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A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK

THE HEART OF WAR

POEMS BY CARMINE SARRACINO

CARMINE SARRACINO was born in Providence, Rhode Island and grew up in the community of Italian immigrants on Federal Hill. After attending Rhode Island College and the University of Michigan, he spent much time in South Asia on research grants, including two Fulbright Fellowships. A specialist in the poetry of Walt Whitman and nineteenth century American literature, his lifelong interest in the Civil War led to this collection of poems, many of which have appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *The Laurel Review*, *The Beloit Poetry Journal*, *War in Literature and the Arts*, and elsewhere.

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Parallel Press is an imprint of the University of Wisconsin–Madison Libraries.

PARALLEL PRESS
Memorial Library
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728 State Street
Madison, WI 53706

A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

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Poems by
CARMINE SARRACINO



PARALLEL PRESS • 2004

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ISBN 1-893311-37-6

“The Courage of Sergeant Miller” and “The Cowardice of Corporal Hughes” appeared in *The Beloit Poetry Journal*; “Armory Square Hospital” appeared in *Prairie Schooner*; “Mary Chesnut at Mulberry House” appeared in *The Laurel Review*; “Hospital Ships” appeared in *The Bryant Literary Review*; “Sunrise at Sharpsburg, April, 1866” and “The Battlefield Museum Guide Speaks” appeared in *War, Literature and the Arts*.

Published by Parallel Press
University of Wisconsin – Madison Libraries

<http://parallepress.library.wisc.edu>

FIRST EDITION

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For Daniel Hoffman

*Go to your bosom; knock there, and ask your heart
what it doeth know. . . .*

—William Shakespeare

The Battlefield Museum Guide Speaks

I.

Here they come
in minivans, SUV's, Honda Accords
converging on this town from north and south.

Just like those thirsty, dust-choked troops,
marching, staggering . . . booted, barefoot . . . sunstroked
. . . on the Carlisle Pike, the Taneytown Road . . . jammed
with caissons, cavalry, ambulances, beeves on the hoof.

Banners snapped in the wind. Riders pulled up shouting,
pointing. Drovers cursed and cracked their blacksnakes,
the wagons heaped with ammunition, rations, dog tents,
stoves, kettles, pans, entrenching tools, and with stacks
and stacks and not nearly enough pine boxes.

Before the lines could even form
surgeons rushed setting up tables.

2.

What myth
what delusion
draws them to Little Roundtop
Devil's Den, Cemetery Ridge?

What do they imagine happened here?
("Now I see" Whitman wrote, "war is just *butchery!*
The glistening weapons—tools for slaughter!")

Don't they know that?

Or is there still a truth that draws?

3.

See the Rotarian in baseball cap and oldguy shorts,
how his shoulders hunch around the place in his chest,
scarred still, aching still since the morning his daughter,
just nine, was diagnosed. How he cared for her
giving every pill in proper order at 2 AM . . . at 5 AM . . .
petting her hair, touching a small sponge to her cracked lips.

Intently he aims his camera at the spot
Chamberlain and remnants of the 20th Maine
—bleeding, outnumbered, out of ammunition—
refused to give up. Facing odds as impossible
as surviving leukemia in 1960. As impossible
as surviving the death of one's child. He snaps
a picture of where they fixed bayonettes
and charged—by God!—*charged!*

4.

So they come and they come, bumper to bumper.
The young for what they suspect true.
The old for what they know true.

5.

And you, reader?
Haven't you been marched
toward what you could not bear?

Didn't you fear
you might run?
Did you run?

Haven't you carried
a comrade hanging on your neck?

Does the cold ache your scars?

You know, then, don't you

what hallows this ground?

And why they come.

6.

I have arranged the exhibits.

Polished the glass.

I unlock the doors,
and open them wide.

For you?

First Days

1.

Lemonade and bunting,
a fife and drum corps,
pretty girls at the podium
rousing the boys!
Kissing the flushed lads
signing the roster:
Three cheers for each
and a *Yankee Doodle!*

Round bonfires at night
town fathers pass flasks
and handfuls of stogies.
You are soldiers now lads!

Arms across shoulders
the elders toast
On to Richmond!

Fists in the air
the boys respond
Richmond! To Richmond!

Oh luminous faces!
Mouths agape
laughing, cheering,
ghastly bright.

