



Lonely Eagles

BY MARILYN NELSON

for Daniel “Chappie” James, General USAF
and for the 332d Fighter Group

Being black in America
was the Original Catch,
so no one was surprised
by 22:
The segregated airstrips,
separate camps.
They did the jobs
they’d been trained to do.

Black ground crews kept them in the air;
black flight surgeons kept them alive;
the whole Group removed their headgear
when another pilot died.

They were known by their names:
“Ace” and “Lucky,”
“Sky-hawk Johnny,” “Mr. Death.”
And by their positions and planes.
Red Leader to Yellow Wing-man,
do you copy?

If you could find a fresh egg
you bought it and hid it

in your dopp-kit or your boot
until you could eat it alone.
On the night before a mission
you gave a buddy
your hiding-places
as solemnly
as a man dictating
his will.

*There's a chocolate bar
in my Bible;
my whiskey bottle
is inside my bedroll.*

In beat-up Flying Tigers
that had seen action in Burma,
they shot down three German jets.
They were the only outfit
in the American Air Corps
to sink a destroyer
with fighter planes.
Fighter planes with names
like "By Request."
Sometimes the radios
didn't even work.

They called themselves
"Hell from Heaven."
This Spookwaffe.
My father's old friends.

It was always
maximum effort:
A whole squadron
of brother-men

raced across the tarmac
and mounted their planes.

My tent-mate was a guy named Starks.
The funny thing about me and Starks
was that my air mattress leaked,
and Starks' didn't.
Every time we went up,
I gave my mattress to Starks
and put his on my cot.

One day we were strafing a train.
Strafing's bad news:
you have to fly so low and slow
you're a pretty clear target.
My other wing-man and I
exhausted our ammunition and got out.
I recognized Starks
by his red tail
and his rudder's trim-tabs.
He couldn't pull up his nose.
He dived into the train
and bought the farm.

I found his chocolate,
three eggs, and a full fifth
of his hoarded-up whiskey.
I used his mattress
for the rest of my tour.

It still bothers me, sometimes:
I was sleeping
on his breath.