

Two Poems

Dolores Hayden

Packing the Parachute

*Georgia Ann “Tiny” Broadwick, parachute jumper
(1893-1978)*

Air circuses put the jump last—
sometimes a harness breaks
or a gust shoves you down hard
like a liquored-up husband.

Wilbur Wright shook my hand once,
he said, you're awful small to do that.
I weigh eighty pounds, I'm four foot one,
I've landed in the chill blue of Lake Michigan
and the hot steam of a moving train.
Anything is easier than thirteen hour days
in a North Carolina cotton mill.

I married at twelve and had a baby, Verla.
Honey, that's the way it was done down South.

I joined the Johnny J. Jones Carnival
in Jacksonville at fourteen,
all I ever wanted to do.

My mother raised Verla while I jumped
from a hot air balloon filled with gas.
I was The Doll Girl in white ruffles and a bonnet,
I dropped like a baby falling out of a bassinet.

On the Fourth of July, I stunted
with red, white, and blue chutes.
Faster than a firecracker,
I cut each set of cords,
fell free before opening the next,
landed on a trapeze sitting
next to the Stars and Stripes.

An airplane is much safer than a balloon.
Before I drop from a plane
cruising at seventy,
I pack every inch flat and dry,
silk like a coverlet,
rope like an umbilical cord,
my parachute is birth in a bundle, rebirth,
I've strapped it on my back
a thousand times.

Watch me fall
watch me
watch

before the chute snaps open.

Flying Lesson: Air Mail, 1920

Schedules, contracts,
sketches, letters,
air mail pays three bucks
a pound: locked canvas sacks
provide a living,
don't let them weigh
more than your life.

Strap the skinny
scrolling strip map
to your knee board:
climb north from Bellafonte
through a gap in the ridge,
cross the switchback
on Rattlesnake Mountain.

Pick up the west branch
of the Susquehanna River
at Snow Shoe—look sharp,
five small houses.

After Clearfield, follow
the white gravel road
to Du Bois, south of town
sits a piece of flat pasture
you can land on in a pinch.

Night mail: if you
climb above fog,
the moon and stars
give directions,
streetlights glow

beneath the clouds
to hint at locations,
still, you need a hole
in the fog to land.

Zero, zero,
no ceiling,
no visibility.

Ten minutes' fuel.
Five.
Four.
Three.

Death is calling collect.

Climb the cowling,
bend your knees,
hurl yourself
head first
into the fog.

Watch out for the ship
gliding down
without you.

Away from its path,
jerk the cord,
release the silk.
Cross your ankles
to avoid wires.

Earth pulls you back,
hard and particular.

