

Atelier de traduction – Anglais : *Le Voyage de Robey Childs*, Robert OLMSTEAD

Dimanche 9 novembre 2014 / 9h00 – 10h45

Avec François HAPPE

COAL BLACK HORSE

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As he approached the town, everywhere the eye looked was the litter of war. There was paper torn from the cartridges rain-pasted to every surface, shreds of ripped clothing, blanket, and sack trodden into the ground. There were sprung watches, broken plates and shards of crockery. He saw a boot, and then he saw a boot with a foot inside, a sleeve and then an arm inside a sleeve, a glove and then a hand inside a glove. There were dead horses, splintered caissons, the litter of corn cob and the brass tubes of cannons seated in the earth with their white oak carriages staved and broken and the tubes of the cannons blackened and bulging and cracked. A white horse, its forelegs shot off, lay on its side calmly cropping the tufted and trampled rye.

The trees were made white and glistening as bone where they'd been peeled of their gnarled bark and whole men lay in rigid contorted shapes and some others lay as quiet and as peaceful in death as if they truly were asleep on the picnic ground.

In the deadened woods where the bullets had stormed and the air still crackled with the smell of heat, sharpshooters were hanging in the trees by their cinched leather belts. Their bodies were turned out and they occupied the air like great frozen birds intent on kill and in a flash their flights arrested. They hung dead and could not raise their bodies, but it was as if at any moment they would come to swift and fierce motion, and for anyone to pass under their bowers would mean certain death.

Those were but the small images where his mind could isolate what it found and save it into memory, for about the fields of milo maize were fifty thousand casualties, fifty thousand men who were killed, and wounded and missing from the roles. They were in parts and pieces. They were whole and

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seemingly unscathed and wandering about as the future dead while others were vapor or grease or but rags of flesh and pulverized bone. Strewn over the few hundred acres was everything a man carried inside and out. There were enough limbs and organs, heads and hands, ribs and feet to stitch together body after body and were only in need of thread and needle and a celestial seamstress.

Their blood, gummed and clotted, was beginning to draw flies in the wet air. They lay with their broken legs twisted and contorted so, to even unfold a man in the attempt to configure him as a man would be near impossible. It was a horrible scene to witness, replete with sorrowful pleadings for water and assistance, while the silent dead resided in strange repose, their stiffened arms reaching to embrace a heaven. He decided from that day forever after that there must live a heartless God to let such despair be visited on the earth, or as his father said, a God too tired and no longer capable of doing the work required of him.

In places there were swarms of movement, bodies still wriggling as if with souls attempting flight, but in these environs he knew even the souls had been killed and he knew this down inside himself, though he'd been told by his mother when the body dies the soul is immortal. Then a head lifted and a death drawn face caught his eye. It smiled and called a name his way, its eyes large with recognition. He approached, and when he leaned closer hands took hold of him and tried to claw out his eyes and he could do no other than boot the man's head to save himself, and he thought, In war even the dead will kill you.

He continued on afoot, walking from face to face, the coal

black horse following behind, stepping gently over the dead and not addled by the rank iron smell of cooling blood. In one field, he found a lineup of dead dressed in butternut uniforms. It was below the brow of a western ridge and their hands were tied behind their backs and a single bullet had passed through their brains. He didn't know what it was and could only figure they had tried to run from battle. One had a handkerchief tied over his mouth, perhaps to shut up his whimperings. He too was wounded mortally through the brain and they must have done it to keep him from hollering on the occasion of his imminent execution. Or maybe he'd gone mad. Or maybe he'd been wise. It didn't matter: he was dead.

His blood went hot and pulsed in his veins as he determined this was not to be feared for its horrible import but to be embraced for the knowledge it imparted. It was something to learn and to depend upon, another rule of the chaos. It disabused him even further of what he'd brought with him from the mountains. He saw that even they will kill you and if that is so, then anyone will kill you and he was relieved to know such and could plainly see how simple an equation war was becoming to him.

In one wood was collected a field of the dying, a long, sad row of men who lay on the bare ground, moaning and twitching fitfully, blubbing in wave and cadence. They were left wholly to themselves. These were men who'd been severely wounded through the head, some with both eyes shot out. They were all mortally wounded and had been put aside to die without hope as quickly and peacefully as they might.

Not far away from them was a long table where the surgeons worked from first sun to twilight and through the night,

lopping off arms and legs with the quick gnawing strokes of their bone saws. Wagons carted away the bloody limbs and came back empty, wet, and glistening in the blaze of surrounding lanterns and again were loaded and hauled away.

It was as many and again and again into infinity as the most people he'd ever seen in one place—in his whole life together—and they were all limbed and dead and dying and their air smelled fetid as if an ocean shore captured for days at low tide, close and unmoving, quaked by no wind. He knew this was no brittle edge of the world he'd entered. This was the world itself.

There, in that wood, in the fleeting light of a declining wattery sun was where he found his father. He was lying there, in that field of the dying men under a purple sky. He recognized him and he clasped his hand and his father stared into him with the look of an expectation at long last fulfilled.

A bullet had smashed into his father's cheek where it had left a black hole. It had then made a circuit of his cranium and exited out the back of his head. He could feel the ruptured path of broken bone the bullet had left as it coursed beneath his father's scalp before exiting through the wall of the parietal bone. When his father tried to speak, Robey encouraged him to remain silent. As they held to each other, all around them were the constant murmurings of the dying: giving orders, fighting, praying, calling out the names of women and children, gasping, gurgling, and throat breathing.

"I came as quick as I could," he said, fighting the panic that had seized his voice.

"It's a good thing it weren't any quicker," his father whispered.

"I tried hard," he said, his father's head on his lap.

"I know."

There was a low moan he could not contain ciding from deep inside his chest.

"Hush," he told his father. "Hush now."

The moan began to grow and overwhelm his body and take possession of him. He had no control over it because it was his heart and lungs and backbone and he fought hard to not fly away into the thousand pieces of a boy flung into the sky and through the air and down into the earth.

His face burned with what he had discovered at the end of the road. He could never have imagined what he found, could not confront how terrible his failure. His mind fled from him and his body ached from trying to keep it somewhere inside his body—his arms or legs or hands if not inside his skull. The feeling ran the ridges of his spine like a dragging knife-point. Then it passed and he was not panicked anymore.