

the HARLEQUIN

George Elliott Clarke

The Siege of Port Hudson, Louisiana, May 27, 1863

By Captain André Caillou

Surging into the liquid ravine—
no footing in mud
for muddling man or horse—
each step's a slog,
each canter convulsive.
Troop of the 1st & 3rd
Louisiana Native Guard—
ex-slaves plus blacks born free,
at first got barred from *Combat*.

But Rebs stymie the Union, smite the whites.
We're what's left.

(I wanna jettison the horses;
jug and chug fresh water;
our ale provision is only good
with salt frosted in.)

Commanded, we charge.
Though slashed by sabre, gashed by bayonet,
we guffaw in the mouths of guns.

Ragged lines limp in simpering *Slaughter*.

Bellies flood with tears and snot;
an ungrudged fluid—
scarlet—
wells out,
voluptuous, a tide.

Shot and cannon cripple
languid greenery;
or splash swimmers into pond-scum.

Shot scissors elms,
cannonballs willows,
splinters shadows into tendrils.

The Confed fire is no measly trick;
no prohibitions apply.

We Union blacks beg vulgar rock
to yield some platform,
for bracing.

Otherwise, we lurch about,
slipping, tumbling,
conspicuous as dark clouds,
make child's-play targets,

except Rebs also seesaw and yaw
through air bristling with misfires—
swooping shots that pummel or impale—

so one's as apt
to skewer one's own comrade,
as to spit the "foe."

The long smell of smoke almost smothers
face-smashed boys' weepin for mamas.

And drink messes up some men's aim,
for there's less pain in dyin drunk.
Thus, they drub their brains
with drab beer
(unsalted),

and loose a gumbo of shot
as likely to sink
a stately, shimmering pelican aloft
as it is to nix
a grey-clad slaveholder.

The Big Sandy Creek be swamp,
just splinters and red foam,
a groaning sepulchre.
Voices curse as boisterous as whores.

We bring on fresh horses
to trample down bobbing bones,
but some boomerang up and back—
like brilliant, reverse windfalls.
Hooves deliver such splashing blasts,
bones fly up in a sad storm,
some still showing fragments of cloth.
The air looks a quilt of pirate flags.

These wetlands, this jaunty brew,
pleases grinning gators.

The dead are novel soldiery:
They form a pontoon bridge for cavalry.

If I outlive this swamp,
I'll sport in Naw Leens cribs:
Only the grave be more irresistible
than *Coitus*.

Since the heart has four chambers,

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shan't a (black) man please four wives?

Ed. Note:

A musket-ball tore off half of Caillou's head.
His screams broke in half too.

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