



GETTYSBURG



AAA



PERSONAL



ESSAY

OF MATTHEW BETHUNE & PHOTOS BY JOHN BETHUNE



You see the pictures,

the Mathew Brady pictures of the bodies of Antietam and Bull Run, and the soldiers' clothes are always open like someone rifled them looking for loose change. The story tells itself. A man lies with his left arm twisted behind him and his head to the side. His shirt is open; he opened it himself when he realized what had knocked him down. He tore the buttons to see: was it just an arm or leg? He could live without an arm or a leg.

In the picture the man's eyes are wide. His face is toward the camera, his mouth open. He seems to be saying something to the photographer. A man can't always tell when he's been killed. In this case it is *not* an arm or leg; in the picture you can see that it is the man's chest that is dark.

My first year, I asked the other science teacher how it was he had come to teach high school. He had been a geologist and an on-site consultant to drilling companies in Brazil and the U.S. (very dangerous work, a sort of war between rock and machine. For 20 years he had said "do this" or "stop doing that," and men's lives had depended on what he said. He had made more money each year than a teacher makes in three. Then he took a while off to relax; someone asked him to teach a couple of classes to kids, and he never went back.

This is about wounds to the gut and to the head and to the heart. What we can live without and what we can't.

I had been hired to teach the life sciences, but they needed someone to fill in for eighth-grade U.S. history at least for one year, and I figured, why not? "Don't worry," someone told me. "The whole secret to teaching eighth grade is to seem to have known all your life what you learned this morning." The other secret, I learned, was to tell stories—not the stories students expect to hear, neat and rife with patriotic meaning, nor the too-easy exposés that have become popular. I mean the stories that leave them wondering: The rainy night a graying Washington put on his glasses and brought his men to tears; the locket Chief Justice John Marshall wore around his neck after his wife died—stories I still haven't recovered from.

In the first summer after our marriage I talked my wife into a trip back east. We said good-bye to our students, packed up our car, and drove off to see the places I'd been telling stories about. We swung south through Texas and Louisiana, stopped at Vicksburg and Atlanta, and turned north. I'm not the kind of Civil War buff who would dress up for reenactments, but I will admit that in Atlanta I heard "Dixie" and got hot behind the eyes.

In Richmond I bought a cavalry saber, and in Fredericksburg I stood behind the stone wall on Marye's Heights and looked down a city road toward the river, trying to measure it in my mind. It was June, but I imagined the field under snow, without the cars and houses—just a wide gentle slope down to the town, and behind the town, the Rappahannock River. Up slope of the wall, 30 thousand rebels wait three deep for the next round of the slaughter. Again the bugle sounds, and blue boys surge forward. This time it is the 1st Corps, and you can just make out the black hats of the Iron Brigade. They walk shoulder to shoulder at a good pace, rifles up and bayonets glinting like some kind of bad joke (as if any of them are going to get that close to the wall). Up on the hill a solid mile of artillery pieces reload. Some of the Union men have left behind their packs, because what's the point? Some have no canteens. Would it make any difference if they left their guns? I try to walk this field in my mind, but I don't make it very far. I start again.

"Are you coming?" says my wife. She is already moving along the wall, heading for the parking lot. "It's late," she says. Ours is the last car.

This is the first real trip Danielle and I have taken. We turn north on the highway and ride in silence. Opposing traffic has thinned to a few trucks humming by on their way to Richmond, their lights ablaze. She turns on the overhead light

and thumbs through our AAA guide for a campground. She turns off the light. She does not search for a radio station or make conversation. It is enough to be alone with the names on signs: Frederick . . . Harper's Ferry . . . Potomac. How does one get ready for Gettysburg? What did Lincoln do on that last night? On the back of the map I start scribbling notes.

"It'll be like a business trip," I told Danielle back in April. "To make us better teachers." Now as I lie awake in the tent listening to the Virginia rain, a lesson plan is trying to take shape in my head: "Let me tell you what I did for the summer. Let me tell you about Gettysburg."

Tell them *what* about Gettysburg?

With a standard Enfield rifle, a decent shot could hit a man square in the chest eight out of 10 times from 100 yards away. The ninth time might be an accidental evisceration, and the 10th time he might miss completely (and kill the kid behind you). But that's assuming he's taking time to aim and is not in the heat of battle. Maybe I could pace off 100 yards and have a student stand there. Maybe I could line up 10 of them.

