

Mary Elizabeth Lang

Two Poems

First Blood

Groton Heights, September 6, 1781

Elisabeth wakes to cannon
and musket fire, to squawks
of chickens seeking cover.
Hair unpinned, she pulls on
her linsey-woolsey dress, fastens
buttons wrong as she runs, flings
the latch up, the door open.
Cows unmilked, confused, wander
in the yard, complain in deep lows
above shouts and moans of men
and boys. Across the narrow river
the town burns, close enough
for smoke to sting her eyes,
enough to think at first
it is her own cornfield in flames.

Hands pull her back
into the house. Though tall,
she is only thirteen, hides
behind her mother's skirt
until the cannons are silent. Then
the women come out with rags
to bind wounds, a bucket
to douse scattered grass fires.
Elisabeth learns to take the gourd and scoop
water between lips of men who whisper
that they thirst yet cannot seem
to close their mouths and swallow.
John, the physician's apprentice,
works beside her, barely notices
her shawl askew, her rumpled stockings.

Between her house and the earthworks,
twelve of her cousins and brothers
lie still. One is fourteen.

They are not dressed as soldiers—
they wear sturdy work clothes, one
a blacksmith's apron, one a brimless
milking cap covered with flies.
She reaches toward a neighbor's face
she no longer recognizes, tries
to cover it. Inside her, sympathetic blood
begins to gather. This day is a milestone,
her first woman's blood,
but she cannot take time to reflect.
She only bleeds quietly, feverishly works
to save what and whom she can.

Later, she will marry John, bear
twelve children, and they will help
plow this now fallow field under
and make it yield again.

When she is eighty, she will still walk
the corn rows here and then lie down
where her kinsmen lie now.
This is the way with wars at home;
we gather the same ground to us
while we still stand and when we fall.
Either way, our blood makes it ours.

Remnants

The burning of Mystic Fort, June 5, 1637

We English first defined
the Pequots, the brown-eyed Destroyers,
as savages, enemies, slaves, a people
scattered, absorbed, no more a tribe,
only the ashes left of flames in which,
historians say, three hundred
to seven hundred perished.

We Pequots once defined
the English, the *Owanux*,
as other, as green-eyed stranger,
snake who lies dozing on the path,
then, according to the storytellers,
as hand that holds the firebrand,
cruelty heaped upon cruelty, voice
that orders, "Burn them!"

For centuries only a few could speak
of that day, that single hour.
Who has words, even in two languages,
to tell a story so far removed from nature—
the color of a grandmother's hair
afire, the acrid smell of smoked
flesh and boiling blood, the snap
of roasting marrow of children?
These sights, odors, unspeakable sounds
human ears were never formed to hear
nor throats formed to utter,
made even seasoned soldiers cry.
Outside the circle of fire, Narragansett
witnesses moaned in disbelief and horror.

But sit and listen now to this, our story
told anew. Does the surviving fox
identify itself only by marks of hawk's talon
and dog's tooth? We, war's remnants,
no longer measure ourselves
by fire and blood, outward brands
and inner scars of war.
We must look
through time's clear lens, as we now see
through multicolored irises.

When we do, we recognize
in one another the strong faces
of our common grandfathers, hear
the soft voices of our grandmothers

singing shared songs. We do not
speak the names of the dead,
but at last speak the names
of the living, names by which
we wish to know ourselves.

Mary Elizabeth Lang teaches English at Southern Connecticut State University. She is a fellow of the Connecticut Writing Project and a member of the Quinnipiac River Watershed Association. She has previously published poems in *The Prose Poem*, *Underwood Review*, *Connecticut Review*, and *Connecticut Artists*. She was born and raised close to the sites of the two battles depicted in these poems.