

A Stop At Stone's River

Written for my father, Donald Warren Vanderboegh, and my son, Matthew Bradley Vanderboegh. Dedicated to Jannes "Cornelius" Vanderboegh, Private in the 21st Michigan Volunteer Infantry and in Battery G (Hescock's), 1st Missouri Light Artillery, who was wounded and captured December 31, 1862.

There was an old man I knew once, who said
Raindrops were God's tears.
"The world is so wicked," he vowed, "That every now and then,
God can only cry for what he made.
And in weeping, rinse us clean again...
If only for a little while.

The old man is dead now, but I thought of him
When I got out of the car, into the cold drizzle of late December.
I was looking for a place
Where my blood had been, once,
Long, long before my birth.

Not many seasons from Holland it was, when he came to
This place
in the cedars.
Fleeing revolution, he found a new country, and soon,
a war.
"We are coming Father Abraham, three hundred thousand strong."
For what?
Freedom? Whose? And Why?
Once among the rocks, it didn't matter.
Or, maybe it mattered too much.

It was this place I had come to find.
His place.
Our place.
To this spot, in Hell's middle ground.
Then, it was shrieks, and sighs,
Curses and prayers,
That no one heard for the noise.
FOR THE NOISE!

In a solid wall, booms and bangs fused into a universe of deaf pain.

The Johnnies charged through a cotton field, and paused
To pluck the raw bolls and stuff their ears...

It did no good.

They ran on, and he killed them

With each blast of the Parrot.

The canister shredded them, cotton still hanging
from their dead ears.

He had no cotton.

His Lieutenant screamed into his ear, inches away,

He could not hear.

He shook his head, and the officer motioned

Until he understood and put his shoulder to the wheel of
the gun

And moved it, again to greet more Johnnies,

Always more.

But now, it was quiet in the rain,

except for the whizzing of traffic on the road.

Then,

It had been called the Wilkinson Pike.

Now, it was something else...Manson Road or something.

Had Charles M. come from here? He could have.

The ground was soaked with blood.

A lady stopped her van on the road and hollered at me,
walking back to the car.

It was, she said, a heckuva place to stop.

Didn't I know

it was a dangerous road?

Her niece had just been killed in a car wreck,

a little ways from there last week.

In her own pain, the woman cried out,

Didn't I know it was a dangerous road?

Well, it always had been. Didn't she know?
That's what I thought.
But instead, I tried to tell her that
my Great-Great (how many greats?) Grandfather had been wounded
in this place.
But she rolled up her window and drove away,
fed up with tourists.
Her blood was too fresh to worry about the old.

It was fresh then, too.
Oh, by the gallon it was fresh.
Near where the niece died, an Illinois boy
a long way from home
walked up to his Colonel during a lull and handed in his musket.
He had to "go home on furlough, now," said,
"he couldn't fight anymore, but he'd leave his rifle for another."

Then the boy asked the Colonel if he knew
where he could find a doctor.
And the Colonel looked down, then,
and saw the boy's intestines were hanging down to his legs,
Threatening to touch the ground.
The Colonel pointed toward the log house
that served as an excuse for a hospital
and the boy shambled off,
looking for a place to die.

The boy didn't find his place until the next day.
Screaming out his last hours,
Screaming that his guts were on fire,
and please God would someone put it out?
Happy New Year's Day, it was, 1863.
Auld Lang Syne in Tennessee.
So, you see, the niece had company when she died,
for it was a dying place.

I found HIS place,
the cedars gone now,
the rocks still there.
Where his brave, screaming Lieutenant died trying to save
his guns,
out of ammunition.
He took a minie' ball in the face
and it blew the back of his head off.
He was mercifully dead before he hit the ground.

It's someone's side yard now,
nice house, well-kept lawn.
The Ditch
where the disemboweled horses lay screaming,
lay in their harnesses screaming,
always screaming,
everybody and everything screaming,
their death ditch is filled with beer bottles and McDonald's bags.
No monuments here,
only ghosts and trash.

The Johnnies on three sides,
They were trying to get the guns out.
The Lieutenant already dead,
all the horses dead or dying,
They pulled the Parrots by hand over the rocks,
the Johnnies right behind.
The battery beside them overrun before their eyes,
Bayonets and sabres against rammers and handspikes
and rocks...
They fought like demons
until the grey tide swallowed them.

The infantry had run too--no more ammunition.
Somehow, they saved the Guns--
their's alone.

THEY saved them, not He.

For HE was down,
at THIS place.

Shot in the hip, he lay amongst the rocks and wondered
if he was dying.

Thousands lay around him, already dead.

Those who survived would search for words to describe this place.

They settled on, "The Slaughter Pen."

He made it to the log house, and lay down
beside the boy whose guts were afire.

Did he crawl?

Or was he helped by a Johnnie, looking for a buddy?

Outside, a pile of arms and legs grew larger,
the drizzle and the moonlight
made them into glistening white worms,
like maggots gone riot.

And all night long the boy screamed.

You can still see the "hospital,"
(or rather, where it was).

Someone's back yard it is now.

Dead leaves neatly raked.

Manicured lawn.

Do they hear the screaming, late at night?

Do you think, Somewhere,

between sleep and consciousness,

do they hear the boy begging for someone to kill him?

I hope so.

From this place,
this Slaughter Pen,
HE was taken, a prisoner.
Long Journey to the Libby Hell,
and through it,
until he was finally exchanged.
His war over.

He went back to his farm in Michigan, living out his life
in pain
from that day,
that place.
And from him
came me, my father, my son.

How many times did he wake
in the cold Michigan nights
of later Decembers?
Sitting up straight in bed, bathed in sweat and screams?
How often did the Lieutenant die in the dark,
or the white worms glisten in the moonlight of another night?
Did his wife know when he heard the screams?
Could SHE hear them?

Today, I returned to his place,
looking for a part of me, and finding more.
There are places where time and space intersect--where
you can stand Today and feel Yesterday
looking over your shoulder,
or see it played out in front of your eyes.
Hear it screaming in your ears.

How permanent is Time?
More lasting than Place?
Do they still fight today, in long lines of screaming men?
Running through the carports,
Firing in the living rooms,
Taking shelter behind the BMWs?
When the blond-headed Tennessee boy
dies in the bathroom,
the cotton still sticking from his ears,
does his hand touch the commode?

The dark and bloody ground still claims its victims--
with so much Death
Compressed in one place
Could it be otherwise?
Death lives on past its time,
and even if it does not,
Should we build houses in our own cemeteries?
Should we play on killing fields?
Bathe in Slaughter Pens?

Can even God's Tears ever cleanse such a place?
I wondered as we drove away
from his place,
from his slaughter pen.
I understood what had happened to Him that day--
not yet fully understanding what had happened to me
this day.

And through it all, it was raining.

M.V. December 31, 1989