2.

At the depot hankies wave,
roses arc into the ranks.
All the lads doff their caps!

Then hissing and banging
in chuffs of steam

the cars pull out
throb down the tracks
and are utterly gone!

In the stunning quiet
the ladies begin to weep.

Blossoms and petals
litter the ground . . .

3.
like the parasols of silk
and the opera glasses
trampled

by picnickers fleeing
cloudbursts of shrapnel.

Caissons tear across
calico blankets. Blood
spatters sandwich hampers.

In a dash for the bridge
couples lose mates,
reach back, lock fingers,
and snap apart again.

At the arch they jam and back up:
Congressmen, judges, town fathers
their sweethearts, wives, and children—
A swarm
of dishevelment and wild eyes!

Fretting and moaning
—*What hell is this!*—
the ladies avert their eyes
from a headless body
swaying in an eddy.

To cross! To cross back!

With the flats of swords
Captains and file closers
curse and swat them,
clearing a line of retreat
for the boys
stumbling, hopping.

Some held at head and feet
slack between comrades—
hands pressing dark stains
or trailing limp along the ground.

And that was First Bull Run.

All desperate!

Desperate to cross back!

Mary Chesnut at Mulberry House

I don't know when I have seen a woman without knitting in hand. Socks for the soldiers is the cry.

—Mary Chesnut, Diary, August 27, 1861

I.

Mary puts down her Emerson and takes up the socks,
her pair for the day. Birdlike hands flutter in her lap.
Needles twinkle in the slant of sun lengthening
across the silk carpet . . . climbing the paneled wall. . . .

In the fields around the mansion, a thousand slaves
hoe, boil soap, milk cows, haul feed in the July sun.

As if they had not heard with their own ears
the rockets and shells bombard Sumter in the harbor.
As if they could not read Mars Chesnut's—the Colonel's—
looks from horseback: *Do you understand at all?*
—*Inscrutable creatures!*

How much do they understand?

2.

Under that July sun Eustice Hammy at Rich Mountain
stands in a skirmish line against McClellan's troops
in line of battle firing by file: line of puffs, line of puffs. . . .
Just like drill! Eustice smiles in wonder
even as the "bees" buzz round his head.

He levels his musket, aims. . . .

A minie ball strikes his shinbone just above
the top of a sock knitted by Mary Chesnut
—the sound like a rock hurled
against a woodplank fence!

Two inches of tibia blow out the back
of his calf in a red spray, tossing
both legs in a jig that sends him sprawling.

Oh, destruction is the miracle
of creation turned on its head.

Not all the king's men
could put together again
those splinters of tibia and fibula,
the gastrocnemius in tatters.

Still in its boot, in its cotton sock,
the perfect architecture of the foot.
Phalanges and metatarsals,
lateral, medial and middle cuneforms,
so beautifully knitted—drop
beside the surgeon's table.

3.
There!
The shape of the adult male foot
dangles from her needles. Done.
The sun touches the ceiling, almost.

Boom!
goes the gun of a battery drilling
and her start drives a needle's point
into Mary's palm. The cotton sock
wicks the red pearl, and another,
and still one more. She pulls angrily
at the stains and watches stitches skip
and pop undone until the sock
is a cotton tangle in her lap.

Mary wants with her nails
to shred the yarn's fibers,
return the fibers to balls, the balls
to the pods that vex the slaves
at harvest, picking even by moonlight,
singing so balefully as the mountain
rises . . . the immoveable mountain
of . . . Of. . . *this life!* Of discussing Emerson!
Of wit! Manners, Parisian dresses, and ballrooms!
Of *savoir faire!*

She finds herself weeping
as if she could feel the cold fingertip
of that demon Sherman in the wilds
hunched over his table. . . .

Certain
(though acclaim
has eluded him)
his day will come.

Trailing a fingertip
across the Mason Dixon.
Down to Georgia.
Slicing Atlanta.
To South Carolina.

—He stabs his finger
onto the map—
Charlestown Harbor!

The “Millwoods.”
The “Cool Springs.”
The “Mulberry Houses.”

The very heart.

The Cowardice of Corporal Joseph Hughes

His jaw vanished entirely! The length of tongue
wormed out the bubbling hash of his throat
like maggots in the beef rations I boiled.

