at my sweaty hands on the wheel? To memorize
the livid veins like ruckled roads crossing
hot desolation heading deeper into the interior?
The interior is what I'm running from--

nothing inside worth keeping-- mucked up
with misbegotten cells and superchemicals
that don't know good from bad. Sitting here,
slashed and burned, poisoned for dessert, myself
a damaged ecosystem-- more of a desert than this.

I'm no longer afraid, just dried up. Mumbling
to whoever still lives inside, pretending
to still be a woman, not just an animated logogram
for ignorance posing as medical prowess. When I die
the docs will finger their beards and say:

"A shame it didn't work this time. Maybe
we'll hit the right combo next time."
And next time is already sitting
in their waiting rooms filling out the forms,
preludes to filling coffers and coffins equally.

Cut the commentary, girl, you're not the type.
Some patients get lucky; maybe you will.
Listen, if you've got a few months,
why spend 'em driving? You can still dance, dammit.
You could adagio with that dust devil out there,

what's left of your hair standing straight up--
grit to grind your teeth on for a soft-shoe number--
grit to sting you pink and alive, to sand
your scars smooth and touchable as rosewood.
Enough grit to get you back on point like a stylus.

Look at that wild thing dervish around the cactus:
secret rhythms-- slow spins-- winding down now--
naively graceful. You could choreograph that. Could it
lift you like a ballet partner? Is it strong enough?
If you cover your eyes and nose could it hurt you?

Actually-- could anything?

CALLIGRAPHY BY NIGHT

Three migrating cranes
brush inky strokes across
the waning moon's empty page.
In silvered silence
we read their cryptic message
like an ancient haiku scroll.

--Glenna Holloway,
1985, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR 1995,
RED MOUNTAIN RENDEZVOUS (anthology)

GLENN HOLLOWAY

Winging It

December 17, 1903 • In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Wright Brothers' historic first flight.

Two brothers scanned the cold front stalled northeast.
Wind stung their eyes, they tasted briny grit.
Not promising at all, and yet their blood
Was humming yes, their bones agreeing, genes
Evolved beyond the wax and feather stage,
The Icarus infection now afire
Inside a circuit preacher's gangling sons.

Here on a continental splinter sparing
Carolina's coast the punishment
Of privateering seas and vaulted sands,
Where Neptune's aviary made its home,
A new breed waited for its fledging time.
No longer cold pretender, now a bird,
Warm-blooded thirst for fuel in its crow.

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,
Its shadow low and blunt, unbirdlike, crude—
Its landing more an unexpected stall.

The wind twanged wires and ribs, honed expertise
On subtleties of air, its sudden whims.
"Good lads but daft—" The Bankers winked and watched
The brothers sweat four summers on the beach.
One day a wizened fisherman advised:
"You boys've had y'fun. Y'sailed the sky
Like seamen rollin' combers in a skiff.

"It's time to set y'minds on solid things
More worthy of y'labors back at home."
And in home's cluttered shop when flight seemed doomed,
Da Vinci's misbegotten fantasy,
Those words were added drag on each device.
Then Orville, part romanticist, would spark
The re-ignition of their dreams, their drive.

Today his optimism soared again
In spite of Wilbur's cautionary frown.
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 to crown
The hill with hope revised again, renewed,
It's tactile substance thrumming, taut and sound—
Except it blundered down and broke a skid.
Yet now, most gawkers gone—today—today
Could unchain history from gravity,
Could free man from the limits of his grounds. . . .

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
Repaired, improved from yesterday's attempt,
Impatient to perform its starring role:
A hulking hawk with wings of forty feet.

Old Bankers stirred fish stew and mended nets.
Some picked their teeth and watched the changing tide.
Out on its tracks, the bird was warm, intent
On lifting its own weight with practiced hands
To hold it true. And Orville mounted, prone,
The nascent species trembling to be loosed
Upwind, his leanness part of *Flyer's* form.

The hybrid, flesh and fabric, wire and oil,
Left wooden rails and climbed its element.
Two startled gulls veered upward from its path.
And high as they fled, cheers went higher still.
Eleven seconds—twelve! Amid the shouts
The floating apparition traded sky
For sand again. But seconds were enough.

Orville grinned as Wilbur ran to meet
Their wing-warped oddity, to take his turn
To keep the clumsy dream aloft, inhale
Its fumes, extend its reach, exceed the time.
Twice each, the brothers broke accepted law.
Each test was higher, longer than the last
Until almost a minute *Flyer* flew.

It rose above its flaws and proved its name.
It bullied air and arced the emptiness,
Its altitude eight hundred fifty feet
For half a mile, a whole lifetime of lift
Above the ragged shore of Hatteras,
Above the tossed-up caps, the guardsmens' yells,
Two Dayton boys sure this was not a dream.

The world, not sure of much, did not yet feel
The slipstream of a powered airplane's rise,
The impact of those landings on the sand.
That day at Kitty Hawk man overrode
Earth's ancient pull. The tether snapped, one era
Closed, an unimagined age was born

And here below would never be the same.

TESTAMENT

Saint James described it as a raging fire.
That little muscle anchored in our throats
Is flexed by pride, cupidity, desire.
It curves and curls, incessantly misquotes,
Embroiders, burns, inveigles with a twist,
Spews bile and guile then batters like a fist,
Misleads the innocent, derides the weak.
Sometimes it poses quasi-truth oblique
Against a noble theme, a vital rung,
Or revels in the taste of its own cheek.
Ah, James, how well you knew the human tongue.

How keen a marriage tool, a smoking pyre
For any wife or husband who promotes
Communication, probing to acquire
Superiority. Each one devotes
Delicious care to making up a list
Of most effective subjects used for grist.
As ancient mills begin to grind and squeak,
The mighty organ primes its pipes to speak,
And from its depths supported by a lung,
Sound bites arise to start the day's critique.
Ah, James, how well you knew the human tongue.

A bit can curb a horse, control his ire.
The softest member in his mouth denotes
Where his own power ends, serves to rewire
Intentions as it channels all his oats
In service to the reins he won't resist
Once understood. He minds, unprejudiced,
Just so he's fed and watered at the creek,
De-cockleburred and brushed until he's sleek,
And stabled where they've shoveled out the dung.
It only takes a bit to make him meek.
Ah, James how well you knew the human tongue:

(cont.)

For ours cannot be tamed. Always for hire,
 It plies its ancient trade by modern rotes,
 Aflap in wayward winds or stuck in mire.
 The people it infects, the self it bloats
 As every snaky syllable is hissed,
 Don't even know they're bitten till they've missed
 A beat, a byte, as they attempt to sneak
 In idioms of kindness, strange as Greek.
 Then only laughter licks the newly stung
 Who quickly emulate the top technique.
 Ah, James how well you knew the human tongue.

Toxicity and acrid ash conspire;
 The residue of curses, lies and gloats
 Impedes all good. The status quo is dire
 With increased odds against the antidotes.
 Hell's blaze, said James, backlights our words; the gist
 Of what is said defines the atheist.
 Prognoses for reform are worse than bleak.
 This totem, coveted by Satan's clique,
 Must meet the challenge head-on very young
 To rid the premise of its tainted streak.
 Ah, James, how well you knew the human tongue.

A few still try to triumph, some still seek
 To douse the damning flames and maybe wreak
 A miracle to purge the body hung
 With this bizarre appendage, this antique.
 Ah, James, how well you knew the human tongue.

--James 3:3-10

--Glenna Holloway,
 MICHIGAN QUARTERLY REVIEW, 2000
 THE PUSHCART PRIZE, XXV Anniversary Edition,
 2001

UNMAILED LETTERS OF A YOUNG MAN MAKING HISTORY
1805

No one dreamed these mountains were so big, Ma,
No one warned me I would be this cold.
Granite towers straighter than the cedars,
Couldn't climb such rocks for love nor gold.

Horses fell off backwards it's so steep now.
Just as well one died-- we needed food.
Summer stayed behind on the Missouri.
This must be where all earth's storms are brewed.

Since we've come so far we get to wondering
If we've missed the pass and lost the way.
Captain Lewis tries to keep us hopeful.
After dark I go somewhere and pray.

Ain't no human ever put his foot here,
Even animals avoid this place.
More than five days since we stood up level--
Longer since we walked a decent pace.

Hired another guide, an old Shoshone,
After we left parts the girl had known.
She still totes her papoose on her back, Ma.
Reckon she's got troubles of her own.

Near the Great Divide she met her brother;
He's a chief, he let us make a trade:
Twenty-nine good horses and a jenny.
Spirits rose, nobody was afraid.

(cont.)