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Noonan's Crown

Neal Bowers

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Noonan's Crown

Neal Bowers (bio)

—Fred Noonan vanished with Amelia Earhart on July 2, 1937, during an attempt to fly around the world. He was her navigator for the flight.

She told me she was not afraid to die,
then tried to prove it by the way she flew,
full-throttle and at altitudes so high
the breathless sky became a blacker blue.

I swear the stars were visible at noon
as we rose over daylight and mere time,
toward irrelevance of sun and moon
beyond the upper limits of our climb.

Then came our mad descent, with barrel rolls
and spirals, loop-the-loops and figure eights,
which she completed in a death-defying stall
and free fall from those unforgiving heights.

She was Queen of the Air, in death supreme;
I was a phantom in a mirror in a dream.

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I was a phantom in a mirror in a dream,
a blur, a no one, with a name to match,
hitchhiking in the slipstream of a fame
that was impossible for me to catch. **[End Page 359]**

Perhaps she took my insignificance
as her excuse to lift me into space,
then pulverize me to irrelevance
on the stones of some undiscoverable place
where even insects wouldn't come to celebrate
the feast of me in all my particles,
as she dispersed in ether to intoxicate
the world with her mysterious debacle.

I kept my mouth shut, and I went along,
because Amelia could do no wrong.

Because Amelia could do no wrong,
 she never took the blame for anything
 but found somebody else to pin it on,
 even if the fault was her bad piloting.

So, when she crashed while taking off, she said
 the ground crew filled the fuel tanks unevenly,
 then settled on a blown-out tire instead,
 though I could tell she wanted to blame me.

Because she flew by nerve more than by skill,
 she was a fatal crash that hadn't happened yet,
 and flying with her was a terrifying thrill,
 like lifting up the gun in Russian roulette.

My one regret, down to the very bone—
 I promised not to drink until the trip was done. **[End Page 360]**

I promised not to drink until the trip was done,
 then modified that promise with a sip or two,
 and quickly went from saying “just the one”
 to losing count and pissing on my shoe
 outside a bar in some forsaken colony,
 where we put down for fuel and to break
 the tedium of one another's company;
 of course, Amelia did not partake
 of any alcoholic beverage
 but stayed behind to watch over the plane,
 striking poses in the silver fuselage
 of Deco goddess and Egyptian crane.
 Meanwhile, while I could almost barely think,
 I thumped the bar for one more thumping drink.

It humped the bar for one more thumping drink,
then cursed myself for spilling most of it

and called the bartender a goddamned fink
when he refused to cover the deficit

but cut me off, instead, showed me the door,
the midnight street without a single light,

and never mind the rain, the mangy cur
that nipped me as I stepped into the night,

my head bent low above my sodden shoes,
so sorry for myself I had to laugh

and sing a few lines of the Noonan Blues
into the shearing wind and the storm's wrath:

Wanted me a new life of harmony and joy,
but my new wife found Amelia too coy. **[End Page 361]**

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My new wife found Amelia too coy—
her hair combed as if tousled by the wind,
her dungarees and neckerchief a ploy
to understate her sex but remind men
there was a woman underneath those clothes.

“It’s just another kind of tease,” she said,
“the tomboy look, the freckles, and the pose
of innocence, the way she tips her head
and offers up that shy smile for the lens.
She pulls men in while pushing them away,
which is the heart of her allure, her siren’s
call across the drowning rocks where her kind plays.”

Scoffing at her foolish jealousy and fears,
I...

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NOONAN'S CROWN

NEAL BOWERS

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