

Kestrel

Robert Lynn

General Lee's Remarks to the Dense Motherfuckers

Charlottesville, Virginia 2017

I told you dense motherfuckers not to put up statues to me and I winced
when you did anyway, locking me here in this park

where I have winced through the sticky Virginia heat and stinging
snowstorms atop my little horse, Traveller, forever stationary

and we have winced ourselves through the occasional couple fucking
in the shrubbery surrounding our plinth as if
they forgot we were here,

and I have winced at the small armies of tour guides reciting
my great battles and even greater failures
like some sort of apocryphal gospel.

I wince each time remembering the names of the dead
and the crunching sound they made underfoot
so long ago but that was long ago.

And now I wince at the struggling joggers vomiting regret
at Traveller's hooves in these pinkest hours of morning

as I winced at the college men doing the same thing in the darkness
mere hours before, just as I cannot help

but wince at the foreign faces posing for daguerreotypes before me
on football weekends in the fall. The world changes

and so I have winced my way through the odor wafting from crowds
of apple-bonged teenagers lying in my shade

and I have winced my way through the screech of punk bands,
assailing them from inside The Garage across the street

and I could only wince one night watching the drunk driver plow
through that garage's brick wall quieting the music forever.

And I winced to think that some music should be quiet forever,
like the old men playing Dixie under a flag I folded
for the last time at Appomattox.

I winced when they tore the neighborhood down around me,
razing Vinegar Hill so black folk couldn't live
walking distance from the courthouse

and I winced when they dragged black men from the jail
beneath it but also I winced as they let them vote
for the first time since the last time I was alive.

And I winced at you dense motherfuckers—am I saying it right,
dense motherfuckers, this catchphrase I learned
from a man selling powders in my park—

like I winced when someone painted *motherfucker*
across Traveller's bronze haunches. I can still read.
At least I could before they draped us in this tarp.

I winced, even Traveller winced knowing a battle was coming.
Could there be any other reason
to put blinders on a war horse?

I winced when they shackled us in blackness and now
I've had enough time to understand
what a dark joke that is, one I played upon myself.

Still I told you dense motherfuckers
it is well that war is so terrible lest we grow fond of it
but you ignored me, like a couple fucking in the shrubs.

So Traveller and I winced at the taste of pepper spray
and the sorrowful moan of car tires travelling
up 4th Street in exactly the way we can't,

and yesterday I winced at the noise a crowd makes
while being crushed and I winced at the way
some things don't change through the centuries.

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I wince now into the deafening silence that followed, the very same
sound John Brown's body left us with the day we hanged him.

And I wince to think about Traveller, my upside-down Atlas holding
up a world I wished he wouldn't. Lord knows times change.

To think I used to wince at the mothers striking unruly children that
scrambled up to sit in my lap.

They don't do that so much anymore. These days they make them sit still.
Sit still and think about what they've done.