



# The Battlefield Guide

HARPERS FERRY

ANTIETAM

GETTYSBURG

poems

Rodger Martin

*illustrations by*  
Chad Gowey

HOBBLEBUSH BOOKS  
Brookline, New Hampshire

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Composed in Adobe Caslon Pro  
at Hobblebush Books

Cover art and illustrations by Chad Gowey

Printed in the United States of America

Second printing

ISBN: 978-0-9801672-4-5

Library of Congress Control Number: 2009939105

*Published by:*

HOBBLEBUSH BOOKS  
17-A Old Milford Road  
Brookline, New Hampshire 03033  
[www.hobblebush.com](http://www.hobblebush.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

*The Battlefield Guide* follows in the footsteps of Herman Melville's *Battle Pieces* and Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body*, but rather than use the poems as a viewmaster from which to imagine the Civil War, this volume strives to use those landscapes as a prism from which to view ourselves, Americans, in all the contemporary shades and colors that have evolved since the Civil War.

This fifth edition of *The Battlefield Guide* includes a major addition with the poem "Harpers Ferry." Though the last written, it now initiates the collection. When, in the late 1990s, at Harpers Ferry National Park, I first noticed the monument sponsored by the Daughters of the Confederacy, I sensed only poetry could navigate the emotional and psychological wilderness that we as a people attribute to the events of those years. Since then, the attempt to find a form for Harpers Ferry with which to begin the collection led from one blind alley to another. By 2005, I had put the poem away, unable to discover what would tie it with Antietam and Gettysburg.

In 2009 something changed and I sensed it was time to try again. In the spring, poet John Hodgen and I took a road trip to the battlefields. We were at Gettysburg, when preservationist Dean Shultz showed us the ruins of a mill that had been a stop on the Underground Railway and, a day later, as John and I stopped to throw a few pitches at a lovely ball field just beyond the farmhouse John Brown used to train his believers, the connections began to fall into place. As I reflect on why then and not before, I can't escape the feeling the inauguration of 2009 opened a portal—turned faith to belief that despite all the disastrous decisions we as a people make, we still can come together, build a baseball field for our children, reinvent ourselves, and try again. Literally the entire Harpers Ferry poem came together in May and June with a final quick trip in July with my daughter to fill in the missing introductory six lines.

The other poems began with a trip to Gettysburg in the mid-1990s to investigate whether the memories of youthful explorations to Gettysburg (I grew up nearby) were as real as I recalled or had been exaggerated in my imagination. I expected there would be a 15–30 line poem come of it at most. When I discovered that the places I remembered were not figments of imagination or exaggerations, but simply changes hidden by thirty years of growth, the torrent of language this unleashed caught me off-guard. Then came An-

tietam, as much a vehicle to examine post 9-11 behavior and an invasion of Iraq based on fraud and propaganda as it was the 1862 battle. By 2003 it became clear, the most dangerous people on the planet are ourselves.

The poems are arranged chronologically in time and geographically from south to north.

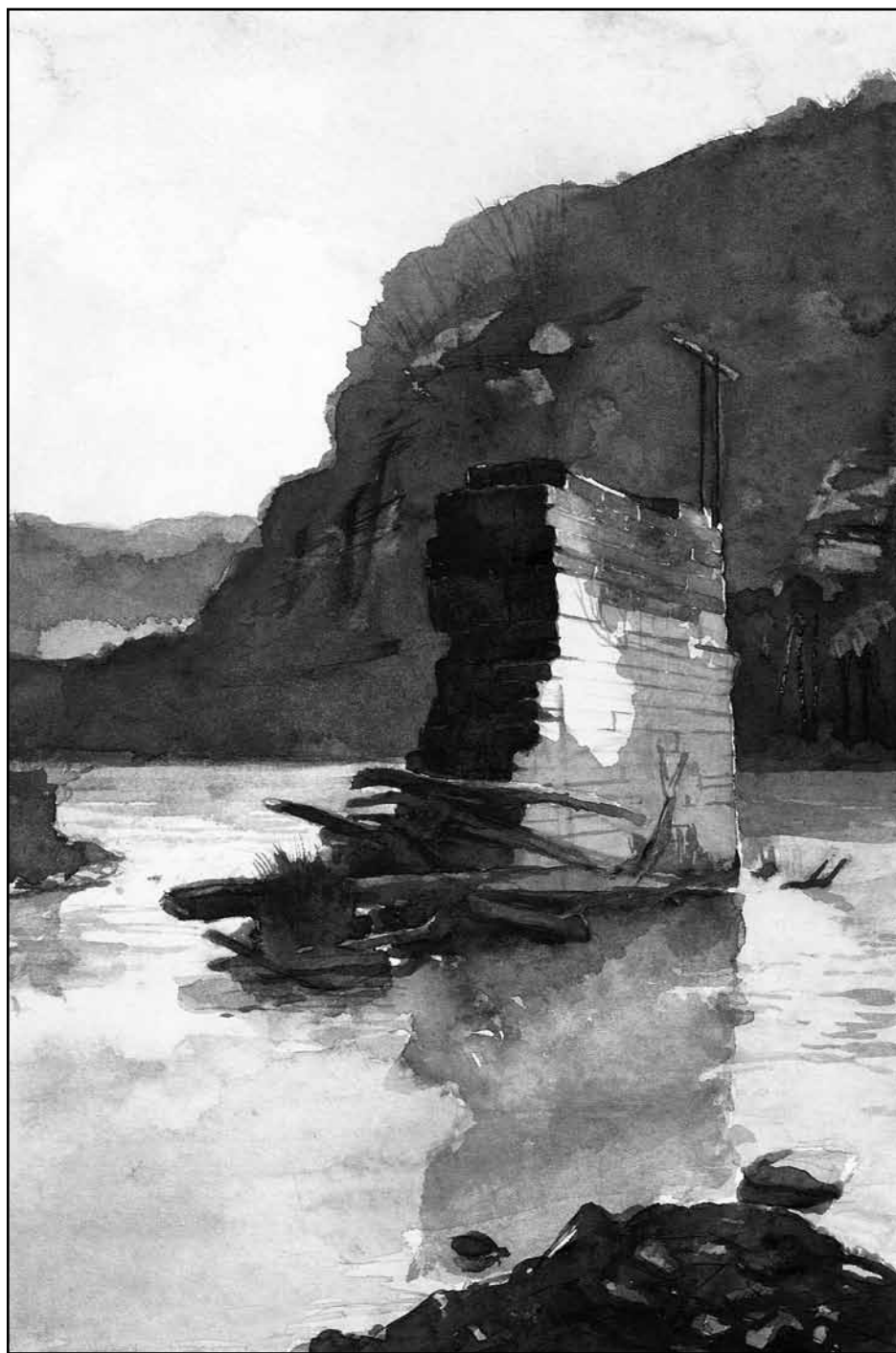
With exception of the initials of Henry Clay Powell, whose hand-carved initials I misread through the glass of the old national museum at Gettysburg as *A. C. H.* and from which I created the fictional character Absalom Christian Hart, all historical references are accurate. Endnotes have been added for the curious. I hope the notes are simply that—something, after a poem has been heard and sensed, for the still inquisitive listener to play with later.

