

## RUBY of the Underground Rail

*...another group of women has also been hidden in history – probably somewhere between five hundred and a thousand women who disguised themselves as men and enlisted as full-fledged soldiers during the Civil War. Page 165, All The Daring Of The Soldier by Elizabeth D. Leonard*

I.

O Gregory, there must be  
a place where brother is not  
turned against brother  
and women do not pretend  
to be men to protect life,  
love or meager expectations.

Burnt into the willow dreams  
at the back of my hazel eyes  
is a setting sun —  
Oh, not this landscape salted  
or on fire, but a hollow  
place of wind carved stone ...

rusty orange, red, and violet  
painted by a hand of golden light  
from our own fierce star –  
a place we walk hand in hand,  
free to be just who we are:  
pioneers of peaceful change.

From this view, perched on stone walls  
I see a wagon train come,  
smell sweat from burdened horses,  
imagine the caravan  
of abandoned and orphaned  
children traveling

into this mysterious  
untamed red sea of blown sand  
and canyon shores, stone  
walls carved by a sassy wind's  
tongue. Then, my love, my warrior,  
I imagine you,  
Taking off your army clothes,

burning them at amber dusk  
while we slowly dance  
our own peace and glory dance  
unbinding your union breasts  
for the evening star

Great Venus to light upon each  
tender tip – of hair – and there  
where I long to kiss –  
your shapely, decommissioned,  
brow. Yes, as fire turns wood to  
coal we'll make good bread

from the impostor cornmeal  
you've worn in your wool trousers  
for all these long months –  
doing your best to keep quick  
hands from local ladies off –  
Mending holes, my ass!

And what came of that 'one up'  
officer who likes them young  
sweet-faced boys and keeps  
trying to give you favor  
in his twilight maneuvers?  
Trust no company?

Oh what a feast it will be  
when we eat the meal  
that sets us free.

II.

Oh darling I KNOW your deepest passion  
lies in truth, justice and that ideal of  
a civil, nurturing nation...and that  
you are more than willing to sacrifice  
personal for the good of all you love  
be it tree, kin or card playing women  
And I KNOW you are determined to risk  
whatever great revelatory fall  
before the strange weight of blood and honor  
(if indeed there is honor to be found  
in war or any true revelation

of your actual emancipation  
among these self serving authorities).  
Free the slaves, my love, we all must be free...

As for the inequities of 'our own  
stagnant julep-sipping society'  
these are bound tighter within all of us  
than your tender breasts beneath that union  
coat and, I daresay, will not be changed by  
any war, bargain, sermon or fear, but  
may recoil and wither to nothingness  
when 'true' love can look into its own heart  
without flinching or turning a cold back  
to the pain of mortal and immortal.  
For only in our own eyes and ghost-eyes  
of dead lovers can we see what has been  
hidden, erased from conscience and yet lies  
awake before us.... What humble compost

will it take to ease the salted fields – heal  
wounded in this bloody contested land  
of promise and misshapen family pride?

### III.

As for your concerns, Captain,  
No, I will not kill and eat  
those chickens we raised  
together from little peeps  
or sell your inherited  
home to save my skin.

No, I will never leave it  
empty before enemies.  
Some commands I will  
not take, even from you,  
They will have to pull iron  
keys from my stone fist.

Yes, I'm ripping bandages.  
My prayer today (and ever since  
You joined up for cash)  
is that some angel keep you

out of the line of cannon  
fire in this parade –

of Hell on earth. Will it end?  
They say the war is 3 days  
away and south now.  
So far they've only taken  
cows and raided our good still.  
Tell me you'll take leave .

IV.

Odd time of year, my Gregory  
for so many birds to still be  
in migration: I've seen Heron  
and Crane, Sparrows, and songbirds too  
exhausted to sing. I warn them  
of fox, snakes and even night owls.

You'd think the natural order  
of things was about to be turned  
upside down. Of course, I've been known  
to read auspices – just today  
I heard three ravens moving north  
through Jefferson's good maple trees.

It gives me a knot in my gut,  
(these late weather defying flocks)  
wishing I too could fly above  
these watchful confederate eyes,  
but until this war is over  
I remain here, rough and uncut

A ruby underground, waiting  
for your stubborn love to come pan  
me from this holy cantankerous,  
muddy, and God only knows why  
so fickle a river of sharp  
bend, deep pool and quick redemption.

V.

I got myself muddy today.

An unexpected wind came out  
of the south and has been holding  
its own for days and with the warmth,  
a late and lonely bird will flee  
winter's shackles. I love the sound

of wings and wind – but the river  
has no chosen friends. It begins  
to hold its ice near shore, and so  
baths – however necessary --  
do little to keep my skin on...  
Or tender in its resistance.

VI.

Gregory,

It is a dark, snowy day here.  
The sad and lonely come and go.  
I give up on desperation --  
make chicken soup for the children.  
I tell them Mr. Lincoln needs  
your help and YES they are nearly  
impressed by this explanation.

