

Dave Smith

WITH WALT WHITMAN AT FREDRICKSBURG

To Louis Simpson

I have brought the twittering flags old bear-hug,
the swaying noose you admired at the end
of the 13th Brooklyn muskets sashaying
down Broadway, everybody's intended girl
swooning, Jesus, for the grandeur of it.

I have brought a tumbler of spring water
for the sipping if your brother George lives.

I see you and Simpson stepping carefully through
wreckage, the hacked-off arms, useless with Masonic
rings, for God's sake, shining like used-car lots.
The arms are so American, like parts junked
before the expiration of their projected longevity.
This is no joke for Velsor Brush to peddle.

I have brought a red handkerchief
for our mouths. Godalmighty, the stink grows.

I've come here like you to pick a way to the heart
of the business, tracing out what ripples I can,
skirting blood pooled like knocked-over
coffee on my own sunny backporch. But
I see you and Simpson arm-wrestling
in a lantern's moon, sighing out
the lonely words of America's losses.

I wish I could say it was December 13, 1862
but the faces of young men I see aren't Christ,
dead and divine, and brother of all, though
they wear the green clothes of Park Rangers,
the polite smile of Toledo and one
thinks you sold him a Buick.

Isn't it for them we threw the noose in a can?
I gave George's water to a small boy found
by his mother in time, the life saved
he thought lost, which he will lose again.

if you lay your body down in this Virginia green,
you feel the quick shadows of passerbys, the whispers
that zing in your stomach like miniballs or
knee-high bees. Loafing like this

you can hear the freeway moaning under ground
dry and beige as free-shrunken coffee
or look up into the sexy, tossing leaves
of October. Alone on a stolen Army blanket

I've stretched out a long time here
to dig out of a bright afternoon the glazed eyes
of anyone whose temple, as I touch it to clean
away the smear of flecked ice, breaks my heart.

At dusk I may be the only one left to drift
down Mayre's Heights where the Potomac mist rolls
over rocks humped like bodies, little dunes
inside which a black tide I cannot see
goes rising and falling. I want

to tell you how progress has not changed us much.
You can see breaking on the woods the lights
of cars and the broken limbs glow
in the booming rush of traffic that chants
wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong.