

DANIEL TOBIN

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## A Centenary

(Maplewood Graveyard, Charlottesville)

Among the gapped, moss-sunken slabs  
of this Confederate cemetery  
where the trucks of Route 20  
tousle yews beyond its rusted pickets,  
an elaborate obelisk stands, the tallest marker,  
whose name in Roman scrollwork makes me laugh:  
Hottop, Adalbert Finke, born 1888, died 1899—  
“Suffer the little children to come unto me.”

Were he born seventy years later  
to my childhood’s gray streets  
and not these lush Virginia hills,  
he might have lived beyond eleven, as I lived  
past my days of emergency rooms and oxygen tents,  
the attacks fewer with shots and technology.  
He might have watched, as I watched,  
planes with their cargo of body bags  
on the TV news, documentaries of The World at War,  
the spindly white bodies like mannequins  
bulldozed into their mass graves;  
or maybe learned the word “genocide”  
from a Time-Life history of the twentieth century,  
slowly waking, as his parents hoped, “to a knowledge  
of the world,” as he tried to learn compassion.

None of it would have done him much good  
when my friends and I corralled him down the block,  
or in the dark part of the schoolyard behind the handball wall  
the monitoring nuns couldn’t see behind.  
There, we’d have mocked him till someone smashed his glasses,

or one of us, whose conscience suddenly woke,  
let him break through the vicious ring  
to run weeping home. How many of us were caught  
in that circle, saw those faces contorted  
with timeless cruelty, and took his place among them?

As it is, I picture him in some big parlor chair  
on his father's lap, listening to stories of the Civil War;  
or in bed, his mother's hand wiping his forehead  
as he spits slick blood into a cup.  
Maybe, before his lungs collapsed to useless sacks,  
he was the brat springing from behind doors  
to scare the maids and nurses, being groomed  
in the town for a minor greatness,  
this garish monument the mark of that hope.

Now crows gather in the live oak  
that shades his grave. It must be hard to see  
through the dirt and clumped grass of himself,  
through oak limbs raising themselves toward the sky,  
to see the plane's vapor trail skirting the emptiness,  
to see my face, so much nearer. And if he could,  
would I be recognized? Had we grown up together,  
I'd have laughed him off the block  
with the others of my kind, have cursed him  
for his awkwardness, for a name.  
Dead child, would you have been a good man?  
I leave you to the ground, to the crumbling walls  
and thriving green.

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Daniel Tobin teaches at Carthage College. His work has appeared in *Poetry*, *The American Scholar*, *The National Forum*, *The Tampa Review*, and elsewhere.