

The background of the cover is a reproduction of Vincent van Gogh's painting 'The Potato Eaters'. It depicts a man in a blue shirt and a brown hat kneeling on the floor, gesturing with his hands towards a woman and a young child. The woman is standing on the right, wearing a blue dress and a headscarf, and the child is in a white dress. The scene is set in a rustic interior with a wooden table and a window in the background. The painting is characterized by its thick, expressive brushstrokes and a somber, earthy color palette.

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Middlesex: *a literary journal*

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Cover:
Vincent Van Gogh, *First Steps* (1890)

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CARLOTTA

Oh, how she wished her father
Had held her before he died;
Just her mother's belly away from him,
And only a month from her birth;
And she resented how Melville
Had usurped him for his poem,
Erasing the last summer of his life
For the sake of drama,
As though the author were God,
And the measure of all things.
Just some black ink spilled from
The writer's pen and he was gone,
The father she came so close to knowing-
Ars gratia gratis.

She knew from her mother how much
They had loved one another that summer,
How alive they had been, heart to heart,
Making love in the tent, while the life
They had made lay between them.
We live in the need for
One another's touch,
Not in the hope that ink squibs
Should have souls:
"My poor wife," he had said,
"I'm afraid this will kill her,"
Lying on the floor at Belle Grove,
His spine shot away, divorced from touch,
Slipping by the hour into mere thought;

And her mother drifting about the house,
Holding the little girl tightly in her arms,
Balanced between this world and the next,
In the black ink of her widow's dress.

PICKETT'S SWORD

*"Never say you know the last word about any human heart."
- Henry James*

As Pickett's wife imagined him,
A graceful knight of chivalry,
He brandished it aloft
And pointed toward the Ridge,
Excalibur for men in gray,
When conquest was still possible,
A cherished blade that disappeared
Like Morning Mist in Avalon,¹
Clutched to a dying Indian's chest
A thousand miles away,
The parting proof of a father's love,
Which dolphin-like, revealed its shape
Above the element he thrived in.

And we in turn imagine her,
The widow, Sallie Pickett,
With her speeches and her books,
The relentless chronicler of a myth
Soaked in the fragrance of magnolias,
The faithful keeper of a sovran shrine,
A fragile, white-haired woman
Lost among old daguerreotypes
And bolts of velvet and silk,
A cut flower on its last day.
But we live in the memory of

¹ The translated name of George Pickett's young Haida Indian wife, who died shortly after giving birth to their son, Jimmy. Her grave has never been found. Pickett's battle sword disappeared on the day of Jimmy's funeral.

One another's gaze,
And the little boy's face
Had preyed on George's heart.
She is indeed the Lady of the Lake,
Summoned by her husband
To the surface of her soul,
To carry out his dying wish
And give his orphaned son the sword.
Praise her; when she comes to your town,
To make her speech for the Lost Cause,
Stand up and cheer; sing Dixie with her.

THE PROPERTIES OF GLASS

When they were mustered into line,
She took home the glass from which
He drank while he held her hand,
But she could not bear to wipe it clean,
And kept it in the window by the sink,
Where from time to time she would hold it up
And study its frozen bubbles and
Its blemishes, the traces of the breath
Which brought the glass to life.
And then, holding it up in the light,
She would look toward the sun
And the garden and the deep blue air.
In the glittering circumference of the glass,
She could feel her husband's touch
In the maker's crystal breath.

STARLINGS

A handful of starlings, a bunch,
Fly like confused thoughts,
Lost in the vastness of skies.
Like a beating heart they fly—
Close in, detach,
A black and white batch.

SISTER GULL

My sea gull sister, a burst of birth,
flies by my north window, heavy/winged,
forty-nine yards from sand and waves—
struggles south down Bath Avenue, looking sideways
at my stone building on the verge of the sea.

ALBATROSS

The albatross
Called my name last night in deepest black
the ocean dark over a silent moon
and said the ship will burn in two
while Venus watches cold and distant
awaiting end to its own song as will Pluto and Jupiter
when their spinning ends.
And emptiness will rub against itself
and start all life anew

LOVE LETTER TO THE WORLD

The kindness of strangers,
The purity of children,
Loyalty of a brother,
Care of a mother;
The same nature in which
The trees perform their leaves,
The wind sings a breeze,
The sea kisses shore:
All a knock at the door
With sound only heard by the soul.
The touch of love,
Smile of a day,
One-way mirror
That keeps my soul awake
Sent by the Spirit:
Messages, most overseas,
But I have found
The key underneath.

WILSON: A VOLLEYBALL LOVE STORY

My Dearest Wilson,

As a little girl, I dreamed about feeling the passion that I have for you. I still remember the first day that I saw you in person. You were playing in a nearby park with a group of mutual friends. When I watched you, I felt a warmth run through my body. I think it was love at first sight. I went home that night and wrote about you. I was determined to have you for myself.

Time passed and I still could not have you. My family thought that you weren't right for me. I am so sorry that I let them choose someone else for me. The others did not even compare to how I feel about you.

Every time I am with you, we experience different adventures. If I hadn't found you I would have continued monotonous partnerships. You are extraordinary. Time with you is a rollercoaster. The highs make me feel like a queen while the lows humble me. Sometimes, our encounters are short, and I want to devote more effort to be with you. Every ounce of energy is worth it just to have you in my arms. I will lay myself out if it means I can bring you up.

I love when my friends set up our rendezvous, so I can do what I want with you. We may cross some lines with the things we do, but you never hold that against me. We start over and try something even better.

My love, I will do anything to have one minute with you. As much as I love sharing you, I desire remote time with you involving a wall and cradling you with my hands. I have picked up a few new skills and I would love to try them out the next time I am with you.

Until next time,

Lappalou

ABC POEM

A butterfly coaxes
diamond eclipses, forever
grasping haunted illusions
just keep love, lilting
miraculous nature
opalescent pine
question roses sleeping
to understand velvet wings
young zenith
-lily

ELECTRIC BLUE

Released from the mortal spiral
The paths noble
The ones of the sun
The night, omniscient
and the day has not yet begun
Empty us, free us, of these mortal days
Take the sunsets, sculpted in clay
Thieves with leaves, beside the bay
Souls glowing
yet trapped within an empty sight
Up on trials, free the cross
However grateful,
when all was lost.
Release us from these earthly days,
emptiness surpassed,
that flies away.
Written into scripts
that highlight the depths
of the bright transparencies
of contrasting yin & yang
cradled in the heavens' dreams
yet not redeemed
the shadows of the hidden truths
reminds one of electric blue.

NIGHTINGALE

A common light
May not possess
but dreaming might
give me rest
from the plights
the wheels turning
the arrows burning
sun scorched roses
black ice frozen
do you know,
as if to go,
escape into
the midnight blue dream
rising cup, and empty steam
a disruption in a heart shone
alone
and wondering why
it is only
the nightingale who cries,
and only the faun
who is gifted
the new dawn

BUTTERFLY NIGHT

The jade rain,
the opal moon,
oh this butterfly night!
Dusk fleets between times,
a forever twilight-
black-tinged turquoise starlight,
turns like dust into day,
just for a second to release its wings,
and as always,
it flies away.

NEW TOMORROW

The woe
the flow of the forgotten world
pisces twins spiraling above the earth,
a rising ground of sacred sound,
dwindling down,
falling beneath
the tilted crown
the searing pyre of abandoned fire
embers sparked; rusted romance.
Hand in hand, we danced thereafter
aching hearts of love and laughter,
until your voice was but a whisper,
an ancient song, and then he kissed her.
These tales of dust rain upon the land,
that past aurora dawn, gone away,
sorrows turned into yesterdays,
waking death upon the spirit,
the reign of blood, humanity fears this,
lost in each blended night, striving each day,
in each last rite.
Aching tales of love gone and borrowed,
born into the new tomorrow.

SUMMER GLORIES

The clouds parting
To reveal the
Vast blue horizon.
The intense heat
Glaring onto us from
The shining super star.
The once empty beaches
And parks are filled with
A myriad of human beings.
These are the
Signs of summer.
The most treasured time
Of the year.
We walk down the
Forest path,
Taking in all of
Nature's beauty in its
Purest form.
We drive down the parkway
And blast songs from our phones,
Filling the freeway with my joyful noise
Without a care in the world.
And at night, we dance along with the twinkling
Stars before we sit on the soft Earth.
Our eyes focused on the explosions of colors
As hundreds of fireworks soar into
The night sky.
Our eyes met for just a moment
And we smile because we

Already know the truth.
It doesn't matter what we do
Because the time we've spent together
Is what matters most.

