

BENJAMIN GOLUBOFF

The Fairy Fleet at Fredericksburg.

It took a long time for the storm
to break at Fredericksburg.
Lincoln held Burnside's feet to the fire.
The General temporized
while the engineering battalions
delayed, and the pontoon bridges
for the assault across the Rappahannock
were late to arrive.

During the lull there was a week
of indian summer weather.
In those mild days
the two great armies
—Potomac, Northern Virginia—
lay in repose like bedfellows,
the river between.
Smoke from Secession's cookfires
mingled, over its waters, with smoke
from the Union camp.
On Marye's Heights,
where Lee's batteries were poised,
and where in just days
Rebel sharpshooters

would harrass the building of the pontoons,
the Johnnies turned a spyglass on
the Bluejackets playing baseball.

A holiday atmosphere had descended
on the Rappahannock:
a school outing, a berrying party.
Sentries on the river crossed
to their counterparts and chatted in the shallows.
Men of both armies put tiny
sailboats on the river and sent them
on the winds to an enemy that seemed,
under the spell of weather and delay,
no longer so hostile.

The boats were made from
the scroungings of the camps:
ordnance crates and barrel staves,
gunny sacks, cartridge cases,
and the soft pulpy timber of
riverside cottonwoods.
Caulked with tar and oakum,
they bore little cargoes to
the other side.
The Confederacy had seen no coffee
since the blockade began in '61.
Burnside's Yankees sent theirs across,
ounce by ounce,
on the little boats to Lee's men.
The Johnnies had no shoes,
many of them,
or blankets or tents,
but they had God's own plenty of tobacco:
sleek, fragrant plugs and
twists of Virginia Brightleaf.
These they shipped to the enemy.
Each side sent the other their newspapers.

For a week before
the bloodshed began the tiny
vessels crossed and re-crossed the river,
bearing compassionate freight.
One observer wrote that “the waters
were fairly dotted with the fairy fleet.”

It couldn't last, of course:
the lull, the amity, the little
voyages of good will.
Finally Burnside sent Hooker's
and Sumner's divisions across
the belated pontoons to clear the
town and seize the strongpoints
on the Heights.
But they did neither of these.
Lee sent them shattered and
bloody back across the river—
those whom his batteries
and crack-shot infantry
had not sent to a heaven
made doubtful by the death
of Calvin's God.

The Rappahannock rolled on,
as rivers do in songs,
bearing no gifts.

BENJAMIN GOLUBOFF teaches at Lake Forest College. In addition to a modest list of scholarly publications he has placed imaginative work—poetry, fiction, and essays—in numerous small-press journals. Some of his work can be read at <http://www.lakeforest.edu/academics/faculty/goluboff/>.