

POETRY BY DAVID KEPLINGER

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## Preface

### *Collaborating with the Dead*

Isaac P. Anderson, born 1836 near Philadelphia, fought for the Union between Augusts from 1861 to 1862. He was accused of desertion and detained in Washington DC from November 1863 until June 1864, considered to be an enemy of the state. He tells us in a letter he wrote from one of the hospitals on Meridian Hill that he is “a Painter by trade, and have had the so called Painter’s Cholic, and since that have never been hearty.”

A soldier with the 88th PA Volunteers, cousin of the one-day governor of Pennsylvania, Samuel Pennypacker, as well as being the grandson of a member of Jefferson’s congress, Anderson came from an honored family whose history was entrenched in American politics and culture. He was given what he called a “descriptive” to leave the army at Warrenton, VA, due to illness—a combination of typhoid, rheumatism, and lead poisoning—on August 26, 1862. A month later, back in Philadelphia, he paid a man named Dewitt forty-five dollars to process his claim. Dewitt, it turned out, was an imposter; Anderson’s discharge was never put through.

The army eventually tracked him down. Anderson was taken from his home in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, to Forrest Hall Military Prison in Georgetown and later to Stone General Hospital, a locale Walt Whitman often visited to nurse the sick in those latter years of the war. “I thread my way through the hospitals; / The hurt and wounded I pacify with soothing hand,” scroll Whitman’s words round the granite entrance of the Dupont Circle Metro Station, “I sit by the restless all dark night—some are so young; / Some suffer so much—I recall the experience

sweet and sad...” Haunted by him, as Whitman was by those young men, I dream, I dream, I dream.

Still later, I would find, in a stack of documents over eighty pages long, a letter written from jail in 1864, presumably defending his actions, telling step by step what occurred in the course of days following his exit from the war. It had been enclosed in an envelope in the National Archives since 1864. I discovered his songs soon after that. Written in the copybook passed down to me, and over six months’ time, they came back into the world with music I composed for them, and I sang them for the first time. With his lyrics I composed 11 songs and produced the album *By & By* soon after. I must add I felt that weird collaboration unfolding. I still do. His world was my world. A world broken up by a war and disappointment, and an individual caught and killed by the machine. I understood his poetry. His country was familiar to me. This was my country.

The poems and songs that follow base their material on Anderson’s obituary, his copybooks, some personal effects, and his own words: we have the handwritten letter (mentioned above) addressed to his court-appointed lawyer on April 1, 1864. His imprisonment lasted eight months. Anderson was also a poet who filled his copybooks with original verse and songs. These books were passed down in my family—he is my great-great grandfather—until they fell into my hands some ten years ago, igniting my interest in his life. With each new turn in my research, from the charge of desertion to my discovery of his letters, bed cards, surgeons’ reports, and the testimonies from others in his company, his story grew more contradictory, more human. What follows marks my strange collaboration and connection with a man now dead 130 years, Anderson’s story of one who fell through the gap is universal; it touches upon the lives of detainees at Guantanamo Bay, the issue of American violations of human rights at Abu Ghraib, and the overflowing American prison system in which, at this writing, some two and a half million are incarcerated. Isaac was a man who returned to his life, exonerated, but who never fully recovered. He died at 47 of a confluence of diseases he first contracted during the war.



## Letter to Annie Anderson Containing a Recipe for Coughs

My world begins with the spiraling stem  
Of a trumpet flower, choking  
The proto-trunk of a young oak.  
The oak has slipped from the cracks  
Of the camphouse, where we,  
Learning how to flanking march,  
Assemble quickly, charge into  
The wilderness of cannon fire  
And stab at hand to hand.  
It is difficult at first to pretend.  
Then pretending is less difficult.  
I imagine the work becomes  
Easier. Meantime the trumpet  
Flower wends around the oak,  
Meantime nothing else on earth  
Could matter exactly as much  
As its soft toppling of the tree  
As if by two hands. There was a day  
Of boyhood I have never told.  
My father took me out to kill  
What had sprouted near the stone  
Foundation of the house. I had to  
Snap the saplings with my hands--  
If we must live here, these cannot,  
My father said--though it is wrong  
To kill. Then we killed the oaks.  
Captain grinds with his knife  
The licorice, mixed with alcohol  
And thoroughwort, concocting a brew  
For our coughs, to kill the fevers  
That swell and fade and come back

And so preside above our work here.  
Some men like giants are pulling  
What would be giant oaks out of  
The earth around the camphouse,  
But these are only saplings  
That in a hundred years would fall,  
Tall as fifteen men. Without  
Our intercession, it would all go  
Much slower, but to the same end:  
The oaks upending the house,  
The trumpet flower snapping,  
The fever living, dying when I do.  
For now it's all sustained in a grip  
Like a dance, and it holds in place  
The world, I'm starting to notice, Annie,  
Even as it rends itself apart.

