

After the Inauguration, 2013

"Without the shedding of blood, there is no remission of sins."
--*Epistle to the Hebrews, 9:22*

Pulling from the tunnel at Union Station, our train
shunts past D.C. offices and then crosses the rail bridge
over the tidal Potomac blooming in sweeps of sunlight.
Except for me and two young guys in suits studying
spreadsheets on their laptops, and the tattooed girl
curled asleep across two seats, and the coiffed blonde lady
confined to her wheelchair up front next to piled luggage,
it's mostly black folk, some trickling home in high spirits,
bits of Inaugural bunting and patriotic ribbons
swaying from their suitcase handles on the overhead racks,
all of us riding the *Carolinian* south.

Further on, where it's suddenly sailboats and gulls
on a nook of the Chesapeake, the banked-up rail bed
cuts through miles of swamped pines and cypress
as the train trundles past the odd heron stalking frogs,
or, picking up speed, clatters through open corn fields
where, for a few seconds, staring through the dirty glass,
you can spot turkeys scrabbling the stubble. Further south,
past Richmond, something like snow or frost glints off a field
and you realize it's just been gleaned of cotton
and this is indeed the South. As if to confirm this fact
to all of us on Amtrak, some latter-day Confederate
has raised the rebel battle flag in a field of winter wheat.

At dusk, just outside of Raleigh, the train slows

and whistles three sharp calls at crossing in Kittrell, N.C.
Along the railroad tracks, under dark cedars, lie graves
of Confederates from Petersburg's nine-month siege, men
who survived neither battle, nor makeshift hospital
at the Kittrell Springs Hotel, long gone from the town
where our train now pauses for something up ahead.

Nearby in Oxford, in 1970, a black soldier was shot to death.
One of his killers testified: "that nigger committed suicide,
coming in here wanting to four-letter-word my daughter-in-law."
Black vets, just back from Vietnam, set the town on fire.
Off in the night, you could see the flames from these rails
that once freighted cotton, slaves, and armies.

Now our Amtrak
speeds by, passengers chatting, or snoozing, or just looking out
as we flick on past the shut-down mills, shotgun shacks, collapsed
tobacco barns, and the evening fields with their white chapels
where "The Blood Done Sign My Name " is still sung, where
the past hovers like smoke or a train whistle's mournful call.