GAVRILO PRINCIP

Princip, little
Gavro, a man as low
as we, wagging
his finger like
a lame God
in Sarajevo's Franz
Joseph Street, laid
the great Archduke
in his grave, piercing
the imperial side
and neck. The royal
flesh, like any fisherfolk's,
drinks in lead.
The duchess, too,
Gavro's regret, pitched
forward, ears numb
to the Archduke's
last command. "Soferl,
Soferl, don't die. Live
for my children."

Blood on the Archduke's mouth.
blood on the collar,
trails of blood on the Russian snow,
pools in the French countryside.
And the blackbirds flew
up in wild gyres to the June sky.
What might one divine
from a flight of birds? Kalkhus,
was there a failure of hecatombs
or vows? Kalkhus, visionary
of hell, did you foresee

calamity in the terrible
gray eyes of Athena—and
remember that her promises
to Achilles were never kept?

Oh, little Gavro, no
child of his majesty
but our new Ares, fit
to cut the crown's
jugular and set
the world to war.
Like some diminutive
Milos Obilic, Serb
assassin who slew
the swart Sultan
in the field of
blackbirds, comes
Gavro, dreamy
ascetic, draining
cups of blood-dark
coffee in Belgrade
cafes, waiting for
weapons, meeting
with schoolboys
like himself, hoping
for glory, for history
to come to him,
seductively as Aphrodite
to Anchises. Gavro,
you were living
out a life in legends
the wise call crazy,
but your dream
broke the world.

But perhaps the
world of gold
braid and sabers

was just a Fabergé
egg ready to hatch
a new Goliath. Perhaps
your lucky lead
did nothing to shatter
a shell only too ready
to shatter on its own.

But to some you are a hero.
I hear the singing of a saw on bone.
Peasant Princip, born
in the rich green valley
below Dinara's height
in Bosnia, long your homeland,
which hoped to haul itself like
cordwood into the new world.

Once the Turkish boots
were lifted, it was
the Austrians' turn
to step on the kmets' necks,
to keep the rebellious
Zadrugas down. The Princip,
crafty border ruffians, would wait
to ambush brigands in
the high Western woods.

Todor, the legendary
headman of the Princip
tribe, would ride his
large white horse through
villages and terrorize
the Catholic girls—big
boned, brazen Todor
of the wide shoulders,
astride the stallion
in his colorful native
clothes, peacock feathers

jouncing in his cap and
a silver breastplate
riding lightly on
his form. If any objected
to his thievery, his
short musket made
short reply and then
the knife blade poured
from out the gaily
colored cummerbund
to pluck out an eye,
a grisly trophy to display
among friends, a joke
to tell between big
gulps of rich
Dalmatian wine.

RUPERT BROOKE, 1914

Brooke, with all the small anxieties
of the young, made within a busy bollox,
though without he seemed serene
as any sun god, lolling, white-collared,
on Cambridge lawns.

His pagan soul brooked no deities.
Beautiful as the bees and sweet as their
honey, the whole—from midge to star—
had no necessary meaning but what
a human thought might lend. We
were the little gods, he mused,
his nose tucked in Webster and Donne
before turning to the soft abrasions
of an English sun.

There was such
a thing as love, but whither
to find it? Its wisps always
seemed elusive. No
sooner might he recall
the Munich nights with Ka
then the cruel smoke of dreams
would dissipate at the mind's
febrile touch.

He knew this much:
The love of a moment outweighed
an eternity of insensate time.

But all this was before
the war and the war
was not yet.

That thundering
constricted every sundial,
every clock and calendar.
“It’s the biggest thing in
your seventy years,” he breathed.
“If Armageddon is on, one
should be there,” he gushed,
particularly the poets,
sick as all get out
for any smash-up.

How should the beautiful
offer themselves to war?
The bowman, Apollo
was deathless—not so
the masquerader, Philoctetes,
his suppurating wound still coiled
below the sun-shaped surface
of a fair-haired Fabian. Yet,
how should the lovely
and young offer themselves:
covered in ink or blood?
“It’s a rotten trade, war
correspondent, when decent
folk—factory hands, engravers,
milkmen, laborers, and roustabout
boys clean from the pub—
are offering their lives.”

It must be, he vowed,
to fight—anything less—
an immorality: Shoot or be shot
and “To hell with the Prooshians!”

Even as the gray German
line drew hell as close
as Cambrai, the real war
lay far to the East,
something elemental, ill-
understood by anyone of
English blood or tongue—
a bird's shadow on a marble
wall, a shroud of hanging
bats deep under the calm
surface of blue landscape.

He connived a sub-lieutenancy
in the Royal Naval Volunteer
Reserve—Churchill's boys,
magic dust to throw
in the enemy's eyes.

To war! But first, Apollo,
battle-girded, slumped in
his chair at lunch
with the First Lord
and Eddie Marsh.

“The northern ports, Dunkirk
to Havre, must be held,”
said Churchill, expending lives
over tea and crumpets.
“What a lovely marmalade!”

In training camp Brooke admired
Grecian bodies, naked men, bathing
in the autumn sun and marked
the shadowmen limned in
the yellow glow of tent lights
as the bugler from a distance
blew “Lights Out.”

Brooke and
the Ansons broke camp
and marched through
the Kentish countryside
to Dover as the band played
music-hall tunes. Dover folk
tossed apples and cheered.
The girls kissed them
and wept for the approach
of what was ominous.
To France: an ode
with light artillery.

Amid waving throngs, his life
seemed “a flash between darkneses.”

They sailed that night
over the dark rolling Channel.
Sleek-hulled, the ship lay off
Dunkirk at dawn, like Odysseus' craft,
choked with offerings,
riding the tide near Khryse.

As if from Athena's very
lips, word came: “We're bound
for Antwerp by train.”

He thought then of Cathleen, her
gentle fingertips and black silken
hair, for whom there were to be
other lives—film and television—
things unimagined as the train
clacked through the Belgian
landscape. He recalled the vague
goodbyes—stupidities of war—
and considered how the mind makes
scales to weigh its chances.
Did Odysseus ask such questions
as he set out from Ithaca?
“Suppose I shall not
see you again, Cathleen . . .”
He looked at the words,
then out upon the passing
fields of Flanders.

GENRE AND STYLE AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE IN *DON QUIXOTE* AND *JOURNEY TO THE WEST*

The most remarkable aspect of any comparison between Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Wu Cheng-En's *Journey to the West* is that, despite emerging from two very different cultures, and notwithstanding their rough contemporality, the two works share far more similarities than differences in terms of their respective styles, the characteristics of their protagonists and sidekicks, literary unorthodoxy, and a more general unorthodoxy aimed squarely at the social institutions and norms of their cultures. Distinguishing between these different factors is necessary for the purpose of analysis, but in fact all operate in unison to produce the overall impression that, through *Quixote* and *Journey*, each author offers entirely original works which by virtue of their originality—how they are original—is synonymous with their challenge to the literary and social status quo.

A reasonable starting point for comparison is to note how each work is stylistically unique. Both bucked the literary trends of their time by drawing on, recasting, or blending different genres; and both drew on the past to do so. *Journey* was written in vernacular Chinese (when it was unfashionable) and demonstrates a fantastic—in every sense—eclecticism whereby folktale, myth, poetry, the pastoral, and the pilgrimage tale were interwoven, moving from the purely mythological to the pilgrimage after Monkey's release from the Mountain by his future master Sanzang (the mythological remains a constant, however). *Quixote* is not nearly as profuse in this sense, but nonetheless invokes the very chivalric romances and epic structures ostensibly mocked and presented in the form—unique then--of a novel.

Furthermore, the prosaic and idealistic or imaginative are juxtaposed in both novels, generating the bulk of each work's comedic effect. In *Journey*, the most fantastical and typically reverent elements are delivered, through Monkey and Pig, in the most pedestrian, sometimes vulgar ways. Monkey's matter-of-fact, nonchalant, irreverent tone, more that of a naïve yet charged teenager than an epic hero (or pilgrim),

undercuts the thematic majesty of Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, folktales, and mythologies. How else can we understand it when a supernatural monkey birthed from magic stone upbraids an exiled marshal monster Buddhist lusting after flesh and lucre with “Stop trying to cover up, blockhead...you’ve already call her ‘mother’ umpteen times” (Cheng-En 340). *Quixote* follows an inverse pattern of the same kind: the grittily real is the backdrop against which the fantastical elements are played, entirely through the willful imagination of the titular character; and for the same reason—because of the dramatic juxtaposition—his perceptions and interpretations and the actions borne from them are hilariously incongruent.

