

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

*James Vachowski*

### **Bleeding Marlborough**

JEB LOOKED ME OVER ONCE, TWICE, then twisted his lip into a sneer. "Farb." He let loose with a stream of brown tobacco juice, letting the gooey liquid ooze down into the grass and dribble its way through the oak tree's thick roots. "My own brother, of all people. Nothing but a god-damn farb."

His scornful tone snapped me loose from the time travelling dream, back to our present-day reality. Just moments before I'd been staring straight into the wide eyes of Henry Fleming, that terrified young soldier from "The Red Badge of Courage." The two of us kids had found ourselves surrounded by a hail of flying bullets, artillery shells raining down all round, so tired as I was the rude awakening still came as a relief. I cracked my neck, then lifted it for a quick look around. There was still an hour or so left till dawn, so thankfully the dark night helped conceal the red burn creeping up my neck. Jeb was right, as usual, but I had a responsibility to take up for myself. "Am not."

He shook his head, picking at the dirt with a bayonet. "Hell you ain't. Fact is, right about now I'd bet you're probably the farbiest farb who's ever dared to disgrace the proud uniform of First Virginia, Volunteer Light Infantry. I mean, didn't I even tell you yesterday that Mr. Russell was going to be closing his ice cream stand early? But did you listen, maybe take ten minutes out of your day to walk round the corner to our Quartermaster and sign out a new pair of boots? Hell no, you blew me off. Wasted the entire afternoon playing Call of Duty on the Xbox, and look at you now. What a sorry sight, a boy dressed in a full rebel uniform but for those God-awful hightop sneakers. The black paint even looks wet, like you just now got around to covering up that tacky swoosh logo. Christ, Jubal, you're nothing but a damned train wreck."

I lay there silent in the moonlight. To be full honest, though, I'd had it coming. But since there we were, the two of us with absolutely no better way to pass the time, Jeb kept up his ragging even though both he and I knew all about that can of Coca-Cola he'd stashed in his sleeping roll. "Seriously, bro, this is worse than one of those pathetic opening volleys where nobody wants to fall down 'cause they just spent an entire weekend marching to the battle, the kind where Sergeant Major Ambrose has to go down the line picking out casualties by calling their birth months. I mean, Jesus Christ!"

The outright blasphemy was more than even I could tolerate. "Oh, don't you worry, He's coming" I snapped. "Any day now, as a matter of fact. And you know what He's going to say whenever He gets here?"

Jeb snickered. "I have no idea, Private. But please, enlighten me."

"He's gonna say, 'Hot damn, my children, that there Jubal Early Owens has to be the most hardcore sonofabitch who's ever reenacted a battle.'" And with that, I slipped off my sneakers and kicked them out across the frost-covered grass. My white cotton tube socks seemed to glow even brighter in the moonlight, so I ditched them too. My bare toes immediately began tingling, a sure sign that I was flirting with frostbite. Price to

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

pay, I guess, for a covert mission that was near on about a hundred and fifty years past due. "How many of them farmboys you think could actually afford to buy themselves a new pair of boots? Naw, Jeb, them kids charged into battle barefoot hoping to lift a broken-in pair off the fresh dead."

My big brother shrugged, unimpressed. "When it comes to authenticity, better late than never I guess." He looked up, taking in the full moon with a good long gaze. "Only gonna get brighter from here, I reckon. See them clouds rolling in? Soon's they drift over and block out the light, we move. Got that?"

"Yeah." I forced my mind into focus, running through a mental list of everything we'd managed to swipe from Dad's toolbox. Fifty feet of rope, two pulleys, a mess of eye bolts and an old hand drill fit out with masonry bits. It did feel a little odd, though, going out on a raid without any firepower. It was almost like we were little kids all over again, stuck back in the town's fife and drum corps, but I knew the time for second-guessing ourselves had come and gone. The state of Massachusetts had different gun laws than we did back home in West Virginia and that was that, so I did my best to just lose myself in the moment. There we were, two daring soldiers deep behind enemy lines, fixing to launch a sneak attack against an impenetrable Union fortress. Even after that eight-hour drive I slipped right back into the spirit of things, blocking out any concerns for what might happen once Dad woke up and found we'd swiped his keys. All those cannonball rangers at the park would never let him live down losing a government F-150, even if he was the director.

A minute or two passed before Jeb nodded again. "Let's move." He shot out ahead, moving with the smooth grace of a whitetail deer bounding along an Appalachian hillside. His faded grey uniform stuck out against the manicured lawn something painful, even as he crept down low so as not to be seen. I held my breath, not daring a single exhale until my brother'd reached the dark shadows underneath the belltower. Jeb reached back into the light and pumped a fist up and down, my signal to follow. I grabbed my hightops, stuffed them back down in my haversack and paused for a quick peek around.

The intersection was deserted, almost as if Marlborough rolled up their streets the exact same way that we did. Only difference was, nobody would ever mistake this place for a living history community. Back home in Harpers Ferry, you would've been able to see the skinny lights of a few candles starting to flicker in house windows right around that time, their narrow glows reflecting off all the panes of glass which lined the Potomac. Up here, the only lights to be seen came from a set of fluorescents outside the Dunkin' Donuts shop down the street, one of about a hundred we'd passed along the way. And I mean no disrespect by that, I really don't. Marlborough, Massachusetts might not've been nowhere's near as pretty as Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, but at least there weren't any crowds of tourists holding down the streetcorners. And even though their tiny little river was actually more of a stream, I sure hadn't seen any drunk college kids floating down along the Assabet on their inner tubes. And so, yeah, even though these people's ancestors might've fought on the other side of the War than ours had, I imagine that Marlborough could've seemed like

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

an all right place to live if you'd happened to have grown up there and just never left. I hadn't, though, which I guess was the sum total of everything I had against the city. That, and the fact those Yankees had stolen our bell I mean.

Growing impatient, Jeb reached out to flash the signal once again. I took myself another deep breath before shooting upright, darting out across the park on the exact same line. There at the base of the tower, the two of us crouched down together and stared up at our target. "Back up, boot" he growled. "Don't need you breathing down my neck while I'm trying to concentrate."

Now that little sprint might have winded me some, but I still had my pride. "Listen here, Jeb. You call me one more name we're gonna stop this raid, have ourselves a completely different type of skirmish."

Jeb shrugged his broad shoulders as he peered up into the dark night sky. "Yeah, whatever." He dropped down on all fours, then craned his neck around. "Here, boy, get yourself on up there. It's high time we took back what's rightfully ours."

"Me?" I looked back down at him with a hard stare. "I thought you were going to be the one climbs the belltower."

My big brother reached a hand up and tapped his sleeve, touching a finger to the set of faded black chevrons along his bicep. "It's called delegation, Jubal. Besides, I think that run just now might have jacked up my trick knee. We've got Morgantown at home next Friday, you think I want to be stuck on the sidelines sporting a pair of crutches?"

I sighed, swinging the sack around so it rested in the small of my back. "Whatever you say, Corporal." I reached out to take a firm hold on the stonework, slick from a layer of new frost. My bare feet were numb through by that point, but my toes somehow managed to find the gaps. Moments later I was twenty feet in the air, though I'd had to remind myself not to peek down at the chilly turf below. Soon's I'd caught my breath I shifted my butt full round on that narrow ledge, and it was then that I saw it. As I live and breathe, old John Brown's Bell was hanging so close I could touch it.

