

E. Louise Mull

#### LAST TRIBUTE

We had fought the war and won, had  
danced in gas-lit city streets, while  
Stars and Stripes flew from each patriot's roof.

But now, the glory of our victory eclipsed by  
just one shot, we bore our fallen leader's coffin  
from the whimpering throng and plodded toward  
the black-draped train  
to make the solemn journey home.

Inside the festooned funeral car, we laid  
the lead-lined walnut box upon the waiting bier.  
Through eyes cried dry at Donelson and Shiloh,  
I saw another, smaller casket waiting there;  
it held the body of his son, called home  
to heaven three years before, when he was only  
twelve. They would make the trip together now:  
back over those same rails, through towns and cities  
where he, on his inaugural tour, had stopped to spread  
his fervent pleas for unity and peace.

And we alone, we veterans in light blue, were charged  
to carry our commander through his nation's streets,  
to guard him hour by hour throughout the fifteen days  
ahead  
while his devoted people said farewell; and we alone  
would lift him on that marble slab behind those  
iron gates  
when finally we reached the Oak Ridge tomb  
in Springfield, Illinois.

At eight o'clock Old Gurley said the final prayer.  
Our somber caravan inched forward, puffed slowly  
from the depot, past lines and lines of mourners,  
their heads uncovered in the April rain,  
past babies held above their parents' heads  
to see the martyr's funeral car go by,

past white-haired men and sickly young,  
too weak to stand, who sat in chairs  
and waved a limp farewell, past black-faced members  
of the Eighth Artillery who stood erect  
their faces twisted in convulsive grief.

I moved back from the glass, into the shadows  
of that gloomy car, away from Mick McCaffery,  
my closest friend, who now stood with the others  
peering out the windows at that pathetic pageantry.  
I could share my grief with no one. Not Mick.  
Not those outside. Not even her, the piteous widow  
who stayed behind, locked in a darkened room.  
Could she, could they, be suffering more than I,  
who suffered still the tortured dreams of shattered  
limbs  
and cries of dying brothers? Who, if I lived to see  
the coming century in, would never, even then,  
forget that day in camp, when he, my fallen idol,  
had clasped my trembling hand, and, humbly grateful  
for my selfless service, called me "son..."

At two that afternoon, our four short hours  
in Baltimore were gone. Ten thousand of her citizens  
had looked upon his face, but many thousands more  
were turned away. We bore our precious cargo  
out of the Mercantile Exchange, past long lines  
of children, still standing in the pouring rain.  
"We didn't get to say goodbye," a little child cried  
out.  
Unwilling victim of my sentiment, I turned and saw  
a little girl who so resembled Rose, my dear, beloved  
sister  
back home in Sangamon County, Illinois. I stopped  
reflexively.  
If Rose were here, I thought, she, too, would stand  
there,  
like this angel child, her body braced against the wet  
and cold,  
her sapphire, tear-filled eyes stunned by this sad,  
strange  
sight: the sleek black horses, rosewood hearse,

the long black box inside. Just then my buddy Mick  
who bore more wounds from battle than any other man  
I knew,  
gently touched my arm. "A schedule must be met, my  
friend."

Baltimore's downpour was just a mild prelude  
to the fury over Harrisburg. At eight that night  
escorting yet another decorous hearse along a  
boulevard  
of eerie lights, the cracking bolts of thunder  
and bursts of cannon fire brought back the haunting  
sound  
of rockets blasting overhead as we, in trenches,  
crouched;  
but outwardly undaunted, we, in mud-caked boots and  
soggy blues  
moved onward toward the Capitol, while intermittent  
streaks  
of lightning flashed across the skies, illuminating  
all  
the sorry spectacle: the entire population had come  
out;  
they stood there in the dark, for miles in all  
directions,  
in clothes soaked through while blustery winds  
slapped sheets of rain across their stricken faces.