Yet the comedy driven by these juxtapositions of the profane and the sacred are in both works either incidentally or pointedly the vehicles for criticizing the dominant social structures and conventions attaching to them. Cheng-en uses the historical account of a 7th century monk as the inspiration of Sanzang; Cervantes uses the chivalric codes and romances from which they are drawn to inform Don Quixote (as well as the Knight of the Grove/Mirrors, the barber, the curate, and other knowledgeable wits). Both authors manipulate and apply these resources to weapons of critique against religion, the commercial, and civil society. *Journey’s* gods are bureaucrats (e.g., “The Department of Thunder”) whom Monkey successfully challenges, upends, torments, and generally ravages. While Don Quixote does not operate within the supernatural context allowing for the same magnitude of destruction, he launches his energies against the friars, tavern owners, and windmills in the name of *real* justice; for as he tells Panza, knights-errant are “God’s ministers on earth and the arms by which his justice is done therein” (Cervantes chap. 13). In this light, the cudgel or the lance (and helmets, armor, skimpy nags) assume new symbolic meaning.

It is vital to note that Don Quixote is no less successful than Monkey in achieving his goal; and that, as with Monkey, this goal is no less than reforming society. Cervantes’ continually mocking tone towards Don Quixote, and the latter’s obvious mishaps and unintended consequences (e.g., Andrew gets doubly lashed as a result of the Don’s interjection), does not detract from the fact that others succumb to his will and conform, even if in jest, to the world he creates. In innkeeper may be “as crafty a thief as Cacus,” but he ultimately devises an ad hoc ceremony

to “knight” Don Quixote and the prostitutes *become* maidens in the same episode. The curate and barber, too, impart as much gravitas to Don Quixote’s books as he does, minus the wholesale revolution of perception. This conformity to Don Quixote is not merely “in jest,” most notably when we discover that the Knight of Mirrors has been sent to quell Quixote on his own terms; that is, through the full adoption of his vision. Furthermore, the Knight appears to truly absorb and integrate that vision, not merely cater to it.

Similarly, the honorific demanded by and granted to Monkey (“Great Sage Equal to Heaven”) may have begun as an act of appeasement; but humoring and reality blur convincingly in Monkey’s favor in light of the many exploits suggesting he is, indeed, equal to Heaven. In every contest save one, Monkey emerges as the victor, despite initial dismissive jibes usually indicating in one way or another that he’s simply a dirty monkey and upstart (the latter of which is true). The exception of course in a sense—as far as *Journey* goes—proves the rule, more specifically, that the rule is spiritual or essentially, not conventional and (bureaucratic) in form. Here, the challenge presented by Monkey and Don Quixote parallel each other: both launch impressive attacks against the institutional authorities perceived by each to lack the moral foundation upon which they otherwise cannot be justified. Irony, inversion, the lies that reveal the truth—these are the basic literary and linguistic forms and feints used by the authors to drive home their respective critiques.

Given the cultural differences between Cheng-En and Cervantes, one is astonished not only that their works were unique in their time, but that they were unique in strikingly similar ways: both invoke and manipulate genres and conventions to generate critique (and hilarity) through the conduit of extraordinarily willful underdogs who succeed in challenging the institutions surrounding them. In short, both authors unconventionally attack the conventional with conventionality reorganized to that end. The similarities between Panza and Pig are not lost on the reader, as well: they are comic relief infused with real insight and self-determination, each with a foot in the material and commonplace world; another in an idealistic one transcending the former. Transcendence is ultimately the highly individualistic undertaking of both Monkey and Don Quixote. Though Quixote is

more sharply defined in such terms, Monkey's desire for immortality to infinitely experience the world and the power he wields in it are finally a petition for personal meaning which, it seems Cheng-En advocates, is found in the Buddhistic tradition.

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BREAKFAST TABLE

I woke up one morning
And Jesus was sitting at my breakfast table.
I didn't know why he was there,
I didn't invite him.
I asked if he wanted some scrambled eggs or coffee.
He said he didn't eat eggs and wondered
if I had any ancient grains, like farro or einkorn.
I laughed and said I thought
the term "ancient grains" was made up by some
marketing gurus in a scheme to sell
health foods to trendy young mothers.
I told him I had horseradish in the cupboard
and wasn't that like eating bitter herbs at a Seder
and I could make him a Bloody Mary.
And he said "That'll do. That'll do."

DOG DAYS

Let's have a summer to remember —
like people sometimes say...

Let's get tanned like new leather
travel the states
looking for the biggest ball of twine
complaining about the broken air conditioner
though you actually don't mind.

Let's stay in, instead —
let's be hermits —
we'll have a two-man book club
read Wolfe and Mailer and Didion
we'll spend days in our underwear
rolling around in literature,
the pages sticking to our sweat,
flies to fly paper, ants to the picnic.

Let's celebrate Christmas in July
and sing Bing Crosby tunes
to annoy the neighbors
What can they do?
It's a condo, so as long as they treat
the common area like it's their garage
we can sing *Do You Hear What I Hear?*
when the fireworks start.

Let's pick up ridiculous hobbies
like soap carving or drum lessons
and when the music teacher asks
What are your intentions?
let's laugh and not answer.

In the middle of the night
when we can't sleep
let's plan a family we never intend to have
give our children names like Benicio and Cricket
and tell them about the time we drove to the Gulf
drank margaritas and fly tails
salt sticking to our tongues as we laughed and kissed
smoked hand-rolled cigarettes as we watched the sun set
hot sand burning our soles
our souls half empty, half full.

TASTING THE PACIFIC

It took me 21 years to get to the West Coast
Swore I would get there, pinky-swearing a promise
Inched my way closer over the years -
Moved to Texas at one point
Farther west than I'd ever been
Weird weather in Texas, I tell ya -
Failure sent me packing back to New Jersey
Had to make due with the Atlantic again

For 21 years I've listened to birdsong
I wrote a few entries in the Book of Woe
Traveled the Eastern Seaboard like I owned it
Dug out of a blizzard in Stowe
Had the occasional snowball fight
Smoothed aloe on blistering skin on Marco Island
Kept a cool head when temps read one-o-two
But always dreamed of California,
Strange dreams in gold and green
When I got there - when I got there! -
It was casual Friday every day, jeans and flip-flops
No attitude, just tie-dye spring and rolling fog
Houses piled high on mountainsides
Jagged cuts on jagged roads
Zen bread baked by Buddhist philosophy
Sour dough in my sour mouth
No desire for the dharma talk and tea
Too much, too much of all that wonder

But when I tasted the tender Pacific
Bent down and scooped the sea
Licked my palm to slurp and eat

Salty dribble on my laughing chin, my lips an O
I'd never drank anything so cold, so Pacific
I extended my briny fingers to you
And vowed to return.

ROSES

I want roses—
dozens and dozens and dozens.
No baby's breath, no leafy green filler.
Just roses and roses,
red heads packed tight like angry sisters.
Don't cut off the thorns—
Leave us alone, they remind me.
This beauty hurts,
we are wise and dying,
our goblets filled with fragrant wine.
From the box to the vase,
I will trim the tender stems with
a bead of blood on my thumb,
water dripping from leathery wounds.
Or maybe I'll scatter the petals
just to hear the pop as they're ripped
from the calyx and fall to the bed.
I hold my thumb to my mouth and suck.

WHAT IS IT LIKE TO MAKE LOVE TO GWEN STEFANI?

What is it like to make love to Gwen Stefani?

Does she wear a ratty Rolling Stones t-shirt and her ex's boxers as pajamas?

Red-hot lingerie with lace and buckles and just enough satin?

Does she wear makeup to bed — red MAC lipstick in Ruby Woo
that never rubs off onto the pillowcase?

Does she giggle when she slides under the clean bleached sheets at the hotel,

holding her arms out, beckoning you to come closer?

Or does she turn her back to you so her strong, alabaster spine
ripples like a fish swimming in milk?

Does she have moles and old scars and stretch marks? Probably not.

Does she roll like a pearl between your fingers, leaving behind
iridescence on your wet thumbs?

When she arches her back, does her ceramic skin splinter
into a spiderweb of tiny lines?

Does she need to be put back together again like Humpty Dumpty
after the humping?

Is she too high maintenance? Just a china doll in lamb's clothing?

No doubt.

IGUANA



SNAIL



THE CHURCH

Endless rolling treeless terrain
Through it a winding dirt road.
Alongside a small abandoned church
Alone long forgotten weather-worn
Tired

Parishioners sang hymns here
Studied scripture and offered prayers.
Weddings baptisms eulogies
Gone now all gone
But who and when?

Questions
But no answers

**Special thanks to Champ Atlee and Mathew Spano ("Desert Find")*



SOMETHING HAPPENED

English 2 was the second semester of English 1-2, an introductory course with predominantly freshman students.

Our instructor for the course was Associate Professor John O'Neill, of medium build in his late 40's with dark straight-combed hair and a ruddy complexion. He was always punctual and always meticulously dressed in a suit and tie—never a sport jacket.

Early in the semester we read *The Informer*, a dark foreboding novel by the Irish writer Liam O'Flaherty. At one point in a class discussion of the novel, without introduction, Mr. O'Neill sang, in a husky tenor voice, a plaintive Irish ballad. The students in the class neither snickered nor even smiled. The song was appropriate to the moment and enriched our understanding of the work.

Later in the semester we studied Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises*. One afternoon during that unit, I recall Professor O'Neill reading aloud some passages from the book describing Jake's and Bill's fishing expedition to the Irati River:

It was a beech wood and the trees were very old. Their roots bulked above the ground and the branches were twisted. We walked on the road between the thick trunks of the old beeches and the sunlight came through the leaves in light patches on the grass. The trees were big, and the foliage was thick but it was not gloomy. There was no undergrowth, only the smooth grass, very green and fresh, and the big gray trees well spaced as though it were a park.

I found the two wine-bottles in the pack, and carried them up the road to where the water of a spring flowed out of an iron pipe. There was a board over the spring and I lifted it and, knocking the corks firmly into the bottles, lowered them down into the water. It was so cold my hand and wrist felt numbed. I put back the slab of wood, and hoped nobody would find the wine.

When he finished reading, something had happened for me. There was a dawning, a new and unexpected perspective. Here were living pictures painted with words, just words—words carefully chosen and thoughtfully and skillfully arranged.

It was an epiphany.

Thank you Ernest Hemingway.

Thank you Professor O'Neill.

Thank you.

THE FRENEAUS IN FREEHOLD

By the time Philip Freneau moved to Freehold, New Jersey, in 1826, he was little more than a relic from America's Revolutionary past. Scorned by critics of a new school of American poetry and hard-pressed to make a living, the "Poet of the Revolution" was compelled to take up residence at a farmhouse that had once belonged to his brother-in-law Denise Forman on what is now Kosloski Road. When Forman died in 1822, the house had come into the possession of Freneau's wife, Eleanor, who also received some nearby farmland from her brother Samuel. Here, the family hoped to make a go of it.

A series of disasters had precipitated Freneau's move to Freehold, beginning with an 1818 fire that destroyed his family home at Mount Pleasant in what is now the Freneau section of Matawan. Immediately after the fire, the Freneaus, with only the clothes on their backs, moved to a house under construction near the old homestead, but the poor profits of the farm at Mount Pleasant and Philip's inability to make money from his writing had plunged the family into poverty. For lodgings and a living, Freneau was now dependent on his wife. According to the conventional story, this was a double humiliation to Freneau because his relationship with his wife was already strained. Freneau biographer Philip M. Marsh, who accepts this story, maintains that Eleanor could not understand why anyone would pursue a career that brought little or no monetary reward. Hence, while Freneau fretted over the poems he sent to local newspapers, she grew impatient.

If Marsh is to be believed, the Freneaus' relationship had changed significantly from the days when Philip had courted the comely Eleanor Forman with poems such as "Lines Written at Sea, Addressed to Miss _____ of New Jersey," in which he lamented:

As near your shores I spread my weary sail,
From bar to bar, from cape to cape I stray,
From you still absent, still too far away:
What shall repay me for these weeks of pain,
These weeks of absence on this restless main.

Eleanor had then represented to Freneau the hopefulness of spring, in a life that had often seemed to him a lonely and perpetual winter, as he explained just before their marriage in “Stanzas Written at Baltimore, in Maryland, January 1789.”

Now fetter'd fast in icy fields
In vain I loose the sleeping sail;
The frozen wave no longer yields
And useless blows the favouring gale.
Yet still in hopes of April showers
And breezes moist with morning dew,
I pass the lingering lazy hours
Reflecting on the spring—and you.

Eleanor, it is said, had responded to him in verses of her own. But by the 1820s, in their straightened circumstances, it fell on her to manage the farm, which, in spite of her efforts, provided an insufficient income for the family.

Marsh leaves the impression that Eleanor's lack of appreciation for Freneau's literary attainments stemmed from her upbringing, having been raised as she was in the rural backwater of Monmouth County. He remarks that “her letters reveal only a practical, unimaginative mind, incapable of understanding a creative spirit, out of sympathy with any activity at the expense of making ends meet.” But Marsh doesn't say to which letters he is referring (most of her correspondence and all of her poems went up in flames when the old house burned) and his description does not seem to square with what little information we have of Eleanor. One of her few surviving letters, written from Mount Pleasant in April 1795 to her brother Samuel, demonstrates that she was perfectly literate and possessed a sound education for a woman, or even for a man, during this period. Moreover, she mentions to Samuel, who had moved to a “new Country” in upstate New York, that she found the books in the well-stocked library at the Freneau manse to be, along with her “two little girls,” her “chief comforters.” “I wish it was in my power,” she wrote, referring to the books, “to send you out so good a collection as we have here.” In this same letter, she expresses the hope that Samuel will regain some of his “affluence” but also bemoans the fact that “wealth has great influence on the judgment of little minds”

and declares that she is “determined to fortify [her own] mind against such mercenary creatures.”

A memorial description of Mrs. Freneau, which one of her daughters jotted down in a notebook, also belies Marsh’s unflattering portrait. “Mrs. Freneau,” the unnamed daughter writes sans punctuation, “was remarked for her genteel Lady like manners amiable disposition a finely informed mind affable sprightly in her conversation and few handsomer women even at the advanced age of 87.” So it was that Mrs. Freneau, even if we make allowance for some partiality on the part of her daughter, was no uneducated bumpkin but someone who could hold her own with her Princeton-educated husband. Oddly, though, even as early as 1795, she did not number Philip, who was living with the family at Mount Pleasant at the time, among her “chief comforters,” though she sent Samuel Philip’s “love” nonetheless. But it is also telling that when she mentions her husband in the letter, she expresses no dissatisfaction or ill-will toward him at all.

Be that as it may, by the time the family moved to Freehold more than thirty years later, it was undoubtedly Eleanor who provided for Freneau through her own family inheritance, and perhaps she did evince some resentment for her husband’s failure to contribute much to the household budget, but that doesn’t mean she didn’t appreciate his literary attainments. The irony is that back in the late 1780s, when he had made good money as a sea captain, it was Freneau himself, writing under the pseudonym Robert Slender, who had lampooned the treatment writers received in the new United States and suggested they take up more lucrative pursuits. “Authors,” he wrote, “(such I mean as are not possessed of fortunes) are at present considered as the dregs of the community: their situation and prospects are truly humiliating.” He then joked that “Few authors in any country are rich, because a man must first be reduced to a state of penury before he will commence author.” He also opined that “it is far more honorable to be a good bricklayer or a skilful weaver than an indifferent poet.” Freneau might not have been an indifferent poet (though he had written a good deal of popular doggerel and ephemeral political verse), but it is clear that his literary work had not led to financial security.

By the time he came to reside in Freehold, the poet was past age seventy and had long given up his career at sea. His increasing poverty

forced him to work on the county roads. It may seem that he would have been past the age where he could manage such physical labor. But contemporary descriptions of him mention his muscular physique and his firm step, in spite of a bullet still lodged in his knee, the result of a Revolutionary War wound. Age, though, had given him a slight stoop and dark gray hair, and his dark gray, intelligent eyes were now set in deep sockets. He is said to have dressed in outmoded clothes and constantly wore a cocked hat, which had been popular in Revolutionary days. His demeanor was pensive, and though he was enthusiastic in his discussion of political topics, he was known to be, like his wife, a pleasant conversationalist who showed in person little of the vituperation of his writings.

The physician John W. Francis, who met Freneau about this time, remarked that “his courteous manner, and his general bearing won admiration with all parties.” Freneau sometimes visited New York, where he met with Francis and on one occasion with the Knickerbocker poet Gulian Verplanck. Francis said Freneau was “tolerant, frank in expression” and “highly cultivated in classical knowledge” but in terms of dress “might have passed for a farmer.”

In spite of having fallen on difficult times, which were certainly reflected in his dress and in the “traces of care” Francis observed in his face, Freneau was not without some resources of his own. He was able, for instance, to supplement his income from time to time by selling parcels of his Mount Pleasant estate, and according to local tradition, he plied a tinker’s trade, fixing clocks and doing odd jobs for neighbors. But these same neighbors, most of whom were hard-working, honest farmers, apparently had little sympathy for the poet as a poet. Literary pursuits seemed to them without much merit, and when he was not engaged in physical labor, his neighbors took him to be lazy and indolent. But what little evidence there is suggests that Freneau bore his financial challenges and the whispered criticisms that may have come his way with equanimity. A year after his move to Freehold, his sister Mary described him as “altho’ an old, a happy man.”

