

**JOHN S. BRINKERHOFF**

## *The Sin-Eaters*

long shapes hover beside the creek, seeing the shimmer of bitter fires on the water—

they shovel flaming ground, hearing whispered tales  
of mangled limbs and morning wars—

they cup cold, weed-lipped railroad tracks, feeling  
the shiver and blast of greasy cannons—

they breathe sweet wind on stone-marked hills, smelling the corpses of sunburned soldiers and bloated horses—

they tongue names: Gettysburg, Chattanooga, Atlanta, tasting  
bloody leaves and the sly horror of sharp smoke—

mouth smiles accuse; stony eyes buried in brim-shade  
are gorged, gorged, and hungering for more.

## Kenilworth

it stands firm  
upon its hill  
incomplete.

sky glazes  
the great arched windows.  
stepworn stairs  
fall short of rooms.  
the gates are frozen shut.  
its ragged walls belong  
to doves, and trailing vines.

upon its hill,  
it stands firm,  
solitary,  
seeming to need no more  
than birds and vines  
to shoulder the seasons  
once again turning,  
surviving the shadows best  
when before its autistic stare  
the night  
comes to kneel



In our time,  
we rode the bridge over that ragged rill,  
ascended the winter hill  
and saw her rise from the snow,  
red as a stormbroken sun, saw this misted  
by the plumes of our breath.  
She rocked in our sight as we approached.  
She meant the loosed weight of our weapons,  
wine, friends,  
fires to draw the warm stink from our furs,  
and sleep  
while the sharp stars plunged  
in our time.



We clashed in the tilting yard to celebrate the seasons,  
as pennants cracked in the wind.  
The grass was never so green as on those afternoons,  
never as rich without the thunder of the gallop,  
and flashes of silver.  
The trumpets soared,  
and seemed to pull the sound from our throats,  
  
and we, the combatants,  
sat heavily on nervous horses,  
hearts and breath booming in our helmets,  
staring,  
waiting over our slit of ground,  
locked in that same visible moment  
before the jugglers's ball  
descends.



We lords proposed and eluded treachery,  
and carefully judged our allegiances  
among the staggering shadows  
of lantern flame.

We soldiers auctioned off our loyalty,  
and repaid it at the streams  
in horrible arcs,  
often sagging in our saddles as our limbs  
splashed,  
and settled under.

And we, the others,  
our fingers numb to the touch of all  
but naked skin,  
wondered who would be next,  
who would then claim or kill us,  
and endured.



We sat noisily around heaped tables  
until we reeled and vomited,  
our lungs and eyes burning with firesmoke,  
a pageant of lieges and ladies,  
lovers, soldiers and sons.  
We could see without knowing  
the transience of this holy place.  
We could hear without remembering  
the hollowness of our fealty.

And we could laugh without crying  
at the truth of the jesters, insane with colors,  
who came and went with the music,  
dancing in,  
dancing on

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