

Two Poems

Stephen Gibson

At Rare Books on Worth Ave in Palm Beach

In this carte-de-visite Civil War-era execution photo
you see someone hold an umbrella over Mary Surratt
on the scaffold. She'll be dead in minutes. They know.

This is one of several stereopticon photos on show
with other Civil War memorabilia: July 7, 1865, hot.

Her execution has been made a carte-de-visite photo.
They've placed the heavy cloth hood over her and go
about their business—horrifying George Atzerodt—
fourth on the scaffold—to die in minutes—he knows.

Lewis Powell is waiting, hooded, noose fixed, although
he dies hardest—his legs are tied, but he kicked a lot—
his legs always blur in every Civil War execution photo.
David Herold, between Powell and Atzerodt, seems slow
taking it all in—just staring down, occupying a spot—
as a guy kneels to tie his shins, thighs. Herold knows.

Grant's signed bio and photo of him leaning on tent pole
during the bloody Wilderness Campaign is another lot—
this is a single carte-de-visite Civil War execution photo
of Mary Surratt and other Lincoln conspirators we know.

Civil War-Era Execution Photograph of Mary Surratt

In this one, they're placing the cloth hood over her;
her legs are tied (over her dress) at her shins, thighs—
and, above her head, someone still holds an umbrella.

She's been standing there longest, the "place of honor"
at right, so she was first on the scaffold—it's hot, July—
and, in this photo, they're placing the hood over her.

Earlier on the scaffold, the four were sitting on chairs
(Surratt, Powell, Herold, Atzerodt), all waiting to die,
with someone behind each head holding an umbrella.

The chairs, before the reading of the execution order,
were removed; then, it was all down to business: bind
their legs and ready the hoods, as is being done to her.
Behind her in the photo is her noose, prepared earlier
(about to be placed over her cloth hood), already tied
and held by the guy next to the one with the umbrella.

The hood is in the Smithsonian, with rope souvenirs
(cut for distribution after Lincoln's conspirators die)—
but, here, they're still placing the cloth hood over her
and, above her head, someone still holds an umbrella.

Stephen Gibson is the author of eight poetry collections: *Frida Kahlo in Fort Lauderdale* (Able Muse Press finalist book prize, forthcoming), *Self-Portrait in a Door-Length Mirror* (2017 Miller Williams Prize winner, University of Arkansas Press), *The Garden of Earthly Delights Book of Ghazals* (Texas Review Press), *Rorschach Art Too* (2014 Donald Justice Prize Winner, Story Line Press; 2021 Legacy Title Red Hen Press), *Paradise* (Miller Williams finalist, University of Arkansas Press), and three others.