Tradition has it that some of the countryfolk began to whisper that Freneau had become addicted to drink, and his biographers generally agree that he enjoyed walking into town in the evenings for a few glasses of wine and some conversation at the general store. Few seemed to remember his services to the country— that he had received the bullet

in his knee while on duty in the Navesink Hills with the Monmouth Militia during the Revolution, or that at great cost to himself, both financially and in terms of his reputation, he had been an unwavering champion of the sovereignty of the people, of the natural rights of man, of free speech, and of freedom of religion. His intrepidity in support of these causes, at a time when many prominent men were abandoning them in order to pursue power and profit, led Jefferson to remark that Freneau's advocacy as editor of the widely distributed *National Gazette* had indeed "saved the constitution."

Freneau also supported other causes, such as the emancipation of slaves and the extension of natural rights to the Indians, to which his neighbors in Monmouth County were likely not amenable. Freneau's father had bought slaves to work the farm at Mount Pleasant, and after his father's death, Freneau's mother, Agnes, had married James Kearny, the son of one of the largest slaveholders in Monmouth County. As a result, Freneau had grown up in a family and in a local society in which slaveholding was not unusual. But he seems to have developed an aversion to the peculiar institution at least as early as 1784 when he visited Jamaica with its many sugar plantations. The experience prompted him to compose the poem "The Island Field Negro," published in Philadelphia in 1792, in which he exposed the horrors of slavery on a typical sugar plantation. He minced no words:

Here whips on whips excite a thousand fears,
And mingled howlings vibrate on my ears;

Why were they brought from Ebo's sultry waste
To see the plenty that they must not taste?
Food which they cannot buy, and dare not steal,
Yams and potatoes—many a scanty meal!
One with a gibbet wakes his negro's fears,
One to the wind-mill nails him by the ears;
One keeps his slave in dismal dens unfed,
One puts the wretch in pickle, ere he's dead;
This, to a tree suspends him by the thumbs,
That from his table grudges even the crumbs!

O'er yon' rough hills a tribe of females go,
Each with her gourd, her infant, and her hoe,

Scorch'd by a sun, that has no mercy here,
Driven by a devil, that men call overseer;
In chains twelve wretches to their labour haste,
Thrice twelve I see with iron collars grac'd;

Who would your wealth on terms like these possess,
Where all we see is pregnant with distress,
Angola's natives, flogg'd by hireling hands,
And toil's hard product shipp'd to foreign lands?

It was a damning indictment of slavery in general, for which the horrific details of his description provide ample evidence. But it was also a description of slavery, not as it was in the United States, but in a British colony. So, the poem helped to heap further scorn on the British, whom Freneau saw as the chief enemies of liberty worldwide. It is worth mentioning, though, that at the end of the poem, Freneau notes that West Africans brought in bondage to the Americas longed for freedom, just as did the rest of humanity, and that when they arrived in Jamaica, those who chaffed the most under the slave regime would “pine, and languish to be free” and finally arrange to escape by climbing the “tall cliffs of the Ligancee” mountains. “The Island Field Negro” was perhaps Freneau’s first and most telling attack on slavery. But during the course of his career, his dedication to human liberty made him less and less tolerant of slavery in any form. When his mother died in 1816, Freneau is said to have manumitted the slaves he inherited, and those who were too old and infirm to provide for themselves simply stayed on with the family and made the move to Freehold with him.

Although he had been America’s foremost poet during the Revolutionary and Constitutional eras, Freneau’s poetic style had gone out of fashion by the mid-1820s. Bryant, Whittier, and others of the new school had superseded him. As early as 1818, Bryant dismissively referred to Freneau as “a writer of inferior verse,” whose poems, “abounding with allusions to passing events, which is perhaps their chief merit, attracted in their time considerable attention.” As Freneau’s biographer Lewis Leary has pointed out, it appears that Bryant did not even realize Freneau was still living.

On June 30, 1827, while he was residing at Freehold, Freneau’s last known published work appeared in the Trenton-based newspaper *The*

True American. Entitled “Lines, (Anniversary forty-ninth,) On the Battle of Monmouth and subsequent retreat of Sir Henry Clinton—June 28, 29 & 30th, 1778,” it recounts details of the fighting near Freehold and touches on the changes that had overtaken Monmouth County since, namely that it had gone from a sacred venue of the heroic struggle for liberty to a peaceful rural retreat. Freneau, who had arrived home at Mount Pleasant just after the battle, had identified himself as a writer with those stirring events, and this late poem registers a sense of nostalgia for a time when the poet himself was young and his work was recognized:

An age has departed, so time runs away,
And few the survivors, who witness'd that day.

It was a sentiment that Longfellow would echo on the eve of the Civil War in a much more famous poem about the Revolution. But Freneau, who had no way of foreseeing the cataclysm that would fracture the Union more than thirty years hence, concluded his own poem by wishing that young soldiers would forever enjoy peace, such as then reigned over “the green fields of Monmouth.” But he also bids them never to forget the battle that took place there.

Freneau’s death at Freehold in 1832 is still a matter of controversy. On the evening of December 18, he walked into town, taking a shortcut through a bog near his home. He stayed in town later than usual, and by the time he started back to the farm, the snow had begun to fall, intensifying to a blizzard soon after. The eighty-year-old poet apparently became disoriented, lost his way while crossing the bog, and fell into a snowbank. Samuel E. Forman, who in 1902 wrote a biographical sketch of Freneau, says the octogenarian was able to extricate himself from the snowbank but fell a second time while attempting to climb a fence. According to Forman, Freneau broke his hip and was found dead the next morning “under an apple tree at the edge of the meadow.”

Most of Freneau’s biographers credit a story David V. Perrine of Freehold related to the Monmouth County Historical Association in 1939. Perrine said his father, David C. Perrine, had been a clerk at the Davis-Lippincott store on West Main Street in Freehold and was on duty the night of Freneau’s death. According to Perrine, his father told him on several occasions that Freneau was at the store on the evening of December 18, swapping yarns and talking politics. Perrine said James

T. Burtis, who was also a clerk at the store, corroborated his father's story. Charles D. Forman of Freehold added additional details, noting that his aunt had told him that Freneau was slightly drunk when he left the store at 8 p.m. Others recalled that a neighbor, John Connelly, had passed Freneau as the poet trudged home. Connelly was evidently the last to see him alive.

But other accounts differ as to where Freneau spent the evening and whether he was tipsy. Mary S. Austin, in what might be considered an authorized biography of the poet because his great-granddaughter edited it, relates that Freneau spent the early evening at the local circulating library in political discussions with, among others, William L. Dayton, who was later to run for vice president on the first Republican national ticket and would serve as U.S. Minister to France during the Civil War. Dayton, says Austin, offered to see Freneau home, but the poet refused aid and disappeared into the swirling snow.

It may be that the Freneau family fabricated the story of his meeting with Dayton in order to put the poet's death in a more respectable light. But, in fact, the two accounts might be reconciled. It could be that Freneau did meet with Dayton early in the evening for some political discussion and then stopped by the Davis-Lippincott store for a drink or two before heading home. Unfortunately, there are no contemporaneous family accounts of the incident. But his burial is recorded. In the family Bible, Freneau's daughter Agnes noted merely: "My Dear Father was buried, by his own particular request in the Locust grove very near his beloved mother on Friday afternoon the 21st of Dec. 1832." The gravesite at what remains of his Mount Pleasant estate is now a memorial park on Poet's Drive in Matawan, just off Route 79. Newspapers of the day noted the old patriot's passing. "Captain Freneau," the local *Monmouth Inquirer* reported on December 15, "was a staunch Whig in the time of the Revolution, a good soldier and a warm patriot," sentiments that were repeated nearly verbatim in *The New York Evening Post* on Christmas Day and *The New York Mirror* in January. The *Inquirer* also noted that "the productions of his pen animated his countrymen in the darkest days of '76, and the effusions of his muse cheered the desponding soldier as he fought the battles of freedom." And for this he should still be remembered.