And, as we passed, came tortured cries, "Oh, no.  
Oh, no.  
It can't be true. My God, it can't be true." Those  
wails  
pierced deeper than the chill of that ungodly night.  
'Til twelve the shivering masses shuffled through  
the quiet  
chamber in the Hall of Representatives, then forty  
thousand  
strong they walked behind us in the unrelenting rain  
of that next day: the volunteers with arms reversed,  
the drummers beating muffled drums, the cavalry with  
reins  
held tight, the town's religious leaders and its  
politicians,

and then, most unforgettable, the just plain white  
folks  
on foot, the colored folks on foot, completely  
separated,  
in obeisance to the order of the day.

The lines to see the century's greatest man  
were three miles long at Independence Square.  
From Philadelphia's surrounding farming towns,  
from Jersey on the Camden ferry, they came and stood,  
for seven long hours. And 'though it was the Sabbath,  
their passions broke and bled into hysteria;  
the frenzied mob fought viciously to keep a place  
in line;  
would-be intruders were attacked, screams and  
shrieks  
replaced solemnity; bonnets, dresses were ripped off,  
fainted women hauled away, passed along over heads  
of that impatient crowd; crushed or broken  
crinolines and hoops were strewn throughout the Square.  
And even once inside the reverent chamber  
of the East Wing where our beloved Declaration had  
been signed,  
even then those zealous mourners had to be restrained  
from vain attempts to touch his face or kiss  
his care-worn forehead, hollow cheeks.

Back on the funeral train, a half-smile crossed my  
lips  
as I marvelled at the spirit of those Philadelphians.  
Had I not  
thus been honored, to guard him in these final hours,  
then, too  
would I have fought to see him. But who would have  
thought  
these genteel easterners...

McCaffery looked surprised to see his comrade smile.  
It was the first since that contemptible assassin's  
bullet  
had pierced my cherished captain's head on that dark,  
dismal

Friday, the day our precious Lord was crucified.

But McCaffery  
was yet to hear me speak a word of consolation  
to another human soul.

The New York's Seventh met us after we ferried  
cross the Hudson, then they, the Regiment that sent  
more officers into our Union Army than any other one,  
formed a hollow square around us as we marched  
to City Hall. Inside the Hall's rotunda, the embalmer  
worked for half an hour to hide the growing darkness.  
The mourners passed through slowly all that day and  
night

into the next day. Placing our nation's greatest  
treasure on Relyea's mammoth hearse, we proceeded  
back up Broadway to the Hudson River Depot.

And what a grand procession! The mounted police,  
the eleven thousand military men, the Irishmen in  
green

with black rosettes, the Zouaves in red trousers  
and black ribbons, the brightly-colored ambassadors  
of foreign nations, the seventy-five thousand  
"just plain folks."

Along the route, a white-haired negress shouted out  
"He died for me." Another woman, arms outstretched  
as if

to touch the coffin, cried, "My son died at Antietam  
for him. God be with both of them." And then she knelt  
and prayed. At one halt in the march, a woman broke  
the Seventh's line and said to me imploringly,

"Please sir,  
please shake my little daughter's hand. She wants to  
remember this day her whole life through." I glanced  
about

to see if any generals were nearby, but saw only  
McCaffery

nodding his head affirmatively. I looked down at the  
child

then clasped her tiny hand within my calloused palm.  
Before a suddenly alerted Seventh officer withdrew  
the child and mother from our inner ranks, the mother

cried, "God bless you, sir. God bless you." And as I  
watched them melt into the awesome crowd of that  
resplendent  
day, I thought, but could not say, "God bless you,  
too."

We rumbled north toward Albany, through countless  
flowery arches, past tableaux of maidens in white  
dresses  
past banners with their piteous inscriptions, past  
thousands

upon thousands of this nation's citizens. They  
lined the tracks:  
men raised their hats, some women waved white  
handkerchiefs.

At one road crossing near a little country town,  
a preacher knelt  
with his parishioners; we heard them sing "Praise God  
From Whom All Blessings Flow," my mother's  
favorite hymn--

My mother who had wept when I, unwilling to ignore  
my President's call, left college books at home to  
serve the cause.

Would she, I wondered sadly, be able still  
to recognize the spirited youth, the son she knew,  
in this tired man, who in these years grew aged  
by the sights and sounds of death, whose spirit now  
seemed irrevocably broken?

