

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.

Impatient on a coastal splinter sparing
The Carolina shore from Neptune's wrath
Where his own 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 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.

"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.

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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 and ready 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.

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