

John Bensko

Beauvoir: September 1878

Beyond our wide green lawn
men prepare for the evening to wade
the Sound with barbed poles and lanterns.
They'll spear the flatfish that lie in close.

I like to watch the yellow lights
moving slowly outward, until I know
the men by their lamps alone, bright
then dim, swinging before their bodies.

Mrs. Dorsey, whose house this is,
believes my Jeff needs only his solitary way
to write anew the glory that's gone.
Her planter's house on tall beams

rising above the lawn, and the spreading trees
older than the frailest white-hair remembers,
call him back to the terrible life too well.
I rush through the escape from Richmond

and linger in the surprise he wasn't hung.
He says: *No one knows that a one-eyed man like me
can't see how far he's fallen.*
After dark, rats scamper along the branches

of the nearby mimosa. They pluck
the pink flowers and chew the seeds.
They make the limbs shudder as though the tree
would stand and walk. I read him the letter

from our son in Memphis. No breeze relieves
the fever. When last we saw him,
we walked across the marshy sand of Ship Island
through black buzzing clouds of life

until the Gulf cleared the air with crashing waves.
I would send that salt breeze north,
over Memphis, Richmond, the Potomac,
until it swept the fevered past away.

Husband has me write, *Save yourself*.
But father and son, shown the tree,
scurry to conquer it. Who am I
but a not-so-loyal wife, holding her lamp,

wading the dark shallows? They refuse to see
we must go down into our suffering.
Words like *glory* hold them up.
Who can bear to watch them?

They reach the end of the drop too slowly
to know it. Failing the noose, they rise again.
We whose breaths were stilled, watching,
cannot survive this. Not even once.

Log Road, 1864

We like to cut them small, so there's no splitting,
to strip the limbs and lay the trunks down
side by side along the muddy way.

There's nothing finer than to gaze
upon a road through new leafed trees
and see the ripples of brown bark

like a hard carpet of troubles
to speed the caissons on.
Why troubles? Only troubles would hold

against the deep thawed mud.
Trunk by trunk we lay them down,
and if those back home need know

what it is we do, could this be worse
than saying we lay down men?
I've seen a road one year hence

where the trunks have snugged to earth.
If locust, they'll sprout new born,
a shallow forest marking through

an older place. What gift do we give
to the ground? We sweat for death
and moving forward, but here we leave

a different path, harder, more easy to bear.
Liable to sprout at any turn.

The Blockaded Children

Tonight, January 6, 1864, once more
I saw them. Not even cold duty up the mast
nor sleet that brazens the eye and turns
my coat to iron will keep them away.

Starve what you can't kill, a rule
for pagans walled in stone.
Off Hampton Roads we sail
until we know the waves as well as land.

Through my glass I peer
across the spray-tipped water.
I pull the ghosts apart.
I make them into foam.

The distant low-rigged mast my fading will
would overlook. Jump the side, and walk home.
I step towards the children in their beds
by the low fire, by the table with its empty

place at head. I cannot hear them
but see their faces. My feet deceive
the embrace of water,
although the wind knows more than I.

Or else the Hand above us moves
aimlessly. Though we make them die, the children
are stalks upon the mountain that would turn
the wind and break the deadly storm.

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