Sources: Philip M. Marsh, *Philip Freneau: Poet & Journalist* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Dillon Press, 1967); Philip Freneau, *Poems Written Between the Years 1768 & 1794* (Mount Pleasant, N.J.: Press of the Author, 1795); Eleanor Freneau to Samuel Forman, April 20, 1795, Lorenzo Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries; "The Island Field Negro," *The American Museum, or, Universal Magazine*, July 1792, Appendix p. 3; Lewis Leary, *That Rascal Freneau: A Study in Literary Failure* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1941); Mary S. Austin, *Philip Freneau: The Poet of the Revolution: A History of His Life and Times*, ed. Helen Kearny Vreeland (New York: A Wessels Co., 1901); James Barton Longacre and James Herring, *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, Vol. 4 (Philadelphia: James Longacre, 1839); John W. Francis, "Philip Freneau," in Evert A. Duyckinck and George L. Duyckinck, *Cyclopedia of American Literature* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1866) 1:327-39; Reproduction copies of the Freneau family Bible, Philip Freneau Collection, Monmouth County Historical Association; Obit, *The New York Evening Post*, 25 Dec. 1832.

BATTLE LINES

*Nor cringe if come the night:
Walk through the cloud to meet the pall,
Though light forsake thee, never fall
From fealty to light.
--Melville, *The Enthusiast**

Long I've plotted an epic poem, a poem to stand in relation to my native country as those broad stripes stand in relation to our flag. The subject would have to be the Civil War, of course; it was then, as at no time since the Revolution, that the country grew articulate in self-definition. Lincoln was the poet we elected president. The Civil War generation was the most letter-writing cohort of warriors America has ever produced. Brother fought brother, fathers took up arms against their sons, and slaves escaped to return fire at their former masters—and then forgive them when they stood in post-war relation to each other as citizens.

And when articulation failed, and all the buzzwords of secession and abolition grew sharp as bayonets, the forges of war found their tongues, and vile shrapnel was vomited in Shenandoah's sleepy dells. The Civil War, like every war, found its heroes on both sides of the battle line; unknown men arose who proved equal to their times and mastered the moment presented them.

* * * * *

On a personal level, as I contemplated my (potentially calamitous) approach to a Civil War epic, I found myself confounded as much as coddled by the breakneck immensity of resources available to investigate the old wounds of yesteryear. All things lead to all things via the lightspeed factcheck that Google presupposes. And where facts were in dispute, the very best disputations were available—along with interactive 3D battlemaps, and endless chances to reengage and rejigger

the results with computer game simulations or alternative history sci-fi. As a poet, I am most drawn to pipe-smoking and twiddling long strands of grass between my thumbs. Books are fuel for mules; how much more senseless was a digital dive into the cacophonous black hole of internet archives.

Still, in all, I did a fair amount of death-grip gazing into backlit screens, and mumbling over luminous words in book after book. I felt the hair-raising chill of listening to surviving veterans cry out a final Rebel Yell on YouTube from a 1923 reunion, each man aimed at the microphone and camera and instructed by a friendly fat man to “Do your worst, Grandpa.” And then one last cry in unison, and every cat in the house snapped to look at the speaker as if at a ghost. I’m sure a dog would have returned the unearthly howl.

* * * * *

How, exactly, I asked myself, was the Civil War that “most American of all America’s wars” after the Revolution itself? Where, exactly, is the anchoring pin in this crazy pinwheel of deeds? The Gettysburg Address? The glum dignity in the surrender at Appomattox, where Lee surrendered his sword while Grant attempted polite small talk to ameliorate the sting of defeat his fiercest foe surely felt? I take some comfort in Yeats’ statement (who midwifed modern Ireland into being in many ways), when he said “It is always necessary to affirm and to reaffirm that nationality is in the things that escape analysis.” Perhaps all my moody brooding was for naught. I should be content to be a teller of tales, a stenographer of fact. In any case, hesitation on my grand project was no longer an option—whatever America was and whatever being an American meant would be an emergent quality that arose from dream and poem. So, I’d better start writing.

* * * * *

You may have noticed that you are not holding an epic poem in your hands. That ambition my muse has decided to deny me in this round at the foundry. But, page after page, you’ll find *flickers* whisked together; you can follow muddy footprints to Shiloh, or pace over an acre of

Petersburg's siege as I have done. Whether these poems are equal to their theme, the reader must discover. Every poet has his Zoilus, as they say, and if mine is reading this book today or is yet to be born, I do not know. Still, there's something here that time has folded and put in my pocket.

I give it to you.

**TRUE AND UNTRUE;
OR, THE FACTS OF THE MATTER**

I hadn't seen a piece of soap in a year.

--John T. Wickersham

Yeats' "affable, Falstaffian man" is as much a part of the story of his Irish civil war as those great public events of the rebellion in poems like "Easter 1916." No one wants to distort the facts, but even a selection of facts slants the story. And poetry is more than mere story, it is the soul of every story. Poetry tells the facts why they must be true. Like the formula of the alchemist, or the equation of the quantum mechanic, poetry arbitrates, through exploration and discovery, the bounds of our reality.

The historian has a hard road, and must site map and affidavit for his every step. A poet, when his soul's alight, burns away the tightrope that he treads. These poems seek a meaning in-between these stark extremes. Helen and the burning tower is no more evocative than Lincoln in his tophat. Well, not necessarily. The eye that weeps the tear, floods the landscape. A nation's history is crafted by its participants; they see, they feel the meaning of the thing. For one's truth to become a public truth, it must resonate—in both emotion and in fact. History is no free ride for those with an ax to grind, for those who would delete the subjectivities of the past with their Buzzfeed-fresh agenda.

Accordingly, my approach is hedged round with doubts. I'm trying to find the seed of things in the desiccated plant on the sill. Sometimes, a very personal approach, a singular story, helps flesh the skeleton whose hand I hold while he tells his dead man's tale. Sometimes, it is only through the torrent of future events that some aspect of the past has grown significant. And here, the mirror is watery. I fret and pull the threads of fate; I squint and wipe the ocean from my diver's mask, hoping to reach the beach.

Quotation and epigraph abound in these poems to lessen the culpability of Clio's amanuensis. Lee and Lincoln are brought to the docket to testify on their own behalf; or words recorded by others are introduced to damn or indemnify the figure on trial. Such a strategy has its own half-life, and the phrases used can cut against the organic unity of the poem even as they apply a thin veneer of authority to the proceedings. Rhythm is the one vitality that no poem can do without, and my slinky attraction to quotation can leave me in the unenviable position of a mynah bird, eerily reiterating the last words of a murder victim.

There are several other common dangers in this sort of poeticization of history. One can succumb to the expert's hip elision, a habit of reference that only communicates to those already "in the know." This is already a danger in poetry generally, which prefers by far to implicate than to provide evidence. With factual antecedents, the danger of missed connections increases, and the poem's secret limbic system is liable to go offline or develop incoherent buboes. "Only connect..." was James Dickey's rigorous dictum, and maintains its imperative strength to this day. It is ignored at the author's, and, more importantly, the reader's, peril.

In this collection, abortions along the highway to an epic birth, the language alternates rather harshly between a creampuff softness and the bony planks of bare narrative. In "Night Ride (Toward Gettysburg)," there is so much dreaminess that the rider on his horse literally falls asleep! The entire poem is a subjective guess, almost wholly an invention born of one small act of fact. The epigraph to the poem tells the fact: completely exhausted regiments fell asleep in their saddles while riding toward the next day's battlefield. And this detail, to me, was the seed, the soul, of the contrasting humanity and inhumanity of war—in all times and places. Still, there's a queasy awkwardness I feel in filling out a page that history left blank. These men in blue and grey, and all the others, slave and civilian, are my national companions, and I am loathe to touch their suffering as if it were my own.

And sometimes, of course, the stars are gone and the moon is down.

As a kind of dry repentance for my sins of invention—a Lenten giveback to God above—there are a number of passes at narrative verse

in these pages. These can feel too simple, “ripped from the headlines” as the TV movies say. A pristine example is “The Midnight Ride of Abraham Lincoln,” which is just literally Ward Hill Lamon’s report of Lincoln telling Lamon the story of his nail-biting escape from a gunman, gussied up a touch and poured into a vacant vase of verse. Lincoln is a master storyteller, and I couldn’t improve upon his shaggy dog tale if I had *two* MFAs.

An ampler, and more typical, example of the process of transition from history to poetry is available in “Pieces of the Old Battle Flag.” It is practically unrhymed, and virtually without invention. I changed John Wickersham’s name to Ned. He left his own narrative about coming home from the war, and I read it in B.A. Botkin’s collection of Civil War tales and folktales. Its simplicity and reality left me trashed with tears. My poem, direct as it is, manages to miss a great deal of his easy poignancy—and yet it is my best attempt at a teetering retelling. I left all the symbols in *de minimus* outline, and make the reader rip his humanity on the hard edges of the words. There’s very little “mood music” to queue up the reader’s response. Even reading it out loud, the old-fashioned sound of it is more like a grandfatherly wheedle than a poem. And yet it stands, returned to the page even as John/Ned returned to the uncomprehending arms of his family.