At Garrison, the uniformed cadets had come across  
the river from West Point and mournfully passed  
through

the funeral car while cannons boomed from the Academy  
and a fireball sun dropped lower in the darkening  
April sky. Black with people was Poughkeepsie's only  
hilltop as Matthew Vasser, given special permit,  
placed a clump of magnolia blossoms inside the funeral  
car. Then torches, bonfires lit our way to Albany  
where, on the twenty-seventh, after that town's  
grand parade,

the local papers told of Boston Corbett who had broken  
orders

and shot the wicked actor in a Virginia tobacco barn,  
a fate too kind for him!

The rituals in Buffalo were most orderly: its  
townsfolk  
had spent their tears and grief on a mock ceremony,  
held  
the day of the Washington funeral. Nor could one  
easily forget  
that Cleveland's outdoor funeral was the most  
ingenious  
with its chinese pagoda-type temple in the park,  
or that  
Columbus' streets were strewn with lilac blooms by  
invalid  
soldiers from the hospital, or that in the  
Indianapolis  
procession, colored citizens carried copies of the  
Emancipation Proclamation. Nor that Chicago's was  
as grand  
as New York City's: the wide streets choked with  
people,  
the trees bent down with human forms, the men and  
children  
sitting on each roof along the way, the mottos hanging  
from each black-draped building, the expressions on  
the faces  
of the children as they watched their parents cry.  
From Chicago's St. Louis, Alton Railroad Depot, we  
set out  
one last time, over the prairie, to our final  
destination,  
to his hometown, and mine.

Springfield, Illinois  
May 4, 1865

The moment of relinquishing our precious cargo near,  
we stood inside the Hall of Representatives,  
where "the house divided" speech had first been heard,  
and waited for the general to return.  
While others looked out windows at Springfield's  
silent,  
weeping masses, I stole across the Hall to look upon  
his face  
one final time. To say goodbye was not enough--I took  
a cross from 'round my neck, that I had carried through  
the war, and tucked it in a pocket of his suit. Just  
then,  
our kind commander stood beside me and softly said,  
"You may close the lid now, Sergeant."

We carried him outside, into a scorching prairie sun  
the scent of lilacs heavy in the air, and placed him  
in the gold and silver, crystal-studded hearse,  
while woe-struck friends and neighbors stood  
silently nearby. Our two-mile walk to Oak Ridge was  
begun.

Slowly, very slowly  
did we make our way, with Hooker in the lead, and then  
the thousand soldiers of the Infantry who drilled  
five hours a day for this, their glorious moment, and  
then  
the thousands more who walked behind us. To the con-  
stant beat  
of muffled drums we marched, an hypnotic, dream-like  
march,  
the most moving spectacle the west had ever seen,  
through  
streets he knew so well, to the outskirts of the town,  
through the well-known arch of Oak Ridge Cemetery,  
then down the little vale between two ridges  
that ran along the brook, until we came upon the tomb  
embedded in the hillside. "Well, this is it," my  
friend,  
said Mick McCaffery, just a bit too gayly, "the  
last few feet."

Then we, the veterans in light blue,  
who had carried our commander through his nation's  
streets,  
and guarded him throughout those anguished days  
while his devoted people said farewell, bore the coffin  
one last time and placed him tenderly upon the marble  
slab  
inside that cool, dark vault, where the smaller casket  
lay.

"They're home at last," I thought, then, withdrawing  
from that sacred room, I missed McCaffery's shadow  
at my side. Could he be still...I turned and saw  
the wretched frame of one whose grief has suddenly  
gushed forth, still standing in the shadows of that  
darkened tomb. How could this be...that Mick,  
whose strength was all I ever knew, could this be he  
bent over, sobbing, all alone...those thoughts aside  
I walked back through the doorway and put my arm  
around my war-worn friend. "Come, Mick, it's over now,  
our duty's done," then led him to my loved ones in  
the crowd

whose joy at seeing me was dimmed again when next we  
heard

Old Gurley's words, "Lord, remember thy servant,  
Abraham..."