One might look at this collection as a literary scavenger hunt for the Civil War buff; indeed, the often overlooked places referenced here are an attempt to reduce the scale of battle from mythic IMAX to the much more personal size of the soldier. For soldiers, a battlefield is about the few square feet surrounding them, square feet in which they desperately try to survive and, whether that fight takes place at Fox's Gap or Crampton Gap, or The Lost Avenue and cavalry fields at Gettysburg, or The Bloody Lane at Antietam, or Prek Klok in Vietnam or a field in Iraq or a ridge in Afghanistan, each is equally intense and equally deadly for the soldiers involved. For a soldier there is no such thing as The Battle of Gettysburg, there is only the amoral chaos of his or her individual and frail attempt to survive.

To stand on these places is to recognize there but for the grace of God and time, could be you or I.

Rodger Martin

August 2, 2009



## THE TOWN

Striated slate foundations squeeze themselves flat  
like pages of a national Bible—the book,  
layer upon layer locked in shale stacked from shoal  
to ridgetop, is the story of ourselves lit by the fire  
of gas lamps and determined by the push of the waters,  
as much needed, to tame a continent, as desire.

## THE POTOMAC

In our seasons of amorous bathing, Venus will loosen  
her blouse; but during implacable years, it's Mars,  
jock, who pulls tight the straps of his cod. So, chart  
the offspring—whether cupid or yeoman archer—the river's still 10  
an arrow drawn across the bow of the Blue Ridge,  
plucked at the drawstring of the Alleghenies.  
Patriot always, the arrow aims at the heart.

Before this border became the great divide,  
in the dry days, the dog days, when the river's  
sweet waters swung low and like a murmuring  
kiss brought the color-blind dark of night,  
the river parted for the wheels of the underground  
railway sending its children north to hide  
among the rocky creeks of tributaries—

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places with founders names like Penn's Manor  
of the Masque<sup>1</sup> where a boy, a ten-year-old's thrill,  
could find bundles of food left at dawn  
like manna, care packages wordlessly dropped  
on his porch, and deliver them to stark faces  
waiting beneath the dregs of McAllister's Mill,  
Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 1854.<sup>2</sup>

## THE SHENANDOAH

History's tuning fork, river song,  
ripple of boyhood imagination,  
bridal reins of Virginia, 30  
guiding the great sandstone neck  
of Massanutten, workhorse of the valley,  
and its armies, north, always north.  
After midnight, through the mist  
that rises from the gurgling waters  
about Luray, lightning bugs flicker  
like fairies or the souls of cadets  
left on the fields of Winchester,  
New Market, Cross Keys,  
more, more, more. . . . The changeless 40  
mist lifts one hundred years  
later and two teenage brothers  
sleep on blankets in a field  
under a sliver of moon, awakened  
by the quiet munching of the Holsteins  
surrounding them, just enough light  
to bring alive only the white  
in their coats: each cow a pair  
of faint ghosts or The Klan gathering  
its sheets to turn back the clock. 50



THE KENNEDY FARM HOUSE,<sup>3</sup> 1859

*Amerigbo, Amerrique, a Mexica:*<sup>4</sup>

A golden spirit's perpetual breath  
whirling up and down the continental shelf  
becoming a funnel cloud of blood, a gatling gun  
of names spit round and round again.

Here, behind logs split and whitewashed,  
chinked into the humid Maryland heat,  
eighteen men boxed like cartridges  
into the attic rooms. Fields here  
all slope toward subsistence  
and if one cannot grow wheat,  
one can grow angry.

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Add the gravity of morality  
and the bile rolls downhill  
to the river where it all splatters  
against the fire house at Harpers Ferry.  
A century and a half later,  
under the cold light of a Texas barracks,  
when things go wrong—that one forgets  
where one hides his wallet. It is still easy  
to blame a spic, black even better,  
than admit stupidity.

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