

DENOUEMENT: FLYING THE JUNEAU ICE FIELD

Glenn Holloway

Given a choice I'd have picked the tropics.  
Maybe the warm would begin to work on you,  
make us wrap our possibilities in the smell  
of frangipani and the certainty of tides.  
Maybe I flew the Honolulu honeymoon run too often  
and some of the hype seeped in my chinks.

But here you are, sweaters, boots, coffee thermos,  
being my Alaskan hostess and guide. I always wanted  
to show you the north but I thought you'd hate it.  
It's surprising you stayed. I thought you'd come home  
after two or three weeks. What holds you here?  
This is heathen beauty with chewed edges. You look  
wonderful against it. But you wear all latitudes,  
all climates well. Will our differences  
magnify in frozen lenses and lingering light?

Pilots are the world's worst passengers.  
I've never been in a float plane before  
but you've planned a special tour for my first morning.  
You charge me with camera gear and smiles so  
I can't ease my itch to inspect struts, rudder, prop  
before we're committed. All I know of the man  
at the controls is plaid shoulders, hair, beard

cont.

no stanza break

and Air Force shades. You seem to know more.  
 The vintage craft wallows in the thick water.  
 You point to ptarmigan already losing their brown;  
 they blurt from dwarf willows on the bank.  
 You hand me film to load.

We started coming apart last spring, you and I.  
 When you took the job in Juneau for a season  
 you said you'd know your answer by the time I arrived.  
 Do you know how many hours aloft it's been since spring?

We lift off, fat, sluggish, loud, while you tell me  
 you saw a beluga whale last time. And suddenly  
 we see a pair of them arcing whitely. They move  
 side by side, pale quotation marks  
 introducing verses I've never read.

We ride low and slow over goldmine ruins, wiry brush  
 and rocks. Your cries of look oh, look  
 make me stop listening for the stall warning.  
 There's a moose with a rack like a park bench.  
 I still love seeing with you.  
 Are you going to leave me when we land?

You tell the bushman you want a shot  
 of Mendenhall bulking blueely to the northwest,  
 a grimy grimace on its freeze-dried face.  
 The moraine is plushed with spruce and hemlock  
 splashed with fireweed blowing puffs of seed.  
 Thoughts of ailerons, fuel and pontoons fade;

cont.

no stanza break

my arm falls on your shoulder  
as we press toward your window. A braided river  
flounders in the silt looking for the main part  
of itself without current or compass.  
I'm a braided river.

The mountains are fingerpainted for fall.  
I'd forgotten how many shades of red  
the tundra owns, how many Tlingit legends  
shadow the hills. Remember how you thought  
Alaska would be drab? I watch northern lights  
play your face as you nod.

Pocked remnants of centuries bend the light below.  
We approach the ice cap. A hundred mile mother lode  
forty miles wide and flat. A huge shelf of loneliness.  
No one's sure how many thousand feet deep. I planned  
to fly it once. Never did. We need time alone.  
A cleared stage. No walls, no props, no noise.  
Part of our trouble is we were never still. You always  
had something going when I wanted to be. Up here  
we could learn. Just learn the verb to be.

You're down there on the ice now, as easily  
as if you'd stepped out without saying goodbye.  
Take me with you when you go.

Down there has the look of silence. But I know  
that arctic leftover creaks with age, cracks  
like a rifle shot with constant change, growls at wind.  
Life support for the glaciers, keeping them hale



no stanza break

enough to bully mountains, gouge holes for lakes  
and slough off bergs the size of ships. Even  
the Nunataka groan under their scars,  
those great granite chess pieces castling  
the empty board where pawns and knights were lost.  
No roads. No animals. No living. Except glaciers—  
kings— queens— bishops— pompous beyond the passes.  
You once said I could use a little humility. Is that  
what you're trying to teach me? Alaska would humble  
King Kong. That's why you're not saying much. Why invest  
in communication with someone you're through with, right?

The crevasses are the color of California sky  
and morning-glories. Your eyes have more lavender.  
If we crashed down there somehow I'd save you.  
I'd put myself between you and the ice. Somehow  
I'd will you all my blood strength breath mind.  
The mind— what fool flights it takes.  
Fills up like a windsock when left untended.  
Or ravel at both ends.

We're passing a small glacier. Rough spiderweb turquoise  
in matrix. Look at the top— one perfect cabochon  
some lapidary's frozen fingers had to abandon  
before he could cut it loose for a ring.  
You smile. I'm glad you're still a romantic.  
Is that what I am? Only with you.  
Are you glad I talked you into doing this?  
Of course. I wish that didn't rhyme with divorce.

cont.

new stanza

We're nearing an evergreen rain forest  
slanting away to a meadow rimmed with aspen gold.  
I glimpse wild cranberries as we slip into a river valley.  
Bald eagles circle and sail like wooden totems  
freed from their poles. I can feel how they excite you,  
feel it building. I can almost catch it.  
Look, they're feeding on salmon. Let's join them!  
You're pointing ahead. There's the lodge! Already  
I can smell the alder smoke. Can you carry this bag?

