

Wilderness House Literary Review 20/3

Beth Brown Preston

OXYGEN I

Icarus: My Wings

When first I found my new wings,
Wax feathers were set between my shoulders In a lump of thick black tar
upon my back.

I knew only my own ignorance and terror
In the presence of my father who made me fly. With magic I was bestowed
the gift of flight:
Waxen wings and my back alive with mysterious energy. I possessed the
wings of an angel.

Suddenly I ascended into the heavens.
And upon a summer wind I was carried aloft. From that great height I was
wrapped
In a rich white cloak of cumulus cloud. Far above the fields. Far above my
father.

To my eyes from way up there
The ground appeared covered by a tapestry Of tulips, daffodils and Bos-
ton fern.
Lush gardens were planted in a patchwork of earth. These things I saw
and more on my journey to the sky, Where, in a dream of flight, I soared
on waxen wings.

The blazing sun became my enemy.
The hot sun melted my wings of tar and wax. No matter how hard I tried,
There was no remaining aloft. I tumbled down from the sky.
And, reader of myths, you know my tale.

I fell because I disobeyed my father
With my courage summoned at the edge of fear, My bravery in the face of
the unknown.

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Ascent: Red Tails-A Letter

on the loss of Lt. Cornelius G. Rogers
from Lieut. Col. Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr., Commander 332nd Fighter
Group

June 10th, 1944 Dear Mrs. Rogers:

Strength and honor!

My hope was to meet you again under the Georgia stars just before dawn
today. But now I must regret

to inform you of your husband's sudden and tragic death.

Lt. Rogers and his P-47 Thunderbolt were shot down while flying with our
332nd Fighter Group as American bombers and their escorts approached
the enemy skies over Undine in northern Italy.

Courage, honor, and duty!

I imagine your grieving tears as you read this letter.

As I can imagine your perfume anointing the evening in Macon, and
you, seated on the verandah, sipping your Scotch and soda.

The War Department said that Negroes did not have the intelligence to fly
planes. Oh, but enemy guns appeared to threaten our heroes,
that clear afternoon on June ninth, stuttering their intrepid message of war.
Lt. Rogers, the sole pilot who did not return from the mission.

Victory, triumph!

I have no remaining leave time to visit you and the children stateside. When
shall we see each other again?

I fear my duties keep me occupied in the skies of battle. When will our in-
terminable fight 'gainst the Nazi's end?

This vulgar war which requires my command

till we see victory rise with the sun over the eastern horizon? As his-
tory is recorded in the journals and annals of our time, the story and
legacy of our Tuskegee Airmen will forever shine.

I remain, sincerely yours,

Lieut. Col. Benjamin Oliver Davis, Jr., Squadron Commander

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lift Ev'ry Voice and Sing

for Augusta Savage, circa 1939

Love:

When first you laid your hands in clay,
you fashioned small animals and human figures the people you met in
Green Cove Springs.

The natural Florida clay you shaped and molded into that sculpture win-
ning you the prize.

Labor:

And so, you followed your star northward to New York City in the Twen-
ties, four dollars and sixty cents in your pockets. North to a renaissance in
Harlem, and at the Cooper Union. A portrait sculptor: casting the like-
ness of DuBois, Garvey, and James Weldon Johnson, your model and
good friend, sharing in your love for song. In a tiny studio apartment,
you steadily worked hard and long.

Legacy:

On the cover of Crisis, April, 1939, a sketch, your work-in-progress: ""The
Harp," symbol of Black music -- twelve black figures
standing tall in long robes & lifted by the arm of God, the instrument's
sounding board.

The figure in front - a bare-chested man kneels, singing, singing.

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Melancolie

after Francis Poulenc

The heart now requires its singular pleasures: the babble of water flowing
in a brook

as seen through a bedroom window

surrounded by a symphony of the chromatic forest.

In a meditation on tenderness: I let poetry inside, into this unsung realm
of mine.

What is this music I hear insist among the trees? This music -- an offer-
ing to the silenced of the world. I want to tell the world: I am no longer
afraid.

But now dancing in this world for the unsung others.

I can fill blank pages with stories of their forgotten lives.

I thought that I knew my heart,

but the heart requires its vengeance

on those who would make war upon us, abandon us to our grieving cities.

I dance for the world,

for the unsung, unknown others.

I hear their plaintive song as if it were my own.

The rain descends in a fine, staccato mist.

This poem is a sadness in which nothing is forgiven.

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Someday I Will Love Myself

--after Ocean Vuong and Roger Reeves

Someday I will love you, Beth,
for your blatant and blunt truths. You never lie.
For the jazz woven through your poems.
I will love your myopia and the glasses you wear that do not help you to
see.

Someday I will love you the way you love others - unconditional love.
You are never afraid of being hurt.

The way you endure loneliness
to make something out of the word "one" inside the word "lonely."

You are never satisfied -
demanding mastery and perfection in all things.
But you always forgive the flaws in others because you know better.

Someday I will love you for the many volumes standing straight up in
the on your library shelves
to guard your knowledge like silent and brave soldiers.
For the books you have read. And the many books you have not read.

For the dust gathering on your old guitar,
and for your blank music notebooks yet to be filled before you shake
hands with Death.

I will love the early hour when you greet the morning - while the sun
gathers the roses of dawn.

The way you order your day -
the tasks quite simple, yet vital to your art.

Someday I will come to understand you -
one bright season in autumn as the leaves turn
their burnished copper and gold under a November sun.