Soldiers vanished in ranks and returned to view
out of all order in bits raining down as I ran
from that speechless standing corpse, the detritus
on the field, past comrades hobbling, crawling, as if in extreme
forgetfulness of feet and limbs left behind. Officers
waved hangers, mouths open and voiceless like the dead.

All the way to the abandoned town I fled
and in the third house found suitable clothes
and left my uniform sprawled on the floor,
no one bleeding into the blue, and departed

a live man out of a dead
in some husband's homespun
heading north to catch up the evacuees, north
toward Providence, toward Hannah and my girls,

whose names I recited aloud as I joined
the exodus of mothers clutching babes, greybeards
staggering carts of heirlooms and chickens,

and so turned quite away from the field of honor,
of duty, of every impediment to the fealties
of my own hard-beating heart.

The Courage of Sergeant Kurt Miller

The ball took me in the rear of my hip
as I turn'd to rally the companie, our Captain
on one knee coughing blood, Lt. Hooker
tramped under a casson that run away.

So it come down to me.

Without command the boys were clos'd off,
too far forward to retreat and chew'd
by the volleys of Virginians before us.

I thought of mother and wisht I might live
just so long to be hit in the chest or face
and so not bring her shame, nor any folks at home.

My new boots nicely took up the blood
so leening upon my rifle I remained
to all apperance strong and able.
In this way I commanded the charge.

Splendidly bayonetes bristling, the boys
pitched in licketty cut and routed the rebs!
Then righting about on my command
enfiladed the ranks of sesech at our rear.

I keeled over then and was carried back
and borded upon this hospital ship
where I woke and found myself alive not dead.

But they whipped us bad in that terrible fight.
Chancelorsville. They whipped us again.

There's worst damned things than dieing.

Armory Square Hospital, Washington, D. C. January, 1863

In Ward E, cot nearest stove: Erastus Haskell,
Company K, 141st New York Volunteers.
Typhoid. Diarrhea.
(Killers deadlier than the minie ball,
the canister shot, the bayonet.)
For the typhoid, stimulants: whiskey,
and wine punch. For the diarrhea:
cotton felt bellyband. Though burning
with fever, he shakes with cold.
Still-tanned face—waxy. Eyes glazed. Breathes
in shallow gulps and gasps. Dreaming, he moans.
He will die tonight.

Next cot: Thomas Haley, Company M,
New York Cavalry, shot through lungs.
Whiskey stimulant. For lungs, turpentine.
(Expected to die within a day, yet he lives.
Strong, 16 year old farm boy, he lives
another five days. Dies quietly,
in a manly way,
to make mother and father proud.)

Next to Haley: Oscar Wilber, Company G,
154th New York, shot through right hip.
Wound probed to remove bone fragments
and foreign matter. Packed with lint, bandaged.
Stimulants administered. Blue Mass for constipation.
*Back on a farm just outside Brooklyn
mother calls father from beyond the fields,
where he cuts wood. She waves a letter
over her head. "Oscar is in Virginia!
He is well!—Says he is gaining weight
while—oh, heavens!—he is gaining
while all the others are losing!"*
She shouts as father lifts his knees,

chuffing uphill through snow,
white puffs around his head.
“Been there ‘most a week . . .
—must be two now—Place
by name ‘a—Fredericksburg?”

See that man with the bushy grey beard?
Walking the aisles cot by cot—
who gives Samuel Frezer a small jar of jelly . . .
and Isaac Snyder cut plug for his pipe,
as per request . . . and an orange for Lewy Brown,
left arm cut off. . . . Moving slowly, smiling,
responding never to the gagging stench
of gangrene, the sight of oozing wounds,
(“Mother,” he writes home, “I see every day
such terrible terrible things. One day
I shall have bad dreams. . . .”)

—who comes to Oscar Wilber and leans close
whispering encouragement in his ear
like the father, pulling up the blanket
around his shoulders like the mother. . . .

—who sits by Thomas Haley, 16,
and slowly reads Psalm 23:
“. . . yea, though I walk through the valley
of the shadow of death, I fear no evil. . . .”
then kisses his hair, as he was kissed
to sleep in his bed at home. . . .

—who comes at last to Erastus Haskell near the stove,
his breath a low rattle, and takes his hand . . .
sits there long at his side . . . then folds
the hands, closes the lids, and remains,
silent, through the night.

