Just Before the Battle, Mother

In the Civil War song that she stands by her upright piano singing
In our streetcorner living room, in preparation for a solo recital
Of standards, hymns, and parlor songs later this afternoon
At the Orchard Park senior home, for residents in the activities room,
I hear her keep repeating the opening phrase in her light lyric soprano,
Just before the battle, mother, with subtle changes of pitch and tone,
Just before the—Just before the—Just before the battle, mother,
Until she gets it right and moves along to the next lines.

I am thinking most of you, she continues, assuming the personae
Of a soldier in gray or blue, *While upon the field we're watching,*
With the enemy in view. Touching with her tongue in her cheek
The sappy sentimental notes of that very maudlin number
With nineteenth century aplomb, she understates the *you/view* rhyme,
Keying on that upright piano the notes that her accompanist,
The elegant octogenarian Bonnie or the mad Russian Tanya,
At the grand piano will play to follow along. Then she clears her throat,
Takes the pencil from behind her left ear, and writes a note

In the margin of the sheet music, in a left-handed cursive
Made illegible by a tremor that might enhance the vibrato in her voice.
From the perspective of a soldier who would die for the enslaved,
Or for the right to enslave, whether he actually believed
In what he did for duty or not, she wanders from her music stand
In white jeans, sandals, and teal top, then walks across the carpet
And back to the piano again, brushing back her auburn hair
And letting the light from the window polish her buff complexion.

Daughter of an eccentric Protestant father and a modest Jewish
Mother from the Bronx, she was raised as a pacifist Quaker
In southwestern New Hampshire, not far from Boston, that hub
Of both radical 19th century abolitionism and angry 20th century
Racial segregation. And so she practices a mournful song
Of war among the contradictions, knowing there wouldn't have been
A Civil War to begin with, or demagogues bent on scapegoating
Blacks for the votes of gullible whites, if white supremacist
Europeans hadn't abused their power over Africans.

She corrects herself once again, polishing the song, giving
A smoother spin to one or two of the syllables each time, clearing
Her throat again and trying the first verse once more. She sings it
In its entirety now, to be sure she's got it right, pairing "you" and "view"
Perfectly to their notes, then moving along to the next lines, too—
Comrades brave are 'round me lying,/Filled with thoughts of home and God,/
For well they know that on the morrow,/Some will sleep beneath the sod—
While I listen from the kitchen stove, stirring the chickpea stew.

To the Editor of the *Plain City Advocate*

Thanks to Warren Yoder, a Mennonite organic livestock farmer
Whose pacifist ancestors probably objected to the Civil War,
For pausing his work in the garden at the library for a minute
To answer my question about the approximate locations
Of the graveyards where the veterans in my ancestry are buried
And the street where my father was born at the end of World War I—
And for continuing from there with a tangential 20-minute discussion
Of sustainable agriculture—when I arbitrarily identified him
As the first lucky victim of my quest for connection here
And ambled over from the sidewalk with a nod of my head.

Thanks to the docent in the local historical society's storefront office
Between the Bible bookstore and the redneck bar on Main Street
For agreeing with me wholeheartedly, winking behind
Her husband's back, that the McMansion subdivisions
Filling up the fields on the edge of town, along Big Darby Creek
Where my first-generation German American grandfather
Hunted turtles for soup when courting my local grandmother,
Were at least as ugly as sin when I dropped by to see
If anyone knew where the beer-drenched pool hall used to be
That one of my grandmother's more adventurous older sisters,
With two of her younger, rather dissolute brothers, ran.

Thanks to the chubby farmer on the seat of his John Deere tractor,
At rest with his helper and son in his Adams Road barnyard
After a morning of haying or bringing in the soybeans,
For calling on his cell phone his equally elderly neighbor, Marge,
To see if she might know where the 200-acre farm
And the red-brick farmhouse with white wooden trim might be
That, according to family papers bequeathed unto me
Many years before, belonged to my great-great-grandfather
On my father's mother's side, when I pulled up and hopped out,
With a little more enthusiasm than I probably should have,
Of the rusted white hybrid 2007 Toyota Prius
That my wife and I won in a Boston public-radio raffle on WBUR—
And thanks to him for saying, with reference to the license plates,
When I came back from checking out the cabin across the creek
That his ancestors acquired from the original homesteaders
After they moved to the area in the early 1850s,
"Massachusetts, huh? Isn't that where Biden's from?"

