

EDWARD MCCRORE

After the Crossing

Why should Arctic tern chicks on a tundra
break their eggs and face nothing but white storm?
Out of the boat's shell Washington's Life Guard,
first their heads, then spines, had rather they lacked eyes
after the Delaware crossing, faced with a black wind.
Yet if they saw inside, if their General knew what
change might rise like a great blue heron at first light—
had he recalled the nymph that's preyed on mosquito
larvae in ponds and becomes Dragonfly Goddess—
maybe the sleet-stormed man would have turned with a
slight smile
telling the storm *You're just a mote in the month's eye.*

Turn around now, you fool! was the same old
grate on his inner ear, General Gates talk.
Back went Washington's mind to the war-plan,
Victory or Death his password, back to November,
Congress and John Hancock begging for skirmish
wins while days—history—watched as the king's own
butchers corralled and slaughtered Staten Island.
They were the age's gods. Providence, crowned Luck.

All Night March

Moving south toward Trenton, Washington shuddered
cantering past his scrawny regiments. Haslet's
'Delaware Blues,' New Hampshire brindled like spaniels,
Maryland drooping. Connecticut sharpshooters out front
smartly—half their corps buried at Brooklyn.
Somehow the strung-out, scabbed line of battalions
followed orders to march in silence. Or shuffle—
New York was an old woman shuffling, her old folks'
home with end-stopped corridors, all in polite grey.
Washington wanted to braze valor at every
joint with flaming solder. Rhode Island abruptly
slid like puppies downhill, scrambled for balance,
damned odd footing, thunder, and hankered for hot rum.
Memory hurt him too. Reminded of endless
marching in fall by men now sloshing in winter,
knowing the same slapdash cordons had dwindled
after colon-emptying battles, desertions,
food thin as their clothes, the end of enlistments.

Alone Companions

While the Brits, like foxhounds, yipped at the fox's
unmistakable spoor, Washington wearied,
lay one evening restive, dinnertime tasteless.
'Who?' he asked when his Boston Captain Williams
told him, 'Peter DuCharme claims to be welcome.'
'Ah my baker,' the General said. The private
walked in smiling. 'The man is iron-like biscuit,'
Washington said to Williams, who puzzled and walked out.

Both men sat with wine. 'You're doubly a brave one,'
Washington said, 'battling dough and the Brits both.'
'I've been punished,' Peter told him, 'for stealing
too much bread, sir. I dreamed biscuits were outlaws
raiding my house. They multiplied, leaped in my Mother's
mouth and chipped her teeth. When they bulged her belly—
Lord Almighty—they popped back out through her navel.'
Washington's gut clenched. 'Baby biscuits?'
'After I woke up,' DuCharme answered, 'I saw buns
swarm in my tent like bats. I'm done with a thief's life.'

'Where is home?' the General asked. 'New Hampshire,'
Peter said, 'the north Connecticut River.
Lakes so pure you can drink the water while swimming!
Fog so thick I have walked on water in old woods.'
'Ah but close to Canada,' Washington answered.
'Why not join Quebec and fight for the British?'
Peter paused. 'My Father died when his front line
charged Quebec, sir. General Montgomery died too,
heading the rush. My Father always told me,
"Stand alone in your state: you'll stand with the best men."
So I chose your army. I stand by the lonest
man I know, General Washington.' Nodding,
touched at first, the Commander pondered and said, 'No.

You and I are not two loners at war, man.
Friends have taught me ways of family closeness,
whether in peace or war. Fairly, freely,
soldiers can bond.' He left out enemies, captured
traitors, Iroquois braves, spies and assassins.

Unfinished Business at White Plains

Over the hoarse ‘*Nein!*’ and ‘*Sheise!*’ from Hessians,
loud as the Brits’ demand to throttle the rebels,
General Howe banged a drum and insisted,
‘Men have fallen. Why lose more to such rabble?
Let’s give Washington—foxy George and his vixens—
time to despair. Soon as he begs for peace-terms,
George the Third—*that* George—wins at a low price.’
General Henry Clinton, who’d masterminded
Howe’s triumph at Brooklyn, angrily urged him,
‘Flay those bitches first, General. Don’t let
Washington sneak away once more in a cheap fog.’
‘My dear Henry,’ Howe told him, ‘it’s not best,
Washington skinned and raw. Humbled and wiser:
that’s how Majesty wants him marched through London.’
General Heister, who’d mauled Putnam at Brooklyn,
reddened and called for maps. ‘Right there: if you don’t strike,
look at your bloodied quarry’s escape into north hills.
Tell him to yield in an hour. If not, you will kill him.’
‘*Tod!*’ and ‘*Ya!*’ exploded from Hessians like grapeshot.
Howe took umbrage, banged louder for silence,
‘Very well!’ he cried. ‘But if death and plunder
thrill you so much, look right there on the same map:
Fort Washington, named for the glory of Reynard!
I have word from a spy, an American traitor
who has scanned redoubts and earthworks. Cannon
train on the Hudson’s warships, not on a land force.
There’s a prize for our King! Wealth for your soldiers
too when the fort’s chests are captured and looted—
soon as my boot has haply stepped on the man’s name.’

So the army turned hugely and marched south.
Snow dotted their mounts, the war-coats of Hessians,
blazoned malachite green, mixed with a melting
white flung by the north-wind. Regiments frosted,
moved slower in time, their glacier-like cannon

crunching field stubble. An age of immense ice
weighed on village, harvest and hut in their last hours,
lambs in the metamorphic onslaught of empire,
scoured larders left behind in a dreamless
bed of cold, mothers lost in the white tide.

DR. EDWARD MCCRORIE, Professor Emeritus of English at Providence College in Rhode Island, is the author of two books of poems and of verse translations of Homer and Virgil. His current project, from which the four published in this issue are drawn, is *Washington's Night*, a narrative poem about George Washington and the Battle of Trenton. A long selection is forthcoming in *The International Journal of Psychoanalytic Self Psychology*.