

If They Came Our Way

Over an icy mountain in morning mist
a day after shearing Leonora's sheep,
I follow the route Lee's troops took
from the south. He came north to find
shoes for his boys and burn a railroad bridge.
After the battle, farmers could not plant
bloody fields for two years. The national park
protects this soil now from motels on the north.
From the south it's hard to tell where private
pastures stop and the battlefield begins.

No one else is out this early. There is nothing
to see in the damp distance of the Peach Orchard,
the Rose Farm. On low ground the mist thins
and lifts; up close the Wheatfield doesn't look
different than it would have a hundred and
fifty years ago, though quiet and empty now.
From Little Round Top thick fog like
unwashed fleece obscures the landscape.

When the 15th Alabama charged the 20th Maine
who held this hill, July 2, 1863, William Oates
said, "Blood stood in puddles" on these rocks.
Joshua Chamberlain, a Bowdoin professor,
ordered "Bayonets." He later wrote, "We kill
only to resist killing." These were men he could
befriend "if they came our way in good will."

I don't much care who won at Gettysburg.
Fifty-one thousand men dead or wounded,
and the maimed soon dead from gangrene.
By the road, there's a view deeper into
the woods of stone walls, streambeds.
Emerging from a cloud like soldiers
stumbling from the smoke,
tall thin saplings grow where
the mowing stopped.

(winner 2012 Guy Owen Prize)