And thanks to everyone else in Plain City, Ohio, the seat
Of Union County, thirty miles northwest of the capital, Columbus,
Where those ancestors on my father's side who fought for the Union
In the Civil War are buried—not just that great-great-grandfather
But his father as well, and two of my great-great-uncles

Who died, according to my records, in unnamed battles
Somewhere in the South—and where I wish I'd been
When the whole town showed up for the coming-home parade
In late April of 1865, now that the lilacs in the dooryards
Had just begun to bloom, and the forsythia to fade.

At the Old County Courthouse Museum

After flattering the mannequin in the middle of the pedestal,
The one more likely to have been my antebellum type,
On her flowered hat, her string of pearls, her blue velvet flats,
And a green taffeta evening gown that could have been worn
By Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*; after removing
My ballcap, bowing from the waist, and grinning with a little
Feigned chivalric twinkle, while explaining that I was visiting
Vicksburg at the recommendation of my friend, Clark Gable;
And after asking for this dance, please, at her coming-out ball,
There was nothing left for me to do but step from that alcove
Into the exhibits in the Varina and Jefferson Davis Room,
And press against the smudged glass of an upright display case
A nose that had been pressed against so many cases before.

Only by doing that could I be as awed by the artifacts salvaged
From their Greek Revival mansion a few miles from town
When Lee surrendered to Grant and Davis was arrested
Near Richmond for treason—a dinner fork or two,
A chipped Wedgewood plate—as I had been by the sight,
At the lowdown, ramshackle, blues museum in Clarksdale,
Of the rustic log cabin that Muddy Waters was born in,
By the knowledge, in Indianola, in his eponymous museum,
That BB King was raised by a white family when orphaned,
And by the sense, at the Dockery Plantation, outside of the town
Of Cleveland, that one or another bluesman might be performing
In the pecan grove behind the gas pumps and commissary—

That Son House, Howlin' Wolf, Robert Johnson, or Charlie
Patton might be playing for the cotton crews that Saturday
Their raw acoustic reveries about the arousing inconsistencies
And sensuous beauty of women, that one might be emulating
With his voice and harmonica the whistle of the Natchez local
Coming down the line on the railroad tracks from Memphis,
Proving that their raw compositions for raspy voice and slide
Guitar should be contrasted, in a curriculum of cultural history,
To other evocative artifacts I saw through that smudged glass
In Vicksburg, Mississippi, in the old county courthouse museum.

To the image, in dented tintypes, of the white-trellised gardens
On the Brierfield Plantation, a few miles from town,
Where Varina was picking roses in her sunhat and white dress
And Jefferson mulching fruit trees with composted cow manure
When an envoi on a steed arrived from town to summon him
To Montgomery to assume the presidency of the Confederacy;
To the newspaper clipping announcing Davis's death

On December 6, 1889, in New Orleans, Louisiana;
And to the claim, in a newspaper clipping, in tiny pica type,
Captioning a view of *Beauvoir*, their final home in Biloxi,
That the workers on the plantation, in that Delta landscape
Where half the enslaved of the Confederacy lived and worked,
So loved their great master that they attended his funeral,
Contrary to the evidence, in documents not displayed
In this particular glass case, that most of the Blacks from Brierfield,
After Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation,
Made a successful break for freedom, defecting on foot
To the relative safety of Union encampments in the South
When the plantation was in a panic and no one was looking.

While Marching Songs Droned in Mournful Tones on the Intercom

In that second-floor gallery of the Old County Courthouse Museum
On that bluff in Mississippi, while the culture wars in America raged
And Trump's followers pretended the Civil War was still engaged,
I tried my best to give the death of each Confederate my personal attention
In those dated and faded daguerreotypes of the boys who died
At Vicksburg, on the wall of poster boards where they were displayed.