Now just in case you fell asleep during your history, it's probably important for you to know that John Brown was one of them abolitionist types. A few years before the War began he tried to capture the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, him and his men aiming to seize all them weapons and kick off a slave revolt. Legend has it that Brown planned to ring the arsenal's bell and summon all the coloreds of Virginia to his cause, but the plan came to a quick halt once he was captured, tried and hung. Old Man Wallace puts on a pretty mean show during our re-enactments, playing his role as John Brown all wild-eyed and crazy and spewing prophecies about how the crimes of this here land would only be washed away by blood. As for the arsenal's bell, that's nothing more than an out-and-out case of theft. Turns out this company of soldiers from the state of Massachusetts seized it as kind of a war trophy, and I guess they just never saw fit to give it back after Appomattox. All that happened a hundred and fifty years ago now, yet here the bell still stood just mounted up in the same damn place until we come by. I guess it was a little odd, to be contemplating

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

your life's legacy at only fourteen years old, but my thoughts were what they were. Right about then, it seemed like me and Jeb and this little raid of ours were only minutes away from putting Harpers Ferry back on the map.

I felt my heart beating high up in my throat, and if I hadn't of tucked my hands up under my armpits to keep them warm then I might've even reached out to caress the damned thing. Finally and at long last, the two of us were about to right one of history's wrongs. After years of bickering between us and them, all the lawsuits thrown back and forth between the town of Harpers Ferry and the city of Marlborough, the time had come. Me and Jeb was about to do what the bureaucrats couldn't, settle the matter once and for all.

Down below, Jeb broke my reflection with a quick hiss. "Yo! Headlights!"

I tucked up my legs, curled in my arms and pressed my body back against the belfry, willing myself to lie flat and skinny. It was a precarious balancing act, but somehow I held fast and kept from toppling off the side. Jeb sprawled himself out on the grass, laying there still and silent until the car passed. Turned out it was just a late-model import packed with teenagers, not any kind of undercover rover, but the experience was chilling nonetheless. We were doing the right thing, of that we were certain, although the mission wasn't exactly what you might call legal. That thought in mind, the two of us resumed our work with a new sense of speed.

Jeb's voice echoed in the night. "You good?"

"Yeah." I pulled myself upright, then shifted gingerly forward along the brickwork. I had a clear view of the bell's mounting assembly now, just a single thick bolt held on by a cotter pin. "Toss me the crescent wrench, why doncha?"

"You got it." Jeb let out a heavy grunt, and a split second later this foot-long slab of Milwaukee steel struck hard off the side of my kepi hat. I saw the stars in the night sky double as the hand tool clattered against the brickwork next, falling back down to the ground in a noisy barrel of sound. I must've lost my grip on that heavy-duty Maglite too, which caused Jeb to throw up his arms and leap clear of all the raining debris. Next thing I know my entire body had slipped off balance, rolling backwards, with the wind rushing past my ears while I couldn't do nothing but stare up at the sky in a dumb daze. I tell you what, the fall happened so quick I didn't even have time to cry out in fear until after the safety rope had snapped taut round my waist. The piercing shriek of an alarm siren echoed out across the square, no doubt triggered by some kind of hidden motion sensor. The shrill, wailing noise sounded eerily familiar, almost like the steam whistle off one of them big CSX locomotives when they come charging out of the mountain tunnel back home.

I guess I just didn't think to do much of nothing right then, except for dangle upside down and barefoot while swaying about in the chill air I mean. It was a particularly sad and hollow moment, and I couldn't help sympathizing with those Confederate generals who got outmaneuvered by the cursed armies of the Union. Our cause seemed so hopeless, and the only solace I could find was in having my brother right there alongside

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

me. Us two kin standing firm in the face of overwhelming odds, not backing down a step for nothing or nobody. Yeah, that there feeling of empty pride kept me warm for near on about twenty seconds, at least until we heard those first police sirens off in the distance.

That was right about the moment when Jeb took off running and left me hanging upside down in full uniform, still minus the shoes of course. Our raid's complete and utter failure made for a pretty low feeling on its own, but being abandoned was the worst shame of all.

I couldn't believe it myself, to be full honest. I mean, my own brother. Yellow.