

# The New Criterion

Poems February 1992

## Spitfire

by Leslie Norris

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*Flight Sergeant (Pilot) John Curtis Bevan, 1314667, serving with the Royal Air Force (Volunteer Reserve) 611 Squadron, died on 9 November 1943, age 21, and is buried in Plot 4, Row AA, Grave 17, in Longuenesse (St Omer) Souvenir Cemetery, France. . . .*

—excerpt from a letter from the Commonwealth War Commission

The Spitfire One  
is made by Vickers Armstrong  
in cities the three boys have not seen,  
Southampton, Winchester, Swindon.  
Each month in the library  
they search Flight's newest pages  
for images of its symmetry, perfect  
beyond eagles, thirty feet long.

Wearing incongruous floats  
it wins The Schneider Trophy,  
sweeping in tightest bends  
above a riptide  
breaking against The Needles.  
They speak its language,  
having learned by heart this rune:  
*one 1030-hp Rolls-Royce Merlin  
V12 liquid-cooled engine:  
maximum speed 355 mph,  
range three hundred and ninety-five miles.*  
But in their minds

its flight is silent.  
They imagine it through the air  
with their gliding hands.  
Their cycles race above the clouds.

They do not think of this:  
armament, *four 7.7-mm. machine-guns,*  
*two 20-mm. cannons,*  
not even as they grow  
into men's long bodies,  
manage their cracking voices,  
learn that innocence ends.

On a wide beach  
at the edge of Europe,  
the sun going down,  
they throw a football  
above their running shadows.  
As they twist and catch  
the sand is granular  
between their toes.

It is the last evening of peace.

The beach is dark as plums  
and heavy with water.

—*Leslie Norris*

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**Leslie Norris'** latest book is *Albert and the Angels* (Farras, Straus & Giroux).

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