

Lincoln

The dense gray twilight surrounding me is a web
Of elements hanging loose or tattering, the war's
Last windfall. Streets of Washington are empty
Of the ranks of soldiery, and stolid generals
Recede into the impertinence of sleep. The war
Was desolation of finality, the multithousand
Corsairs of darkness vanishing into the gulf
Of their final deployment. I, who gave commands,
Cannot forget my inclination to remain silent.
Now, the carriage waits, and a play's illusion
Is minutes away. The play may entertain,
But the shape will have a smooth, inevitable
Effect in which the mind espouses its own repose.
Once, whistling revenants drew my mind into war,
And the tumult rose like heat to twist and thwart
The vision of regiments that mulled the cause.
Soft and winding heather and vines, rows of roses,
And acresting wheat. If I slump, soon taken
From orders of fiery expedience and slipping will,
I shall rest in the piety of final peace, for war
Suborned the touch and measure of the full devotion
Of my spirit before the prizing primordial will.
I have taken litres of the draught of fire
And have quaffed them, or I have handled a chain
By which I keep a lion down and in, though
He stalks the perimeters of strategic war.
The forlorn milieu of battle rehearses me
For a play at Ford's, but the lists of fallen
Are nailed in me like the play's advertisements
That I may wear my continence like conviction
Or the wearing will to survive. Am I still
The attack at Gettysburg and Chancellorsville
Or the still helpcare of a nursing home?
What comes suddenly upon me in the wilderness?
The rainmist shifts and settles, and silence
Is the closure of the desperate, wheeling attack

That hushed me intermittently as I waited
For cannon and the lines to waver slowly forward
From my command and disappear. I wait alone.
The soldiery do not return. I stand guard,
But hear only the crisp leaves crackling
And the flow of the air I breathe. I feel
The darkness. Someone's behind me, at my shoulder,
Now.

—Clinton F. Larson