

Suzanne R. Thurman

Point of View

“At a quarter past three on that bright afternoon the order ‘Forward!’ rang along the lines. The supreme moment had come. As far as the eye could reach . . . A long line of soldiers mov[ed] with all the precision of a grand review.”

—Mrs. George E. Pickett, 1863

1 Omniscient

The word, itself, was light
as a single feather drifting from the tail
of a hawk, brief as a firefly’s

twilight dance; it melted
quickly in the summer heat, absorbed
by denser bodies that scrambled below.

It was a moderate word, only seven letters,
and unpretentious. It did not require
an education or a dictionary to be understood.

And yet its fleeting life controlled the fate
of men. Its utterance split time in two
and marked the lives of soldiers. It sent
them forward, emissaries

if only briefly, between its ending and theirs.

2 First Person, Present

I used to measure death in years,
protected by youth’s hubris
and the simple rhythm of planting

and reaping. One season turned
into another, each different in its way
but all the same. Sun and moon
foretold a life of pleasure while starry
prophets promised a good harvest.
I embraced the wise-words cast
by nature's seers, held them
like ripened ears of corn
so sweet they burned my tongue.
But now the net is broken,
their soothsayings forgotten
in the rush of falling bodies,
the metallic taste of fear,
and the agony of soldiers
who measure death in seconds.

3 First Person, Future

We had our choice of eateries, General Lee's Family Restaurant,
Lincoln Dining Room, General Pickett's Buffet. We weren't dressed

for entertaining presidents or sacred heroes so we chose
General Pickett's, assured by AAA of the coming feast—

barbecued ribs, homemade pies, even Southern fried catfish
right in the heart of Yankeeland. If mounds of food were not enough

to draw us in, this was: the chance to eat our meal two hundred feet
from charnel ground, the very field where Pickett's men were slaughtered

by Union bullets and Confederate honor. We settled in, plates stacked
high with bean salad, coleslaw and fresh baked rolls; platters loaded

with broasted chicken and fried okra, roast beef and mashed potatoes
drowning in gravy; bowls weighed down with slabs of chocolate cake

and vanilla soft serve. Around us a sea of tourists tried hard to eat
their fill, while outside mangled ghosts covered their wounds
with the gauze of memory and begged for just one bite.

Suzanne R. Thurman is a poet and history professor. Her most recent publications include poems in *The Cresset* and *The Mochila Review*, a short story in *Studio*, and the book “*O Sisters Ain’t You Happy?*”: *Gender, Family, and Community Among the Harvard and Shirley Shakers* (Syracuse Univ. Press, 2002).