Between fact and abstraction, there is certainly room for legitimate invention—coloring inside the lines, as it were. But how different from the satisfaction of Milton’s Satan, standing shaggy-legged and monstrous against a Deity of perfection! I’m as reconciled as a pendulum to my method.

As for a third kind of poem, those that have grown truly unfashionable, anthems of anything other than naked identity, I can refer most reassuringly of all to the historical record. Many are the casuistries and verities of that distant day. Even the nimble Timrod parsed out his “Ethnogenesis,” mad with reified abstractions to unseat the Northern tyrants from their “evil throne.” But, to me, the “terrible grumble, and rumble, and roar,” of that poetry, like Thomas Read’s “Sheridan’s Ride,” has more in common with the verified goodness of verse than the many idiot rants that assail my ears in the New Yorker, each one banking on the slim authority of “my truth” to avoid a

scrupulous accounting of their faults. These are my chosen battle lines, where poetry and history meet and conflict.

I have squared off in my corner, and will defend my stance against all comers. And so I can say, with unironic vigor:

Assemble!

Ghosts of a time not yet made witless....

THE ABOLITIONIST CONGREGATION

And about this time, I had a vision—and I saw white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle, and the sun was darkened—thunder rolled in the Heavens, and blood flowed in streams.

--Nat Turner

The preacher in his pulpit blazed:
“One God for them and us!
Never once since the seventh day
Has God divided races—
It’s man by man we’re saved
Or damned and thrown to Hades.”

A peace surpassing passed among
The Boston congregants;
They knew a truth and knew it strong
Beyond all argument.
They stood in choir and raised great song
Above collars starched and neat:

“Let salvation’s mustard seeds
Be blown among the nations—
Where it grows their taste shall be
Sharp for generations.
Let war pour forth the blood we need
To hasten our germination!”

WHY THE CONFEDERACY BECAME

Fanaticism is inculcated in the Northern mind and ingrained in the Northern heart, so that you may make any compromise you please, and still, until you can unlearn and unteach the people, we shall find no peace....

-- Overheard at Virginia's secession convention

Attack our ways and wound our own
Who'd brought Jefferson and Washington
And all those famous firsts to stirrup—
Rebel men who would not give up
Beating pell-mell into the dawn
Virginian steeds, and would not stop.

Now that revolutionary dawn
Grows stale and cold in Northern hearts,
Tyranny grinds with iron wheels
All minds and every thought.
How can they who hammer and cog
Find valor in a ball of cotton?

To no king nor any petty liege
Shall rebel spines bend what brave
Steel runs through them yet: let
All come! Let gamblers place their bets!
Before the first Virginian grieves
Yankee widows will pace and fret.

**THE WAR COMET;
OR, OOLA'S PROPHECY**

You see dat great fire sword, blazin' in de sky? Dat's a great war coming and de handle's to'rd de Norf and de point to'rd de Souf, and de Norf's gwine take dat sword and cut de Souf's heart out.

-- Oola's prophecy, as told to Lincoln

A shadow at the bedroom window
Tall without his stovepipe hat;
Long his looking at the ragged coal
Of the fiery sword of comet.

His tan hand patted a padded pocket
In time to a nameless tune;
A time was coming to grasp the sword,
And the time for peace near gone.

The comet flickered, weak and wily,
While clockhands met in prayer—
His eyes upcast to skies to read
What was written there in fire.

What moved one heart would move a million;
Both for and against, it flashed;
The man in the black coat turned, and turned
Again, in the shadow of fire and ash.

Restless fingers in his pocket then
Moved upon the restless words:
*He hath loosed the fateful lightning
Of his terrible, swift sword.*

MORGAN'S GREAT RAID

Those who swam with horses, unwilling to be laggard, not halting to dress, seized their cartridge boxes and guns and dashed upon the enemy. The strange sight of naked men engaging in combat amazed the enemy.

-- Bennett Young

Hoist Morgan on your shoulders, boys,
And round the campfire drag him—
Bragg orders us to stay,
And today we disobey him.
Drink to John Morgan and to Duke,
Drink champagne from your boot!

Rain delayed us, picking daisies;
Tom Quick broke his right rein arm,
Such omens won't detain us.
Morgan's raiders, swarm!
Drink to John and drink to Duke,
Drink champagne from your boot!

We break for Brandenburg
To ferry the swift Ohio river;
Such wild crossing's easy, urged
By Kentucky's blue defenders.
Drink to John and drink to Duke,
Drink champagne from your boot!

2.

We moved rapidly through six or seven towns without resistance, and tonight lie down for a little while with our bridles in our hands.

-- Bennett Young

Ellsworth, knot the telegraph lines
With false report and false surmise—

To sit such fine horses is to ride
Streaming dawn astride an arrow!
Burn the bridges and pester flocks
Where hens pile eggs and barns are stocked;
Trace Kentucky's hump through Ohio's wilds,
And leave the rich fields fallow.

Guard Indianapolis and Columbus,
Like statues stand at empty doors.
We'll raid defenseless shores
Subterfuge and guileless ruse
Have left, like magic casements, open.
Our fingers grow rings, and our saddles
Go belled; ham hangs from our bridles,
Who on no kindnesses depend.

Down Jackson streets in ladies veils
(To defeat July and make it mild),
With cobalt bolts of stolen cloth
And goods of equal lustre sail
The lightning regiments of death.
With railyards wrecked behind, and more
Devastation on call before,
They strike with steel and stealth.

3.

*As the red flames created by the great burning timbers rose skyward, they
illuminated the entire valley, and in the flickering shadows which they cast for
several miles around... huge, weird forms....*

-- Bennett Young

Bridges burned before us, and bridges burned behind.
Men asleep on horses, and the horses falling down.
Rivers, rivers, rivers, and the Ohio running high.

The chase is on in earnest that'd been but seek-and-hide.
No time to cook the stolen meat, or brush proud horses down.
Bridges burned before us, and bridges burned behind.

“Axes to the fore,” the cry goes wide and high—
Another narrow roadway, and every tree chopped down.
Rivers, rivers, rivers, and the Ohio running high.
Pot-shots from the farmers, their wives leave poisoned pies.
Man and horse move hollow-eyed, and night and day are one.
Bridges burned before us, and bridges burned behind.

The brazen bugle’s revellie blows ugly and unkind.
“Our last day in Ohio, men, in Virginny’s our next town.”
Rivers, rivers, rivers, and the Ohio running high.

At last we’re at the river; all is black and we are blind.
Are Union gunboats churning round Buffington Island now?
Bridges burned before us, and our bridges burned behind.
Rivers, rivers, rivers, and the Ohio running high.

YOU AGAIN

in a dream, time hadn't frayed you.
the zodiac replaced the hours
lost long before we knew
of oppositions, trines or squares.
beguiled by flickerings in daylight,
seized by seconds over seasons,
we forgot the ancient riddling songs,
skill-wrought panaceas for despair.

dream disturbed our delights
from blur to sharp particulars,
dark woods to incandescent trees.
our sciences gave way to recognitions,
minutes to boogie & soft shoe,
dim chandeliers to wildflowers.

THE HALF OF IT

went missing.
not on its own.

the sky, dark at night
not because the sun

illuminates just one
side of the earth at a time,

but that galaxies zing
faster & faster away from us.

our eyes, too, darken
when our polestars dim,

when zodiacs we trust
no longer rhyme,

when they indicate
each other as enemy aliens.

let darkness sing
new stars' new choruses.

SPOOKS

haunted by its inhabitants, the house
on 27th Street bumps & creaks
delayed echoes of their discomfort
who attribute sounds
to dissent among the deceased

compelled to report
inexplicable stories
from the hidden carousel
where shades abound
forgotten but alert

where side by side they dwell
antiquely normal

SIMPLE LOCATION

love cameos the fullest moon,
originates the sun from starry eyes,
summons geysers, undoes what's done,
retrofits flesh to bone, rezones locality.

language surrenders. futures obliterate roadmaps,
unknows the known. experience lassos limbo
for certainty. the newly innocent rejoice.
the deep moans round with many voices.

deaf to all but breath, lovers verge
on lexicons of gesture, almanacs of rapture,
conditions, occasions, circumstances
versifying natural selection.

sooner denies later, begins begun.
dance discovers dancers, one by one.

HOW STUFF WORKS

the sky inside you glide through,
osprey, falcon, owl – sunbeam blood,
gypsy lighting – nothing to do until,
suddenly, below, something running
releases you to gravity, wings folded
to dive, to swoop, to capture alive
red blood, talons tightening, done.

but gravity comes at a price. the game
has a say in it. some mice freeze
in your shadow, some count on rain.
sometimes you see them anyway.
each relies on its own skill
to complete or defeat the trapeze,
to succumb to the day or survive.