But O much more pleased by the jar  
of maple syrup your brother  
Martin gave us... When they finish  
washing themselves up by the fire,  
each one is allowed to dip one  
clean finger into the sweetness  
of the past you had together.

Snow wraps white buffalo blankets  
around everything – everything  
oddly still – reminding me of  
you and our stolen Thursday. Can  
it be the war was silent then  
or were you just protecting me  
from your loyal return to it?

Afraid I'd tie you to my bed?

Poison you with creamy green pea soup?

O hell, Doesn't one war simply  
beget another, Gregory?  
I thank the moon for each brave soul  
that makes it down drop-off river  
and to another side alive,  
but yes I dream of a day when  
no one but you will come knocking.

I imagine you prancing up  
on your grey Morgana filly  
bare back, you swoop me up and in  
to your sky wide arms. You cleave,  
kiss and hold me tighter than your  
knife in a fight – there is nothing  
delicate about it – silly

And as you kiss the old salt trails  
from my faithless face you tell me  
there is no more war between us,  
no phantom general waiting  
to pin the next seductive flight  
of ribbon to your warrior's chest...

Oh if only this life with me  
was the freedom prize you dream of—  
But I know better than to turn  
to bitter angry conclusions  
just to maintain my sorrow or  
drive you mad before a battle.

Instead these strangers come and go  
wanting, most of all, what I can't  
give them – not soup or clean laundry,  
not patch, bath or lost button sown  
but – the open heart of woman  
pouring elixirs of golden seal  
courage into life's battle wounds.  
And I, darling, can not give them  
what rode off last Friday with you –  
the heart of my heart,  
the soul of my passion.

VII.

Two deer in the yard, feasting  
on hickory nuts. Remember how  
we watched them – their honey brown eyes  
staring back at us? Oh Fleet thieves  
of bean and cauliflower sprout  
doubt not seeds – our humble feast!

VIII.

We all need to lay our braided  
lives before a magic mirror,  
to press our sore -from- weepin' eyes  
to someone's warm or milky breast,  
to probe forbidden oracles,  
to find the lost and holy nest .

Yet I am nothing but a clear  
channel for tears of war and loss,  
of hurt lovers riding away  
at dawn while the short-eared owl flies  
from south to north and the oldest  
of the female deer leads her herd

to a safe place where they can scratch  
at frozen grass and windblown snow  
for some substance – green – and tender  
enough to devour in faith.... June's  
Yarrow gone, they'll start on soft bark –  
nibbling trees that house angel wings

after dark. I am, after all,  
a simple, sainted, war-torn whore –  
doing the business of Venus  
as best I can. Save for you, dear  
Gregory, there is no dream left  
to soften the blows of winter,

make holy this old heart of fire.

IX.

Oh, damn the nation, it is so  
cold here without you that we are  
all sleeping in one wool bundle.  
Yesterday the ice was so thick  
it took a brick to break open  
a stuck seal on the barn door .

Talk about wrath of God – it was  
as if a letter from beyond  
were sealed deep inside and only  
the most diligent (white and pure?)  
would be allowed to read the foul  
contents of old mare’s dirty stall...

Today, I swear, some cold hemp knot  
in my noisy gut has fallen  
to my womb and some furry  
bat is hanging upside down there  
beside the opening. I wish  
you were here but I know you are  
knee deep in bodies bowed over  
by pitiless marching orders.

By the way Althea moved in  
night before last. Her husband  
was unfit for war (an ale man)  
so he turned the war on her.  
“Enough,” I said and belted him  
a good one with my best willow  
broom. I need no god to forgive  
me for his wound but, my Jesus,

Gregory, the judge may see it  
differently. I guess there is  
a soldier in everyone  
pressed far enough. I didn’t think  
twice when he went for her bare throat.  
Let justice stop this woman’s mop.

Althea doesn't eat that much.  
Skinny thing. She's planning to trade  
his ring for beans. We are busy  
looking for grandma's recipe,  
dark molasses, slow steady heat...  
And I swore I knew it by heart.

X..

Still every passing night I feel  
rich on stars, fat on freedom dreams.  
Will there be liberty for us?  
Can love be patient, true and kind?  
Yesterday I woke from a dream  
where a fair maid expressed her milk  
over my willing mouth and face.  
I was wet and sticky with it.

The natives say in the cold heart  
of winter the antelope smells  
spring. I hope it means these artless  
dreams are true and I will soon lick  
a milky you. O, devotion –  
my Imposter – have they stripped you  
of your rank? Or thrown you to dogs  
in a confederate drunk tank?

Here the lilies – O the Bullhead  
Lilies – are open, their flowers  
go on dancing beneath the green  
of their bridesmaids' skirts as if they  
were attending a perpetual  
wedding. Charity is our true  
bride? I am not sure, but turtles  
arrive in driftwood chariots:

We all sit in pews of pretend.