About breakfast time we cross into Pennsylvania. Danielle wakes and looks out at the passing fields, then closes her eyes again. She has wonderful eyes, even closed. We are on the Chambersburg Pike, or where it used to be, hurrying into Gettysburg from the west on the heels of Longstreet's 1st Corps. Mist lies heavy on the Pennsylvania cornfields.

Danielle wakes again. "I'm hungry," she says, but not to complain or to make me stop. Just a statement, the way a sweetheart might have said it in a letter two weeks overdue: "I'm lonely. I'm alone." And he would know, squatting in the mud, leaning over the paper to keep it dry—he would

© Photo on page 20: The "Angle" at Gettysburg stretches back into time.



☺ **The view west from Little Round Top looks down at Devils Den and Seminary Ridge, once Confederate strongholds.**

know what she had *not* written and why—because some things we *can* live without.

We've been driving since before sunup, and I know I should stop, but I'm not hungry. More than that (something I can't explain), I want to fast. It's almost noon. Danielle does not mention food again. This is not the first time I've watched myself be cruel. "I'm sorry," I want to tell her. "I didn't mean to drag you into this. I wasn't thinking." But of course I *was* thinking—just not about her. I stop. We try the shoofly pie just to see what we've missed. In an hour we're back on the road.

They were hot, Longstreet's Corps (a week's march in the summer sun), and half of them shoeless. They were still 10 miles out, though all morning they had heard the cannons up ahead, and it made them sick. Their fellows were up there in the thick of it, and here they were late! They moved quickly up the pike, the morning sun just starting to burn off the fog. One man drank from a canteen as he walked and passed it to another. They did not look at each other.

There's something I haven't told Danielle. Maybe I won't go back to teach-

ing. In Richmond, standing in John Marshall's dining room, an idea spoke to me: law school. Voices call that way sometimes. I almost told her what I was thinking—that I might quit work, take out loans, and go back to school—but I couldn't work out a satisfactory answer to the question she would surely ask: why?

My mind is a muddled and irritating mess. I felt it at Williamsburg, walking across campus at William and Mary, and I feel it now as the day wears on and signs for the battlefield start cropping up. I don't know what law school does to a person, but so many of my heroes have passed that way.

It's after six when we drive into the town. The tours and visitors center are closed, but it's the field I want to see. On the horizon is a thickly wooded hill and then another, lower and with fewer trees. "That looks like the Round Tops," I say, and as soon as we step out into the trees, I know where we are. Off to the left is a

A memorial stone to the 20th Maine stands on Little Round Top. ☺



gully. "That's the notch where the Alabama men came up." No one is listening. Danielle has wandered up the hill, and I follow. Over there is where the 20th Maine piled rocks in the last minutes before the storm. Their wall comes up almost to the knees. On the stones someone has left a row of tied flowers, soggy with the rain. It reminds me of the tree in Salt Lake City where the woman saw the image of Mary. People leave things there: notes, coins, locks of hair.

When a row of rifles discharge, they say, the noise is so loud you cannot tell if your own gun fired. But it's not the battle itself I think about. It's the time before the shooting starts, when you can still hear

men breathing on your right and on your left. Behind you someone is saying a prayer, and you wish you'd thought of that. You think of your gun, the weapon in your hand. Is it ready? You can't remember loading. You load again, just to be sure.

They found a gun in Antietam with eight rounds in the barrel, one on top of another, unfired.

The hill is steeper than it looks. By the time I get near the top, I'm breathing hard. There is a stone here on the south face of Little Round Top with the names of Colonel Chamberlain and his 20th Maine. Chamberlain was a teacher, a college professor, before and after the war. He asked his school for leave to go fight, and when they denied it he went on sabbatical and joined up anyway. He was tall, long-legged, and he was there to walk up that slope at Fredericksburg. He was shot down with the others, pinned to the ground by flying lead. That night he pulled two corpses over him to keep from freezing. A third body he used for a pillow. Six months later he stood with what was left of the 20th Maine and waited, on this spot, for the rebel army.

