

Blood on the Ground

Francis Davis Connor

Even with my eyes closed, I could see the burst of fire and gunpowder leaping from the business end of the cannon. I press my body against the ground like it's going to slide out from under me and pray for a break in the battle. Pinned by gunfire, there is nowhere for me to go.

The ground was hard and cold; a ruthless reminder that I'm not dreaming. I lift my head up and scan the grassy field, searching for a knoll to take cover. Bodies lay around me like scattered Autumn leaves: my friends, my enemies, my family. It gives me no pride to know I caused some of those losses.

I run my hand across my red Confederate uniform. I know why we are doing this. "*To preserve our rights,*" says my mama, but it's hard to want rights when the only thing I have now is the right to fight.

Adie Buchanan Jones

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

My finger spasms from where it rests on the trigger of my rifle, causing the bullet to fly out and hit the ground a few meters away. Dirt spews in the air. Cursing, I turn to the man beside me. "It's 1862," I yell over the noise of battle. "You think there'd be better guns by now!"

Private Moses snorts. "It's 1862," he replies, his own weapon pointed downfield at the mess of men. Despite starting on different sides, it has become hard to distinguish who is fighting for whom. "You think you'd learn to shoot better by now." Moses' shoulder jerks back with the force of the kickback, and a Confederate soldier running past us drops like a fly. We

have been at this for hours-- the battle is nearing its end-- but adrenaline still courses through my veins. I take another deep breath and aim toward the grassy hill.

I stare at the specks of blood peppering my blue combat fatigues. I know why we are doing this. "*To protect our freedom, and the freedom of others,*" my mother wrote in last week's letter. "*You're doing God's work.*"

It doesn't feel like it.

Francis Davis Connor

I lay in the dirt so long that my arms went numb from holding my rifle against my chest. I know I need to move, and fast. I am practically a sacrificial lamb sitting here. I do not think; just jump to my feet and sprint like the Devil's on my heels. I zigzag past fallen men, horses, and cannonball-sized holes in the ground. Don't think, just run-

I fall.

A pressure deeper than anything I have ever felt spreads across my chest faster than wildfire. Once again, I am lying face-first on the ground- this time, next to a culvert filled with Union soldiers. I don't have it in me to feel scared; my mind is only thinking one thing: *so this is what it feels like to be shot.* Wet liquid spreads out from underneath me; from my stomach, I think. Blood. *Well, fuck.*

Adie Buchanan Jones

We've reached the end of the battle. I can tell; gunfire is becoming less frequent, and the air is almost silent. My adrenaline rush has long since worn off, and my movements are getting sloppy. Instead of watching the enemy, I watch the sun set against the rolling Tennessee plains.

Despite the carnage below, the sky still bleeds orange. Despite the death around me, the world still turns.

I am still watching the sunset when it happens. The loud *bang*, the sharp pain, and the smell of gunpowder in my nostrils tell me everything I need to know- I've been shot. Wounded, right next to my neck.

“*Adie!*” Private Moses screams my name, and it sounds like he is underwater. Is he underwater? Is this God’s punishment for us all? I cannot think; my mind is a jumble.

Everything goes dark.

Francis Davis Connor

I must have passed out, because the next time I open my eyes everyone living is gone. Everyone, except the source of the groan next to my ear. A Union soldier, his hand pressed against a wound in his shoulder. Blood snakes from under his fingers and leaks from his nose, staining his blue uniform a vibrant ruby-red. I reach for the knife at my belt and panic fills my chest, squeezing my lungs and forcing me to sit up despite the pressure in my chest-

“Don’t,” the Bluebelly croaks. “We’re both already dead. Hell, I’m surprised you haven’t bled out yet.”

I retract my hand and collapse back against the grassy culvert, right next to the soldier. It takes everything in my power not to stab him. He is a killer, a murderer. I swear aloud. “Here I am, dying next to a fucking Billy Yank.”

The soldier spits, and my anger spikes. “Sure. Like you’re any better, keeping slaves and all.” He shakes his head, “and my name’s Adie.”

Adie Buchanan Jones

“Francis,” the young Reb says, almost like a laugh. It turns into a groan, and Francis hunches over his bleeding stomach. His skin is pale; he will not last much longer.

“I should kill you,” Francis whispers.

“I should kill you too,” I whisper back.

There is a long pause, and I hear Francis start to sob. It is like a switch was flipped, and the soldier just realized he will not make it home. “*Mama,*” he whimpers. I turn to face him and look at the tears running paths through the grime on his cheeks. *A child,* he’s a child. Couldn’t be more than eighteen. *A child fighting for the wrong side.* He killed my friends, my family... *and I killed his.* I am no better than the enemy. *Maybe death has made my mind go mad.*

My breathing becomes staccato, matching the pulsing of my heart.

Francis Davis Connor

I feel Adie’s hand touch mine. I want to recoil, to snatch my hand back, but I am too weak. I hear gut-wrenching sobs, but I do not notice that the visceral sounds are coming from me. I cannot stop; I can only think of my mama, my little brothers. The little boys that followed me around like lost puppies, begging my mama to let them follow me into war.

I once laughed at the thought of young Mikey skipping behind me onto the battlefield. Now, I balk at letting him anywhere near a gun. I was going to make the world a better place for him, and I failed. *I’m sorry, mama.*

Breathing becomes harder, and Adie's hand becomes a comfort. For the first time since I got shot, I feel pain. It burns, and I burn with it.

Adie Buchanan Jones

Nothing prepares you for the loneliness of death. The thought that when the walls crumble and the sun explodes and the earth fades to dust, it'll only be you.

I feel the life leave the Confederate soldier's body like a whisper of air, his hand still touching my own. A small cry passes through my lips. I know I'll be gone soon too. My body feels like it was chewed up by the devil and spit back up, right onto the town's soil. *I am going to die alone, next to my dead rival.*

I turn my head back toward the horizon. Despite the blackness coating my vision, I stare out at the orange-gold sky. A cotton candy sky, Charlotte would call it.

Charlotte.

My life, my love. Five hundred miles away. *Charlotte.* Will she know how I died?

I cannot think, I cannot breathe, I cannot move-

I don't want to die alone.