

Landmarks

by Paul de Denus

Landmarks

This ground has always been accepting of everything seeded to it. The southern acres were once flush with tight rows of sunflower, standing tall, close as family, their heads like giant suns. Then the rain came and the earth gave up a dark muddied brew. It is still, a place where no man wishes to venture or tend to life. The corn is trampled and crushed now as madmen lurch and fall like October leaves, the ground soaking up their dreams. They lay silent in the red soil, open-mouthed, eyes surprised and stare up to a giant sun that has now winked out.

A Civil War

Boundary is what my momma named me. She taught it was meant to give something an edge. I'm gonna' need it as that blue boy sniper's lurkin' low and I'm havin' trouble takin' a dead-eye shot at him. He's crawlin' somewhere near the old barn fence jus yonder. Capt'n told me to go git 'im since I'm his best shot at it and I aim to end this day early so we can all git'some rest.

First Thing In The Morning

Lieutenant asks if he wants a smoke but the man acts like he don't understand or nothin', him in a kinda daze and all. Lieutenant then puts two fingers together like a gun to his mustachioed lips and blows wildly into the air like he's blowin' out birthday candles and some of the boys snicker. The fella' just stands there lookin' over the Lieutenant's shoulder, staring at us shivering in the cold, searching our faces as if he knows some of us but I guess he don't. Christ it's

cold as hell and all I want is to get back to my tent for some hot food and blankets. That fella' don't seem to be shivering at all though he should be; don't know what he done but it must have been bad to deserve this. The sun's on the ridge and I'm thinkin', get that goddamn blindfold tied so we kin' get on with it.

Along The Little Colorado

They took us out to a stand, a line of thick trunk trees that poked an opening in the sky. Their canopy caused a shadow to fall upon us though I believe the shadow was there long before.

Do you want a blindfold? A smoke?

Torres laughed at that and spat, asked for a horse and a gun instead. In silence, they pulled their itchy triggers, the air whistled and that shadow became a long flash of light.

Field Measures

The clouds sit on the ridge like perfect white angels, their wings folded majestic and pure and he would gladly step out into their arms and disappear if he could only get there, away from this place.

The booming thunder of artillery up river shakes his senses and he returns to the table, boots planted on ground painted black with blood, swats away flies that frolic in his sweat. The heat in the partial tent is stifling; the heavy copper taste of gore and panic permeate the walls. Outside the dressing-station, a meandering red scar of stretchers advance their position.

I 'seen her doc... the soldier on his table moans, flinches as he points toward the ridge with the one arm that isn't pulp... that pretty nurse... Sister Mercy... she was by. His clenched teeth suck the air as if it were ice cold. He is packed with chloroform, whiskey shot and raw cotton, his ragged gray uniform turned enemy blue from so much blood.

I've seen her too, son, the surgeon mutters, and wields a red and unsteady hand.

The Accompanist

There's a coin plate on the stairs for those who wish to compensate. It ain't necessary though; don't require no payment. I just play 'cause it'd be the Christian thing to do. Play somethin' solemn, they told me, or somethin' that sounds like home or the mountains in summer. This fiddle and me only knows dancing music but be it a hanging and all, I reckon it's proper we learn some different kind of dancin' tune.

Western Swing

I've been thinking about home. Philadelphia seems so long ago. I had a job in the feed trade business but I gave it up. After Amanda got pregnant, I went and left - run I guess you'd say and that'd be the truth. I feel bad about leaving her. I was angry. Scared. With the war over, I come out west.

God damn that war. It ripped the family apart, this country too. So much loss. My brother James... cut down at Shiloh. He was just a boy. He didn't deserve to die.

I fell in with some bad folks out here, with this sort in the next cell and well... I feel remorse for shooting that kid but he come out from nowhere, just kicking along the street as we was leaving the bank and that confederate hat he was wearing just set something off in me. Didn't really think about it... just reacted as if I was making something right. Making it even.

How I got myself in this mess I'll probably never rightly answer. Just is, that's all. They say the kid was only fourteen. Didn't look that to me, more like seventeen or eighteen with that squashed cap on his head and all. He shouldn't have been there, not then anyway.

The others and me will swing in the morning and nobody will feel as bad as I but until then I'll ponder on what's been done and what will be.