A damn nice landing on the river.  
I didn't know we'd be putting down anywhere—  
Your ungloved hand is warm, even your eyes,  
although cerulean is a cool color. On the dock  
you poke your head back in the plane and speak  
to the pilot whose face I've never seen.  
I gather he'll tie up and join us for lunch.  
Instead he hands you another bag and calls out  
See you two next week then starts his turn for take-off.

DENOUEMENT

Given a choice I'd have picked the tropics to warm you, some place we could wrap our possibilities in the smell of frangipani and the certainty of tides. Maybe I flew the honeymoon run to Honolulu too long.

Here you are with sweaters, boots, coffee thermos, being my Alaskan hostess and guide. I always wanted to show you this heathen beauty with bitten edges but I thought you'd hate it. You look wonderful against it. You wear all latitudes well. Will our differences magnify in frozen lenses and bluish light?

Commercial pilots are the world's worst air passengers. I've never been in a float plane in my life but you charge me with camera gear and smiles so I can't ease my itch to inspect struts, rudder, prop before we're committed. All I know of the man at the controls is plaid shoulders and a hood of black hair around Air Force shades. You seem to know more.

He half turns. "All set?"

I check your seat belt and answer "Okay."

The vintage craft wallows in the thick water. You point to ptarmigan already losing their brown, blurting from dwarf

willows on the far bank. You hand me film to load.

We started coming apart last spring, you and I. You took the job in Juneau to buy time and space. Do you know how many hours aloft it's been since April?

We lift off fat, sluggish, loud, while you shout about seeing a beluga whale last time. And suddenly we see a pair of them arcing whitely, side by side, pale quotation marks for verses I've never read.

We ride low and slow over gold mine ruins, wiry bush. Your cries of "Mark, look--look!" make me stop listening for the stall warning. There's a moose with a rack like a park bench. I still love seeing with you. Everything seems newer, sharper. Are you going to leave me when we land?

Mechanical concerns fade, my arm is on your shoulder as we press toward your window. We take pictures of a braided river floundering in the silt looking for the main part of itself without current or compass. I'm a braided river.

The mountains are fingerpainted for fall. I'd forgotten how many shades of red the tundra owns, how many Tlingit legends shadow the hills.

"Remember how you thought Alaska would be drab?" I ask. I watch northern light play your face as you nod.

Pocked remnants of centuries bend the light below. We approach the ice cap, a mother lode of loneliness. We need time alone. Time for synchrony, for learning the verb to be.



Now you're down there on the ice as easily as if you'd stepped out without saying good-bye. Take me with you when you go.

Down there has the look of silence. But I know that arctic leftover cracks like rifle shots, creaks with constant change. Life support for glaciers, keeping them hale enough to bully mountains, gouge holes for lakes and slough off bergs bigger than battleships. Even the Nunataka groan under their scars, huge granite chess pieces castling the empty board where pawns and knights were lost, where kings and queens claim the blue distance.

You once said I could use a little humility. Is that what you're trying to teach me here? Alaska humbles all men. Tell me what you're thinking. Maybe it's why communicate with someone on his way out...

The crevasses are the color of California sky and morning-glories. Your eyes are more lavender. If we crashed down there somehow I'd save you. Somehow I'd will you all my blood, strength, breath. What fool flights the mind takes. Fills up like a wind sock. Or ravel at both ends and flaps.

I don't know what to say to you. But the scenery demands comment. "Look at that smallest glacier-- spiderweb turquoise some lapidary began carving then abandoned when he couldn't cut it loose."

You smile and say, "You're still a romantic."



"Is that what I am? Only with you."

You turn fully toward me. "Are you glad I talked you into meeting me here?"

"Of course." Why did I notice that rhymes with divorce?

We're nearing an evergreen rain forest slanting away to a river hemmed with aspen gold. Bald eagles circle above the water like totems freed from their poles. You always loved big birds. I can feel how they excite you.

You point ahead, exclaiming, "They're feeding on salmon, let's join them. There's the lodge! I can almost smell the alder smoke. Can you carry this bag?"

"I-I didn't know we'd be getting out anywhere--I thought--" Your ungloved hand is warm.

On the dock you duck your head back in the cockpit to speak to the pilot. I suppose he'll tie up and join us for lunch. I should commend him for a damn nice landing.

Instead he hands you another bag, grins, and calls out, "See you two next week," then starts his turn for take-off.

--Glenna Holloway