DAVID KEPLINGER

Three Poems

[In the spring of 1998 a member of my family passed on to me a copybook which once belonged to my great-great grandfather, Isaac P. Anderson, who was born in 1839. Anderson owned the copybook from the time he was 12 years old, in 1851, until his death late in the century. His doodlings and original poems adorn the book, which was originally intended for his algebra homework at the school owned by his father in Chester County, Pennsylvania. He continued writing in the book until every scrap of every page (nearly perfectly preserved) was covered in his scrawl. When he served in the Civil War, his character was clearly changed by what he had experienced. The material was darker, and, in place of poetry, he began to transcribe the songs he had learned while a soldier for the Union. He had "deserted" after less than a year of service—though records contradict on that matter—having contracted an unnamed illness, probably consumption, while serving. He journeyed northward, sick, shortly after the battle of Second Bull Run, where, according to Lewis Hyde's scholarship, Walt Whitman's brother, George, also fought. It was George's injury that inspired Whitman to come to Washington, to look after him, and, ultimately, visit "a couple of Brooklyn boys" convalescing at Campbell hospital. In the poem, "Whitman Meets…" I imagine an encounter which could very well have happened. Other poems are a part of a longer series in which I trace Isaac's involvement in the war and his long journey home.]

Second Bull Run

Already sick with what got in my lung,
The hot, then cold, then sweat along my dewy spine,

Through the left side kidney, boiling, freezing,
Then they came, hoots like geese way far away,

The small explosions, their light in darkness.
August, in the flanking march, I don't remember

But a man whose face was flush
Against the magic flash of cannons.

His cap fell to the left. He reached to touch the cap.
I drove the bayonet into his left: his left: as through the air,

The clouds, my blood, the sea of murky
Germs that multiply in heat. Then, I swallowed him.

Desertion, 1862

I saw my river,
One child
Stood fishing there,
Not even waving
To a passing man
In uniform. My long
Coat brushed
The ground, I was taller,
In my boots,
Maybe my feet
Weren't touching, my beard
The only weight,
Like leader fishing line,
My hair like tippet,
And that's
My story, that's when
The cough discharged,
The sad, black
Blood—exit ink.

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On record I'm a cad, the object of a bounty, rogue escaper from
the rough.

My lawyer, like a doting mamma, walked to and fro with his
black bags, between the offices on Small Street.

But the word had dried already.

Think of my face:
A face the witness reconstructs.
Horse thief. Suicidal priest.

A face that takes its leave.

Walt Whitman Meets my Great Grandfather at the Armory Hospital after the Battle of Second Bull Run

I imagine they kiss.
It wouldn't be strange.
Whitman is a father to them.
Bring us peaches
And a bowl of cream?
They mewl to him.
He offers one a nickel
When he has
A nickel. He feeds a strawberry.
And my great grandfather asks,
Did you bring
The Iliad? And Whitman
Reads RAGE—
In a voice neither angry
Nor mythic, but as detached
As news. The wheels
Of carriages outside
Bear mounds of something heavy
In the long
Straight lines. Whitman's
Voice is curvy, full of ruts.
He kisses on the forehead.
He kisses on the lips,
On the cheek.

DAVID KEPLINGER is the author of three collections of poetry, most recently *The Prayers of Others* (2006), which won the Colorado Book Award, and *The Clearing* (2005). His first collection, *The Rose Inside*, won the 1999 T.S. Eliot Prize. David has received grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, The Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, the SOROS Foundation, the Academy of American Poets, and the Katey Lehman Foundation. Currently, he directs Creative Writing at American University.