While marching songs droned in mournful tones on the intercom,
I peered into the eyes of each soldier as if he'd been my brother, aware
That each man would have loved the reception they'd have given him
Back home at the end of the war, had he managed to survive
The cannon balls, bayonets, stampeding horses, and medical tents,
Even those with the snaggle-toothed scowls, the cross-eyed glares,
And the looks of "sacred idiots" loved by Whitman as much as any other,
When he nursed them in D.C. hospitals while looking for his brother.
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No matter how cowardly, cruel, or savage this one had been in battle,
How inhumane that one had been to the enslaved in the cotton field
Where he worked as an assistant to the overseer before the war,
And even if this third one had fallen for the racist cant of the planters
And was one of those who'd tried in earnest to kill my ancestors in battle,
I tried my best to summon for him some sympathy and imagine
What it would have been like if he'd survived and made it back home—
How his mother would have been there, crying into her handiwork,
How his father would have held by the brim, over his proud heart,
His own felt slouch hat, and how his cousins would have stood there
In crude burlap overalls secured by braided-rope suspenders,
Their mouths hanging open in amazement at the regrettable spectacle,
The denial of rights to ten percent of the population no longer on the line.

And had the Confederacy won, had they succeeded in seceding,
How this one would have marched with his comrades in the parade
To the patriotic Rebel songs an amateur band of local musicians played
While everyone along the route, on both sides of the main drag,
Sang along to "America the Beautiful,", with purple mountain majesty
And waves of golden grain, "Glory Glory Hallelujah!"—*His truth*
Is marching on, and "When the Saints Come Marching In," the song
That a sad glad Black man from New Orleans was still performing,
On angelic trumpet and raw vocals, on prime-time variety shows,
Well into the 1960s, even if most in the South, and many in the North,
Would have continued to tell him, whoever he was, that he didn't belong
When he sang, *I want to be in that number!* The great Louis Armstrong.

At the Durgin Family Cemetery

In that small family cemetery on Hut Road in West Stoneham,
Maine, back then featuring an open view of the eastern slopes
Of the White Mountains, near the trails that take you up
To Miles Notch, in one direction, through a hardwood forest
Of beech and maple, and up Great Brook, in the other direction,
To a boggy col between Red Rock Ridge and Speckled Mountain,
I found the survivors gathered at a row of gray stone markers
For three members of one family, Angeline Durgin and her parents,
Sarah and Levi, who— as I'd surmised in readings of the stones
When I went there to hike—all died within one week, between
The 17th and the 23rd of October 1865, six months after
Lee's surrender at Appomattox and the end of the Civil War.

It was November now, and Angeline's younger brother, William,
Renowned for accompanying the body of Abraham Lincoln
On its legendary journey west by train from Washington, D.C.,
To Springfield, Illinois, and for serving as a pallbearer at the funeral—
According to the monument I'd seen on those visits—stood
In his black boots and swallowtail coat, holding over his heart
His stove-pipe hat, as the black-clad preacher with his Bible
Led the solemn local congregation of mourners in prayer
For these victims of an epidemic that must have been in circulation
Before the captain's return, tuberculosis, typhoid, or yellow fever,
A virulent strand of the flu, or a case of cholera from fecal water,
That earned him an honorable early discharge from the army.

An unknown guest, I took my place among the black-gowned women
Weeping into the veils of their bonnets, the toddlers tugging
At the hems of their dresses for attention, the stoic men focusing
With wet eyes on the three caskets yet to be lowered by rope
Into the open graves and covered with shovels of light brown dirt
That waited in a mound beside each one, even the black horse
That pulled the hearse here from church, hitched by reins
To a granite post, lowering her harnessed muzzle as if
To fight off the same grief that had set even William, over there
On the other side of the graves from me, to sobbing quietly
At the temerity of a disease to add to the body count of a war
The likes of which no nation on earth had ever seen before.