In his heart he hears every tongue that was tied:
Wilber, Haley, Frezer, Snyder, Brown, Haskell.
With original energy, each speaks to him his life
in this war, his death. Without check they speak.
At times he covers his face with his hands.

Come dawn, he hunches his shoulders,
pushes palms down on rests—
his elbows shake—

and he rises to go and tell it now,
rises to go and tell it all.

The Hospital Ships

They might have freighted drygoods—
blouses and trousers, spools of bright
gingham—from ports to upriver towns.
But these days they carry farmboys, mostly.
Like this load of New Yorkers in stacked
white hammocks stained red, none of whom
ever before traveled 20 miles from home.

Under a crescent moon the ships
churn into Baltimore harbor, slowly rocking,
creaking, so that many of the boys, dreamy
with anodynes, smile into their mothers' faces.

Some will be delivered dead. Others
missing the legs, hands, feet and arms dropped
beside the surgeons' tables for burial in pits.
Many expected to heal in days will die.

Soiled gauze must be removed, slough washed off,
fresh lint and bandage reapplied. The boys will need
someone to write a letter, read the Bible, someone
to return the next day, and promise to return again.

This time of night in Baltimore
whorehouses and bar rooms ring with revelry
(the good citizens tucked long since abed)
as these ships steam in from Chancellorsville.

At the end of Wharf 6, in the dark,
a sack of oranges at his feet,
Walt Whitman stands waiting.

Lice

I.

Ticks like plums a season
plumped empurpled. Spotting
(if not spotted) white drawers
with their bursting. Burn
out the head then and done.

Bushwhacker fleas
fled back to thickets
of horse mane and mule hair,
thatched hides
of beeves on the hoof.

Lice however!

Lice

never

quit.

For one cracked
two hatched.

2.

In camp, betting the quickest:
which of two dropped in the middle
of a pine stump reached the barkline first.

Betting the biggest. And story was
this webfoot in First Tennessee
rode his winner, saddled and bucking.

Betting, one drunken night

the prettiest.—This,
with aspersions cast
upon sweethearts and mothers,
resulted in an ugly melee.

3.
Like monkeys the men
casually groomed one another,
plucking mustaches
and burnsides while chatting.

Sometimes in rivers entirely naked
they seared their bodies with lye soap,
sudsing the bushes at armpit and crotch.

(Then on the banks the lice hid out
in hatbands trouser seams and limp socks.)

Other times singing out "*Lice soup!*"
they stirred their drawers in steamy pots.

(Then in haversack folds the toes of boots
in blanketweave lice mama'd their nits.)

In hospitals nurses stripped the infested
and bonfired every crawling rag.
Scoured top to bottom red-pocked skins.

A while the men, licefree, smiled.

Then the nurses
twitched and jigged,
scratching here and scratching
lordamercy *there!*

4.

Longstreet listened to Lee
plan the placement of guns
back of Pickett to cover the charge.

Every proposal Longstreet gainsaid,
resisting the slaughter impending.

As he was about to object
“*Sir, if the guns fail. . . .*”
(as the guns did indeed fail)

a greyback caught his attention
crossing the bridge of the General’s nose.

Lee penciled a map unperturbed.

Between fingernails of the free hand
the General Commanding (Longstreet gaping)
cracked the louse deftly.

Another crawled from the same wirey brow.

And behind, yet another
comrade decamped.

Longstreet felt his eyes well up.

He saluted and turned, clenching
teeth so as not to blurt out—

The lice! The lice!

The cause was lost.

The Battlefield Photographer

Up from cellars the good citizens creep.
Crack doors and slowly nose out to peek.

Chickadees, the first birds back,
flit in and out the abatis of oaks.

In the fields Tim O'Sullivan prowls,
his camera like a weapon shouldered.

Subjects aplenty cover the ground:
Reclined in repose. On bellies flopped.

Twisted in gymnastic falls.
Fetally curled.

Leaned against stumps and wagon wheels.
Mowed in ranks like sheaves of wheat.

Bodies, no heads.
Legs, no bodies. Heads.

A solitary heap of insides here.
There a corpse with nary a scratch.

O'Sullivan unfolds his tripod
and pulls a stiff into better light.

Its eyes wide in utter surprise.
Mouth operatically holding a scream.

