

Just Another Number

I was born in a new port town,
where the James River feeds
into the Chesapeake Bay;

In my mind,
I can still see clearly
the weathered remains
of the old fort's walls,
degrading down at the shoreline;

And to this day I still
hold within me
the grim vantage
over McLean's lawn:

The imagined stench
of gangrenous limbs;

The implied cacophony of splintering bone
and the caterwauling of men
already doomed,
but not yet aware;

This was merely the beginning.

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Bills to pay,
sheep to the shears;

Black lungs mired
in the mountain's vice;

A grim scythe swings
o'er the forsaken harvest
o' fools too early taken;

You will ne'er be forgotten;

For it is your bones
upon which we tread;

And credit
for your graves
which made men great:

We'er in union blues
or shades o' grey.

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Whispers in my ear:
The dead wish to live again;

A soft strumming
of worn out strings:

The dead hope to rise;

From coffin nails
to slow exhales,
the living wane
and slowly fail;

I tie my knots,
I lift my sails:

The dead setting off again;

From Roanoke
to Jamestown's walls,
the sea consumes another soul;

And I'm settling down
on this foreign shore,
without a line
to cast back home;

The living dream
of growing old,
the dead remain:

Trapped,
in rotting bones.

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My dad keeps the lights on;

I love the sound of helicopters,
flying along their patrol routes:

Back and forth,
back and forth;

Sirens blaring at the edge of awareness,
I hope they aren't coming for me:

We are calm,
you stay calm;

Rifle rounds fired in the distance,
mowing the lawn twice a week:

Back and forth,
back and forth;

My dad keeps the lights on.

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It was my childhood,
throwing clays in the field;

Picking wild berries
in the tall grass;

The dam's siren,
and the deluge swallowing the bank
every hour,
like clockwork;

Listening to cattle
grazing in the pasture
on the other side of the river;

Stalking the woods with a .22
while my father staked the property lines;

So many squirrels crucified,
just to be thrown in a cooking pot;

A snake without a head,
splitting its body down the sides,
in its final grimace,
hanging from a tree branch
over the fire;

A hunting party as a young boy:

The stench of pierced intestines
and the crack as antler
was separated from skull;

Catching catfish with tree grubs,
throwing back the common carp;

Like that recurring nightmare:

On a bed with posts,
in the middle of a field,
with a blue tarp overhead,
shaking violently;

The cold nights and exposure;

Seeking warmth around the oven;

Shitting in a bucket in the corner;

There was a baby bird
that fell from the rafters
of the new patio:

Its brain looked like creamed corn.