1864  
Stone Genl Hospital  
Washington D.C.  
Returned Friends: April 1<sup>st</sup> 1864.

Your kind favor  
of yesterday is before me, and I  
will try to comply with your  
request. My case is as follows.  
I enlisted in the Eighty Eighth  
Penna Regt under Col G. D. Williams  
Captain J. W. Durhams Co "F" at  
Philed<sup>a</sup> September 16<sup>th</sup> 1861. I remained  
with the Regt until August 26<sup>th</sup> 1862.  
when, not being able longer to do  
my duty. My Captain gave me  
my descriptive and told me to  
go to the Hospital. This was at  
Warrenton Va. on Popes retreat from  
the Rapidan. I got on the cars, &  
went with the sick & wounded to  
Alexander. I went to the Wolf St  
Hospital, but did not stay there  
but a short time, feeling very  
bad, and down hearted. I counted

around town. In my walk I  
met our Mail Carrier. He made  
the remark - You look bad. What  
is the matter? I told him I did  
not know, he then invited me  
to come with him the Virginia  
House, as he boarded there. &  
stay that night. I did so. next  
morning he told me he was  
going over to Washington. And  
if I wished to go along, he would  
get a pass for himself & one man.  
I went over with him. I then  
knew & felt I was going to be  
sick, and concluded I would  
go home. I did so that day.  
I was home but three days  
all I was compelled to take  
my bed. I was down <sup>with</sup> the Typhoid  
fever for a long time. When I was  
able to be about again. I was told  
that by having my descriptive

Physician. I could get my discharge  
in Philad<sup>a</sup>. I got the certificate  
with affidavit, and went to  
the city, and found a man  
by the name of De Witt in 3<sup>d</sup> St.  
He claimed to be a claim agt  
I showed him my papers - He  
told me to call around the  
next afternoon, and he would  
have my discharge. I did so  
& paid him \$45. for it. This was  
in December. I then thought all  
was right, and went to work  
at my trade, and remained  
home until November 6<sup>th</sup> 1863.  
When I was arrested, and to  
my surprise, my discharge was  
proven false. As true as there  
is a God in Heaven. I thought  
until then that it was genuine.  
I was then sent to Forest Hall  
Georgetown. I remained there three

Sent to this Hospital, and have  
been here since. I am a Painter  
by trade, and have had the so called  
Painters Cholera, and since that  
have never been hearty. My nerves  
are completely shakten. Pain in my  
breast continually, Shortness of breath.  
& poor health generally. And  
since I have been to this Hospital  
I have had a very sever attack  
of Pnemmatism, Was bed fast  
seven weeks - now able to go  
about with a cane but still  
lame, and as for my nervous  
ness - as soon as I discontinue  
the medicine I get very bad,  
and know that I will never  
be able to stand the hardships  
and exposures of a Soldiers life.  
The above is a true & correct <sup>statement</sup> account  
of my case. I do hope to hear from  
you very soon, and trust you  
may be successful in my case.  
And I remain your sincere friend  
and well wisher

Isaac P. Anderson

## The Dead on Culpepper Road

It had become the natural thing.  
Dead animal smell. A long line  
Of parade watchers, faces  
Turned toward the light rain.

I will never go back to Culpepper Road.  
The collapse of a pumpkin reminds me  
Of a man's head stabbed into a fence post.  
Twelve nights on Culpepper Road.  
The world a pit of parades and disuse.

Culpepper Road, if you come for me,  
I will not go along, sir. I left.  
The morning rose like a curtain, sir.  
I was the hero. This was my play.

Crows were quacking like ducks.  
Ducks were taking easy flight.  
Guns were being fired far off, no louder  
Than a hoof beat.

## Leaving the War: Letter from Warrenton

*August 26, 1862*

We are in Virginia now.  
It is the first year of my service.  
We are on the eve of battle now.  
Here is the hillside where many will die  
Crying out to the no one  
Who has murdered them.  
Prayer is not fulfillment of a wish.  
I have learned how. The crows  
Watch as I pray to them,  
From the vantage of some tree  
In which they were created  
And they shall never die.  
They know nothing about their birth  
Or their death, Annie. That's how  
They know so much about prayer.  
When you are running  
From yourself as I have,  
As if from a marching body  
That is not supposed to think  
Of where it came from or where  
It is going, you become like a crow,  
You become yourself a prayer.  
The sunlight passes between two  
Green branches, nearly vertical  
In their rising. The crow is hovering  
In that threshold as if it is a tiny,  
Opened door.



From Isaac P. Anderson's childhood copybook. Some soldiers, ca. 1851

## Forrest Hall Military Prison for Deserters

*November, 1863*

They have come for me, we arrive  
At Forrest Hall. Hawkers trudge  
Calling names, tomatoes, cabbage,  
Apples, beets. November plucked  
And shredded, boiled over open fire.

They have come for me, my life's  
Last day. In the carriage and the chains  
I wear like the calligraphic first word  
From an illustrated book in which  
I am questioned and accused, put to death.

The hawker who eats a beet, boiled  
And wrapped in a white towel,  
Meets my eyes. The juice bleeds through  
To his hands. He eats that flesh  
And leaves a bloody maw.

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**DAVID KEPLINGER** is the author of four collections of poetry, most recently *The Most Natural Thing* (New Issues Poetry and Prose, 2013) and an album based on Isaac P. Anderson's writings, entitled *By & By* (Morphius Records, 2011). He has received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the D.C. Council on the Arts, the Danish Arts Council, and has been awarded the T.S. Eliot Prize, the Colorado Book Award, and the Cavafy Poetry Prize from Poetry International. He teaches at American University in Washington, D.C.