

Carole Boston Weatherford

May 1, 1926: Queen Bess Buzzes Through Three Decades

Note: Unable to enlist a flight instructor in the U.S., Bessie Coleman (1896-1926) America's first black female aviator, earned her pilot's license in France. During her last flight, a May 1 dry run in Jacksonville, Florida, she was catapulted from the plane and fell to her death.

By the time I was nine, Daddy had flown
the coop, rejoined the Choctaw
After that, Mama deaned house for town-folk
and picked cotton to put food on the table.
Ciphering saved me from the field.
I kept the family's books while the others'
fingers bled. Bolls, bales... add up.
Down row after backbreaking row, sacks slung
on shoulders trailed the pickers like long shadows,
collapsed parachutes. I took in laundry to escape.

College, then, when my money ran out,
Chicago, for beauty culture school. I filed
fingernails into perfect arcs, found
half moons beneath cuticles, and landed
at White Sox Barber shop, Miss Coleman
manicurist. Strong hands on my vanity,
vets, my best patrons, recalled aeroplanes
buzzing over the front. I ceased to be grounded;
the ceiling lifted. Work seemed below me,
flight, my preoccupation.

The darling of Northern air shows, I wanted
my people to see me soar. . . soar with me
So, I went South, silk scarf streaming
in the wind. Even carnivals deserved a dress rehearsal.
I am gaining altitude. A steep climb, circling, circling,

a lazy eight, a loop and a nose dive, then. . .
the cotton field is tumbling toward me. Spin, spin.
I touch a cloud and see the feather in my father's hair.
He heads west on a winged mustang.
Write my name in the sky.

Leslie Payne: Old Airplane Builder Homemade

A handyman with rhinestone studs in his teeth
doesn't quit just because his scrap-metal plane
won't fly. No. He suits up in overalls, flight cap
and goggles and drives his craft on the highway
till the sheriff orders him off. Then, he builds more
large-scale replicas, minus engines, mows
a landing strip in his grass yard and enlists
neighborhood children as co-pilots, insists they too
wear flight gear. Pamela types flight reports
and Darlene dons white gloves for the trip to Geneva
a transatlantic crossing in the spirit of his idol,
Lindbergh. Payne was just eleven when the air show
brought World War I bi-planes to the Northern Neck. Six
decades later, his head was still stuck in the clouds.

Walter Flax: Master of the Fleet

Walter couldn't help but think
that the War to End All Wars might have,
if only he'd passed the Navy's aptitude test.
By World War II, his wobbly legs ruled out
enlisting, but he still cycled to odd jobs
near Newport News. The shipyard forged
steely pride, while Walter, stuck onshore,
collected cast-off wood, metal, hardware
and toys to build the fleet he'd steer
beyond thwarted hopes. In the pine clearing
around his small house, a miniature armada
drydocked: battleships, subs, steamers, tugs
and cruisers. Not a seaworthy craft among them.
His ships sailed in a refrigerator-turned-pool.
Each launch called back the boy who'd posed
in a sailor suit. Two more wars took their toll
before the Navy got wind of Walter's flotilla,
finally granted him his maiden voyage.

Carole Boston Weatherford's publications include two chapbooks: *The Tar Baby on the Soapbox* and *The Tan Chantouse*. She has also published two children's poetry books: *Sidewalk Chalk* and *Remember the Bridge*. The poems which appear here are from *Stormy Blues*, forthcoming from Xavier Review Press.