Their names are listed on the stone. Of the original thousand, barely 200 made it this far, plus a 100 or so reinforcements. That was the head count *before* Gettysburg, before their position was charged over and over by Confederate forces three times their size. When the last charge came, the 20th Maine was down to 178 men and no ammunition, so they fixed their bayonets and charged. I understand now what would make a man leave his shoes on the grave of a saint and walk home barefoot.

There is a story from Mormon history of three boys who walked through freezing water to carry a handcart train over a river. At their funerals, Brigham Young said that that one noble act alone had assured those boys a place in the kingdom of God.

It was the first day's fighting that set up the second. You have one day to take or not take that hill, and when the sun goes down, you know where the next day's fighting will be and who will have to pay for it. What Chamberlain did here on that second day set up the third day, and the third day set up the rest of the war. But from the rock where I'm sitting, I can see that it didn't start or end here in



Gettysburg or even with what the books call our Civil War. I think only one war is all there's ever been, and of all the men and regiments of men, of all the divisions and corps and battalions who raced to this spot from Frederick and Hagerstown and from the west, I won't be the last.

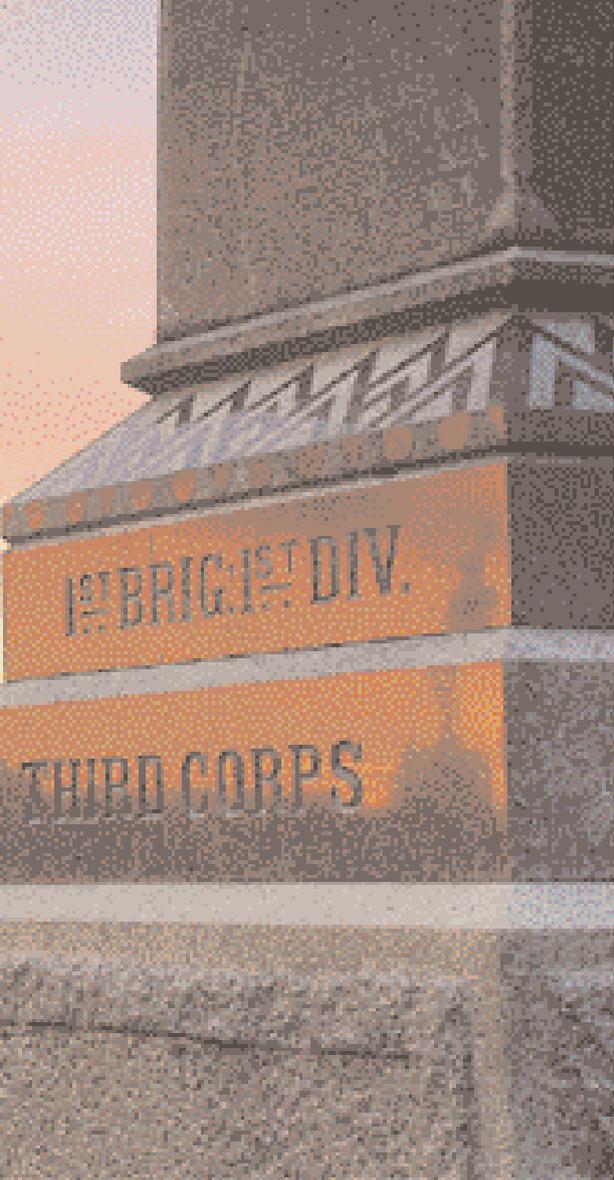
I have been a long time coming, and I'm a little late for the fight, perhaps. Perhaps not.

The rain has let up a little. Danielle has wandered down into Devil's Den. I can

see her moving between the boulders. In my pocket I have a Kleenex and five bucks for breakfast. If I had paper, maybe I could write a poem or something. I could leave my watch, the watch Danielle gave me. But in the rain it would stop telling time.

There's my wallet and credit cards. But what do dead men want with credit cards? I have a pocketknife—and lint. A woman in those days sat at home making lint so someone would have something to stuff the hole in her husband.

I have a wedding ring. I have a finger. I could live without a finger. Slice it right here on the stone. I try to do it in my mind—one quick motion with the knife. One of my students has a dad who was in Vietnam. I saw him one day make a motion with a knife. He was trimming a nail, I guess, but I thought it was something else and thought, "You crazy bugger! Who do you think wants to clean that up?"



