

WATERVLIET

From the Watervliet Arsenal

arrives an old photo of a foreman
turning dials, gauging the fit of bullets
to gun barrels, large iron balls
to cannon mouths.

Millimeter by millimeter reducing odds
of his country's
annihilation.

Years later he would size up
me, third grandchild standing at attention
in his efficiency kitchen,
waiting for him to ration wafers

made perfectly round
by Nabisco –
one nilla, two nilla's, three nilla's –
their golden sugared rims winning
me over to his side

so that
I still buy those same cookies
in a supermarket near the arsenal
and shelve them five boxes deep.
So that
I consume in order
from first-expired to last.

WATERVLIET

Dropsy

~ Watervliet, NY, 1921

Friday's shift finished, Daniel downs
shot after shot at Willy O'Brien's bar,

shares woes with any Mick who will listen,
blubbers about fallen buddies
and Edward his buried brother,

slurring through insults and injuries –
influenzas, fevers,
engine blasts, factory fires,
mustard gas, madness ...

At midnight he whimpers, drinks
one last scotch
to numb the pain. Meningitis:
how the Dropsy had slain
Mary his only daughter.

Jesus Christ! Godammit!

To the Devil with everything!

He will bawl alone
along the towpath,
stumbling home with
not one curse forgotten.

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Scarlet Fever

~ Watervliet NY, 1902

That scourge, that plague, that blight
of city urchins sneaks
past the Arsenal's pre-dawn guards,
scales a barbed brick wall,
maneuvers through back yard and the bolted door
of Commander Benet's quarters

and assaults his son Stephen, age 8,
whose fever for a fortnight
advances, retreats, rallies, falters, then
slinks away. And those ruddy
tavern orphans and Erie Canal bastards
(only slightly reduced in number)
hear rumors:

 for the rest of his youth
Stephen will be isolated,
removed from the contaminations
of public schools, confined
behind gates private, sterile, locked.
Alone with his poetry.
As if the foe could be quarantined.

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Charlotte Russe

~ Watervliet, NY, 1926

Until the Second World War put an end
to candy store treats
named for foreign princesses,
Daniel paid pennies on red letter days
for small cardboard cups filled
with Lady Fingers, peach puree, custard
and crowned with a chilled cherry.
A West Troy sensation when

his son nearly died in St. Mary's.
Perhaps prayers to the Virgin saved him
or maybe Charlotte Russe, creamy reward
after surgery. How its vision of glory
made other schoolboys yearn for

their own turn in the sick ward.
No matter that Sister Rosalie in seventh grade
told chronicles of kings and queens
poisoned until green,
hanged, shot, set on fire,
exiled, guillotined. No matter.
A hungry prince shall have his one rare
cupcake, the fathers shall supply it.

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Cemetery Sloping to the River

~ Watervliet, NY, 1800 to 2012

I.

48 months, Mary Anne McShane

36 months, John Curtin

24 months, Willie Fitzgerald

12 months, Emma McShane

10 months, Francis Rooney

3 months, Bessie Rooney

2 months, Mary Powers

II.

hours old, unnamed boy

III.

unmarked grave

IV.

under 3 years, one McDonell child after another
Michael, John, Catherine, and Pharoah Henry

V.

8 years, Mary Connell

interred beside her grandfather

VI.

70 years, James F. Connell

grandfather, local mortician