He closes the lids. Pushes
shut the mouth. Pushes again.

From the blouse he plucks a scrap
the dead man pinned going into the fray:

Sargent Kurt Miller 87 Penn
tumbles into drifts of cartridge litter.

O'Sullivan drags over a nearby gun
and props a Bible in blueblack hands.

Ah.
There!

Sets a three second exposure then withdraws
the glass plate to make a collodian print

in his wagon filled with acids and washes,
a darkroom built to chase the show.

He mails these prints to Mr. Brady
who shops them around

to scrabbling, backstabbing
editors bidding

for timely images of The War.

no more forever

When I remember all the true-hearted, the light-hearted, the gay and gallant boys who came laughing, singing, and dancing in my way the three years now past, how I have looked into their brave young eyes and helped them as I could in every way and then saw them no more forever . . . my heart breaks.

—Mary Chesnut, Diary, July 26, 1864

I.

Mary marches into the yard in the dark, leading Lawrence and Molly. “*Who remain, Lawrence? How many still loyal?*” In his slow and dignified way, Lawrence answers without pause: “*Mam, we all here. Din’t nobody go over, mam.*”

Just as she expected. *All remain.* She wished to speak that fact directly to Mrs. Stowe: Put that in your horrid book! *All remain!*

In the middle of a yard of slaves, Mary commands the field: swinging a lantern, pointing left and right, directing this one and that to hitch the wagon (no horses? find a mule!) fill a dozen jugs with milk, hunt provisions (beg them from neighbors!) and smartly pack fried chicken, rabbits, vegetables, sacks of flour.—Fruit is so scarce. And so desired. Oranges \$5 apiece!

Her silk dress trails a strip torn by some officer’s spurs. Molly flits around her—trying to repair the hem, to arrange her hair, fretting as Mary shoos her away.

So be it then.

In the rising sun, with all that can be mustered, she hies for the wards, Lawrence driving the mule. One hand at her breast clutches a shawl, the other holds her bonnet down.

Oh that Stonewall lived to ravage The Beast!
Oh to kill them, *kill them all*.
Her heart flames with Mr. Palmer's sermon—
Enough meek Christianity!

To fight and die like Joshua!

2.

In the stagnant wards
Mary almost hears the shriek
of shell and shot, ramrods'
clatter, the ear-splitting volley.

An atmosphere enshrouds these men:
the battlefield.

They are wrapped in its sights and sounds
as in the swads of cotton and gauze.

Sunken eyes catch hers. Stop her in her tracks.
Does she know this boy of imploring eyes?
She stands looking long.

Yes.

This is James . . . this is Wade . . . Robert . . . Preston
. . . Eustice . . . Samuel. . . Here oh yes is *Joshua*.

3.

She receives the news from Dr. Gibbes
bursting into her parlor:
*"Fire and the sword await us all—
Atlanta is fallen to Sherman!"*

*Ah, then,
that agony is over.*

Mary rises from her chair,
her back to Atlanta
crumbling
to blackened
chimneys.

She drops her knitting, lets
slip her shawl to the floor.

*Like David, when the child
was dead, I will get up
from my knees.*

*Will wash my face
and comb my hair.*

Day of Jubilo

I.

Thursdays was the whipping day.
They lined and caned us slaves
no matter we done wrong or not.
So come a Wednesday I felt blue.

On such a day misfortune fell.

In the shed, the monkeys picking our heads
that biggest called Caesar screams—
for he can find no boogies in my nap—
and thumps me with his fist. *Damnation!*

Mr. Jennings and even Aunt Mary laughed.
But the only one thing in my head was this:
Be whipping me tomorrow anyhow.

So I grab Caesar both hands on his foot
spin him round and slam him on the wall!

He lays out cold. Everybody stares.
Jaws so dropped I might have hung oil lamps.

There.

Now whip me for the wrong I *done*.

Next day they brought two men
special for my whipping.
One with a great beard and long lash
looped in coils. Both wore guns.

They come in the gate and to my surprise
from round the house here comes Ma at a run—
and lights on them a hawk on rats!

Grabbing the great beard in one hand
the long lash in the other. Kicking
and clawing like she was crazy
until Master Jennings screaming *Caroline!*
Damn you Caroline! pries her off.