CHASING GHOSTS

Long hair and leather jackets, looking for space in which to be closer to a truth we couldn't know. Reading Kerouac by bare bulb at three in the morning. No time to sleep. Drive a van daytime, get high at night and talk. Talk. Play guitar. Spin some vinyl. Miles, Bruce, The Clash. Talk. Dylan. Trane. The Beatles. More talk. Lou chases god with a Fender and heroin spike, Blue Mask pulled taut across his rage. Iggy writhes and buries ennui in layers of cool. He was chairman of the bored, we his trustees, seeking something distant, a perfect knowledge, unknowable, a transcendent high. We wandered Asbury streets one night on acid chasing ghosts. We knew all and nothing, turned collars to the sky like the poseurs we were. I bumped against a sidewalk bench, tore

my jeans, blood trickling
down my leg. Kerouac
in my back pocket
winked knowingly. We
laughed, cheetahs shedding
spots, and when the trip
turned dark, the sky black, I
snuck off, crept down
to the ocean, stared out
through chemical
filter at the hard line
barely visible in the dark.
If god existed, it was there
where sky and sea met.
Or maybe god
is a water tower
in Davenport, a ghostly
hobo wandering
the Susquehanna. Clash
chords roll on the waves.
Kerouac on the beach
by moonlight. Perhaps
there was no god. Perhaps.
And after all these years,
I still don't know.

THE GAPING AWE

Doubt rises in the smoke plumes spit
from refinery towers into gray dusk.
Flames lick the sky's nape. Metal and rock
and violent motion. A semi
hammers past as the last ember
of day fades to ash. The rabbi
on the podcast says: *Totality
of being*. I think: Emerson's transparent
eyeball. Car lane, truck lane, warehouses.
He had tubes in his arm. Sunset
flares on the horizon, burns,
fades into question. *Impossible
to know the truth*, Russell wrote.
Abdominal aortic aneurysm. Early
morning phone call. Late flight. *That which*,
the rabbi says. *Greater than I*,
she says. *Sum of all mind*, Spinoza
proclaims. *Eternal thou*, says Buber.
He was lucky, the doctor said. *No such
thing as luck*, the Lyft driver said.
A question. It billows above
in the smog. Echoes. Shouts.
Reverberates off the Turnpike
sound walls. Lights tower above
Exit Nine, challenge the constellations.
A mist rises from the river.

WHEN BILLIE SINGS I CRY

(orchestra swells like tides, ebbs,
false bravado, trembling w/
contradictions), her voice containing
multitudes, as Whitman
might say if he lived
long enough to truly understand
the darkness of the American soul.
Nothing I can do, nothing
I can say, (& the drum beneath
beats, almost imperceptible, a hush,
blood-born, & the bass runs
alongside, chases the swing
in her voice, the step of her soul):
should she jump into
the ocean (horns shout back,
blues on blue & purple bruises)
& she sings in a kind of
joyful disregard, don't care just
what the people say, & yeah
independence is hard won but lost
so easily (broken man, granite fists)
& I squirm each time she pleads
for her man to hit her, b/c
there's no other way to hear
her plaintive moan, even as I wish
for her to quit him, knowing she
won't/can't & every time the song
plays, the horns bleed & plead
& I want to tell her to run,
but it's not up to me

& she still proclaims, ain't
nobody's business, ain't no-
body's business, ain't
nobody's business if I do

DE-EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE

that's a peter of think a bagel a small child she says
as her words unravel // shouts at ghosts packs
her things turns on a dime // smiles tells me
a story without proper nouns syntax chasing its tail
until we collapse in dizzied exhaustion // downward
spiral a vortex of such maddening power sucks sense
into its disintegrating force // she writes her name
on empty bottles offers me cookies for breakfast
frozen milk for cereal // I jekylled it she says everything
cleared off and that's got to go and that's got to go //
yells at shadows remembers her brother who died
six months before // Chomsky says we're born with
innate grammar that enables us to learn language
but listening to her sentences implode and I hear
loss // others claim formation of the word the sentence
all meaning gathers in relation to others to community //
I read once of a prisoner in solitary released into the light
remained in dark silent linkages snapped // and she's packing
to go home but where that is // she says yes // complains
about they says they come in take her stuff and this
is my house // they can't they want // vocabulary shrinks
to empty proclamations nonsense syllables random
verbs that squeak into the boxes and bags she packs

SNAP

You rise with a blood sun
Leaving muddy depths
To sip air and sky,
Soak sunlight through
A three-foot phalanx of scales,
Surface to leafy tapestries
Woven tight with tense birdsong.

Breaching the canal's corrugated ceiling,
Your eyes two torsion springs
On a loaded ballista,
Your beak a drawn iron bolt,
Dewy bead dangling
From the pointed tip.

Your pinwheel gaze lingers
On the wide-eyed primate blinking
Down at you: each of us equally alien
Yet sensing a shared shoot far down
The ancient tree's twisted trunk.

I take you in only to find
You've always been here—mired
In my swampland rising
With primal bloodlust
In rush hour traffic, striking
Outstretched fingers
Of siblings too curious of my suffering,
Snapping the olive branch
Extended by a penitent friend,

Luring doomed lovers with
Wriggling worm tongue.

You linger a while and coolly eye
The shaking stick I prod you with
Just before shearing the tip—
As if to say, “This is as close as we get.
Now I’ll burrow back beneath your Reason,
Nudge you over the edge
Of the dock you built on
Shifting sand and sediment.”



CONTRIBUTORS

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Gregg Brown has devoted his life to poetry since happening across a haiku by Moritake, to wit:

*Leaves
float back up to the branch--
Ah! butterflies.*

He runs the micro-publishing house BLAST PRESS, which has published over two dozen authors in the past 25 years. He still composes poems on his departed father's clipboard, which he's had since High School. He is a two-time Asbury Park Poet Laureate awarded by the Asbury Music Awards.

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Jennifer Stahl Brown is a middle school language arts teacher. She is also a poet and short story writer whose publications include *Edison Literary Review*, *Stillwater Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, *The Esthetic Apostle*, *In Parentheses*, and *This Broken Shore*. She is a two-time Pushcart Prize nominee. Jenny's love of poetry started as a preteen when a copy of Emily Dickinson's collected poems showed up in her Easter basket.

Daniel Weeks is the author of *For Now: New & Collected Poems, 1979-2017* (Coleridge Institute Press, 2017), which includes nine previously published collections in addition to hitherto unpublished work. His poetry has appeared in *The Cimarron Review*, *Plainsongs*, *The Stillwater Review*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *The California Quarterly*, *Mudfish*, *Puckerbrush Review*, *Zone 3*, *Slant*, and many other publications. His work has also appeared in a number of anthologies, including *Wild Poets of Ecstasy: An Anthology of Ecstatic Poetry* (Pelican Pond, 2011), *On Human Flourishing: A Poetry Anthology* (McFarland, 2015), and *Palisades, Parkways & Pinelands: An Anthology of Contemporary New Jersey Poets* (Blast Press, 2015). His translations of French symbolist poetry have appeared in *Blue Unicorn*, *This Broken Shore*, and *Middlesex*. He is also the author of *A More Prosaic Light: Essays, Revisions, and Reviews, 1987-2015* (Coleridge Institute Press, 2015) and *Not for Filthy Lucre's Sake: Richard Saltar and the Antiproprietary Movement in East New Jersey, 1665-1710* (Lehigh University Press, 2001).

Daniel Zimmerman, Professor of English at Middlesex County College, served as Associate Editor of the issue of *Anonym* that published Ezra Pound's last canto, and as editor of *The Western Gate*, *Brittannia*, and *College English Notes*. His poetry has appeared in many magazines and anthologies and, in 1997, he invented an anagrammatical poetic form, Isotopes. BLAST Press published his most recent book, *the interrupted breath*, in 2018. Additional works include *Perspective*, a curriculum of the soul #20 (Canton, NY: Institute of Further Studies, 1974), *See All the People*, illustrated by Richard Sturm (Toronto: Open Studio, 1976—now available as an iBook), the trans-temporal *Blue Horitals* with John Clarke (Oasii: Amman, Jordan, 1997), *ISOTOPES* ((London: frAme, 2001), and online: *ISOTOPES2* (Chicago: Beard of Bees, 2007). His book *Post-Avant* (2002, Introduction by Robert Creeley) won the Editor's Choice Award from Pavement Saw Press in Ohio.

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