

A L L E N   S T E I N

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## Henry Fleming's Faded Red Badge

Showing my teeth and snarling curses,  
hunched low like a fullback,  
I grabbed the flag from a falling kid  
and led the smoky way  
toward the fire-flashing gray lines.

Later, men patted my soaked back,  
and my colonel smiled  
and called me wildcat.

That was my first fight,  
Chancellorsville,  
fifty years gone yonder now.

The Johnnies whipped us that day,  
but for me that mattered little.  
As we slogged off through liquid mud,  
weary and wet under a wretched sky,  
my shoulders were squared,  
my jaw set, and my prospects bright,  
for I saw this world was a world for me.  
My bandaged brow throbbed  
a drumbeat pulsing my pride

at what I'd done before others' eyes.

And what none had seen,  
that I never told—  
I'd skedaddled early on  
as Stonewall's Rebs swept toward me,  
howling through the morning mists.  
Later, seeing a squirrel scamper  
from my shield pinecone,  
I assured myself  
I'd simply followed Nature's law.  
It seemed no less natural, I suppose,  
when I soon left my tattered comrade  
babbling and bleeding  
in the tall weeds beside the road.  
Of these I never spoke.

After Appomattox,  
I marched home a hero  
and through a half-century  
of days and nights.

Seeing me working my fields,  
folks still salute as they ride by.  
Sitting at the cracker barrel  
and pot belly stove in town,  
they hear and nod as I speak,  
a local vestige of ancient glory.  
My sons' sons ask about the war,  
and their eyes go wide  
as I tell of Gettysburg, Petersburg,  
and that charge at Chancellorsville.  
Of what preceded, I never tell  
and never will.

The time for telling came and went.  
And I hold my head as high

as ever I did that day I marched off  
through the mud and the cold,  
warmed by memories of pats on the back  
and an echoing voice saying “wildcat.”

Too many nights, though, near dawn,  
I hear things in the breeze—  
bugle calls,  
men and horses making ready,  
far off across my meadow  
in the dark of the tree line.  
And I know that the tattered man is there,  
and those that held the line and died  
while I fled  
and tossed pine cones at squirrels.  
I stare out my window  
till they leave with the sunrise.  
They will never charge;  
no, they wait for me to bare my breast  
and rush wildly to them,  
their strayed comrade.  
I never will.  
Defeated each time, I return to bed,  
my eyes smarting in the morning glare,  
soon to endure another day in my march,  
another day with shoulders squared  
and head held high.

What ever made me think  
this world was one for me?

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