I pounced the other, kicking him hard
in just that place to make him crumple up.
Cussing on his knees he pulled his gun.
Use your gun I yelled at him, *Use it*
and blow my brains out if you will!

2.

That night Ma touched my face.
She said Cornelia is the spit of her ma

and pushed a bundle in my hands.

You can't stay here no more.
Girl they will whip you dead.

She told me run wherever you can run.
Listen for the paddyrollers' dogs.
Look and pray for a Union camp.

If you're caught fight she said.
If you can't fight
kick. And if you can't kick *bite*.

We cried against each other a while
then she pushed me out into the night.

3.

Fifth or sixth night running in the dark
a whole hillside rose up all aglow with lights!
Back of that the next slope just the same,
and even the furthest gold with fires.

I prayed the Lord and walked in Jesus' name.

Halt comes a shout. *Who goes there?*

Praise God it *was* a Yankee voice!

Who goes?— *Who goes?*

I thought on this every day I hid.

Who was I now? What was my name to be?

Daddy was called Johnson till we were sold.

Then he was Jennings, new master's name.

In the dim I seen the soldier point his gun.

And another at his side leaned in looking hard.

I am Cornelia Caroline from Eden Tennessee.

The soldier looking hard, I heard him say

That be a nigger?

Come forward! calls out the other with the gun.

Come forward and identify yourself!

Bad Dreams

I.

In his rocker at an open window,
a glass of lilacs on the sill,
Walt enjoys the April noon.

The wind is right,
sweeping away the stink
of the fertilizer factory
and the slaughter house
across 328 Mickle Street.
Buffalo robe across his lap,
he sniffs the fresh, bright air. . . .

And remembers walks
on such days as this with Pete.
Meandering walks, miles
uphill and down . . . To the river,
along the banks to the markets
in soldier-crowded streets.
Choosing this peach, that orange,
and eating with juices dripping,
standing in the sun, grinning.

Speaking hardly a word.
A sideways glance, a smile,
striding together over
the awakened earth.

Afterward, oysters and beer
until morning almost! Then
away—arms across shoulders
like the phrenologist's symbol:
Comrades Together Walking.

Sign of adhesive love,
of manly love.

2.

Those blue shirts he sent. . . .
Did Pete ever receive? No word.
Not a letter. Not one visit.

Walt feels his face flush,
a fist clench his stomach.

“Mrs. D.!” he calls.

Too weak for these old fits!
What excess!
Morbid excess!

He pushes the robe half off,
removes the grey slouch hat,
and rocks, rocks. . . .
Until his breath is even
he rocks.

When he opens his eyes—
there stands Pete!
Beside the wood stove,
cap tilted on his head,
jaunty, the impish smile!
Wearing the blue overshirt,
with black kerchief at the neck,
just as Walt suggested!

Doyle!
Walt raises his arms
and Pete’s shirt opens—
intestines tangle out!—
His belly split with a wound,
maggoty, putrid. . . . Walt gags—
starts—awakens—gags again. . . .

The wind shifted!

Awake,
images keep flashing:
Hospital ships unload men
like bales all over the Baltimore docks—
Boys . . . pale . . . imploring—thousands!

“*Water! Water!*” they all cry.
Walt hasn’t enough water!
He moves too slow. Why can’t he move?—
His legs stick in deep puddles
of clotted blood! He cannot step!
Oh he cannot move his legs at all!

“Here . . . *here!* Why don’t you take the water?”
asks Mrs. Davis, at his side. “Is it the blurs?
Oh, drink . . . be still now . . . drink, please. . . .”

“*Yes, yes, the blurs, it’s the blurs*”
Walt lies, rubbing his eyes,
reaching slowly for the glass
as she wrinkles her nose
and thumps the window shut.

3.
All his life he dreamed of The Friend.
The One Who Never Fails.
To whom nothing needs be spoken.
Intimate as the Self.

But even surrounded—as if in a dream—
by hospitals full of camerados!—
not in one ward, in one row, in one cot,
did he find the unfailing friend. Not Pete.
Not Lew nor Harry nor Fred. Not one.

Walt adjusts the robe, pulls on his hat.
From the glass he plucks a sprig of lilac
and presses it to his lips.
Tiny blossoms fleck his white beard.

He rocks again, and rocks. . . .