⊙ **A monument near the Peach Orchard cuts the view looking west to Seminary Ridge.**

What good is a sacrifice no one asked for? I rise to go. How will it sound when I tell them I had nothing, *nothing* worth putting on the altar? From up here I can see Cemetery Ridge, the Seminary, and Devil's Den. I can see my wife coming up the hill, picking her way between the stones.

In the morning we do the tourist thing, but when we are tired of the shops and plastic soldiers and the statue in front of where Lincoln slept, we go back out to the field. We go to the Angle. It is still early. I lean on the fence and look out over that mile stretch. There are people out there in the gray drizzle moving about, taking their own sweet time, looking for all the world like they're dressing the line. I throw out

the lesson in my head and start over. How will I give them Gettysburg? Foolish, I know, to try. Impossible not to. I will go back to the gift shop. I will buy a couple of minié balls and grapeshot. "This is grape," I will tell them. "Feel it. Heft it. At 100 yards you can pour a bucket of this down a barrel and you've got yourself a giant shotgun. Or if you're running low on shot, you can use canister with nails or screws or rocks. Or horseshoes." But in a warm, quiet room, what will they care what canister can do to a man's spine? I'm aiming for the chest, and the best I'll do is knick a few of them.

Right here, behind this wooden fence, is where they sent what was left of Chamberlain's regiment. They sat right here making jokes, because people who know they shouldn't have survived can find almost anything funny. They were in the middle of the Union army now, where Meade thought they might get some rest. It was July 3. The cannonade began. Over in that grove of trees a mile away Pickett's men were waiting their turn, and Pickett was waiting for Longstreet—Longstreet the romantic, who wrote day after day to his Louisa. He sat over there behind those trees astride a log fence all morning, listening to the guns. He was adding it up—how many men and how far they would get. Oh, he knew what he was doing, don't doubt it. Even a madman can do arithmetic. Lee knew what he was doing. Lincoln knew when he stood up and made something degenerate into something right, even if he pretended not to. How does a mind like Longstreet's work? How did he write a letter that would make a wife rock for hours, and while she was back home rocking, nod his head and give the order for 10 thousand men to die?

Jackson and Lincoln and Sherman and Lee. James Longstreet. I look at them and I think, people can do without sleep and comfort and family and friends; they can live without love or tenderness; they don't even need to understand or be understood. They can live without almost anything.

It's the "almost" that has me puzzled.

The men stepped out of the trees. No more hymns, no more prayers. They stepped out in a line a mile long, and the whole Union army gasped. Then they cheered. From way down in their chests,

they cheered like boys, because they understood and knew, suddenly, it was not *their* day to die. They laughed when they saw how easy it would be, laughing and cheering with their mouths wide open and not ashamed.

Maybe I will tell this story to another class next year. I will tell them how you nodded, General Longstreet, and I will show them how your friend led the men all the way to the Union guns with his hat on the end of his sword. They will take from it one thing, and I will take another. When they are asked what they learned about in school, they will say "heroes" or "hatred" or "love"—but I am sure this story is not about love. Men killed and let themselves be killed. They took the one thing that mattered most to their sweethearts and children and marched right into the cannons. No, it wasn't about love, unless love is something deeper and far more dangerous than I can explain.

In the only photograph taken of the Gettysburg Address, the president is a blur. The photographer was setting up his camera, making all his adjustments, and before he had taken a single shot, the speech was over. The president was sitting down! He went ahead and snapped one anyway, and if you look carefully you will see Lincoln's head is the only thing moving.

Among the rows and rows of bodies in the cornfield at Antietam was a young man named Oliver Holmes. To the day he died, the critics of Justice Holmes said his views of law were too much tainted by his experience as a soldier, that the war had left him permanently scarred—and maybe it had. I see him flat on his back in a Maryland cornfield, pawing through his own clothes for the wound.

I loved teaching, but maybe I will not go back. "A man can live greatly in the law as well as elsewhere," Holmes said. "There as well as elsewhere he may wreak himself upon life, may drink the bitter cup of heroism, may wear his heart out after the unattainable." It's not that I relish the thought of being sent to the front. I just want to have something worth giving before I die.

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