Soon he is humming softly,
some song which only he hears.
Like some solitary bird.
Like the hermit thrush.

The Old Soldiers

I.

The old soldiers remembered mud.

They told grandchildren yarns
of a Private, Johnny Mudd.

Mud pulled on their aching legs, like a cruel prank.
Mud sucked shoes and boots right off their feet.
Mud mired wagons, cannon, caissons.
Mud swallowed mules, heaving and braying
until their flared nostrils closed over.
Until it looked like the drover was fishing
with rope for some mudfish he could not land.
Until he slashed the rope and glared, fists
on hips, at the last coil slipping
into the belching
goddam mud goddamit.

They did not remember battle, the old soldiers.
They remembered stories about battle.
Stories with beginnings, middles, endings,
they told and retold.
As if they understood what happened.

They remembered comrades most of all,
boys who'd played Ring Taw and Fives.
Fishing mates, pranksters, hunting pards.
Enlisting together, boarding trains together
to tent camps in Harrisburg . . . Providence . . .
Richmond . . . Charlotte. . . . Emerging
dressed up in kepis, frocks and sacks.
Bristling with Bowies, Colt's revolvers, bayonettes.
Swearing great oaths. Posing for ambrotypes.
Goosing one another with the muzzles of rifles.
Sharing canteens, blanketrolls, last hardtack crackers.

At Shiloh, Antietam, Fredericksburg, for love
of these comrades they laid down their lives.

To the old soldiers in rockers by the fire
a face did sometimes luminesce—
ghastly, eyes rolling—*Dear God!*
—*Oh Robert! Oh No!*—

And someone, niece or daughter, did ask
“*What’s wrong?*
Why do you stare at your hands so?”
And the old soldiers did not respond,

could not turn palms out and say
“*See! Robert . . . I held his head. . . .*”

No. They let their hands drop,
and shook their heads. Hiding in the abatis
of old age, the old soldiers.

On Memorial Day in uniform again,
or Sunday best, up Main Street they marched.
Displaying medals. Using canes. Their step
stiff, strained. Old age muddying every road.

2.

July 3, 1913
Gettysburg Battlefield
Cemetery Ridge

The old soldiers once boys here
reenacted Pickett’s Charge
one final time.

They looked across at each other,
rheumy eyes squinting in the sun.

Long and long each looked
at the other line of old soldiers.

At the signal to fire . . .
nothing.

Silence.

No one moved.

Wind ruffled their battle flags,
fluttered the streamers.

They looked at each other.

Not one moved.

Then someone dropped his rifle.
Then another and another.
Then all rifles together fell.

On stiff, faltering legs the blue and gray lines closed.
They embraced, the old soldiers, brothers hugging brothers.

This last time—they laughed and wept—
we damn well got it right this last chance time!

Sharpsburg at Sunrise in April, 1867

The morning blooms out of blackness
as out of nothingness itself.

Faint light

pours a shy green
into pokeweed and mullein,
into the tender, shooting
new grass covering all;

stirs clouds into
bluebrown Antietam Creek;

touches gold
a cord of braid
in the beak of a robin,
her breast reddening
like remembered joy.

On a sandy patch
she snapped the threads
from a rag of sleeve.

Small bones there
in perfect order lay,
like the exhibit
of a marvel:

The Human Hand

(which can
set a gunner's level
or trace at parting
the outline of a lover's chin).

With her prize the robin hops
to the dead mouth of a brass gun.

She glances quick left and right,
then drops straight in—

out of sight.

Note on the Historical Aspects of the Chapbook

These are poems, not history, but I have grounded them all in historical fact and then, in many cases, taken liberties with them. South Carolinian Mary Chesnut's journal entries are accurate, but from there I have imaginatively entered her life and her mind to expand on those entries. Some characters are completely invented, such as Sergeant Miller and Corporal Hughes, but they are composites of actual soldiers I came to know from their letters and journals. These poems, then, tell all the truth, but, as Emily Dickinson prescribed for poets, tell it slant.



THE HEART OF WAR

by Carmine Sarracino

is the thirtieth publication of the Parallel Press,
an imprint of the University of Wisconsin – Madison Libraries.

Series design by Tracy Honn.

Typeset in Scala by Greg Britton.

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PARALLEL PRESS

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ISBN 1-893311-37-6