

# Looking into History

By Richard Wilbur

I.

Five soldiers fixed by Mathew Brady's eye  
Stand in a land subdued beyond belief.  
Belief might lend them life again. I try  
Like orphaned Hamlet working up his grief

To see my spellbound fathers in these men  
Who, breathless in their amber atmosphere,  
Show but the postures men affected then  
And the hermit faces of a finished year.

The guns and gear and all are strange until  
Beyond the tents I glimpse a file of trees  
Verging a road that struggles up a hill.  
They're sycamores.

The long-abated breeze

Flares in those boughs I know, and hauls the sound  
Of guns and a great forest in distress.  
Fathers, I know my cause, and we are bound  
Beyond that hill to fight at Wilderness.

II.

But trick your eyes with Birnam Wood, or think  
How fire-cast shadows of the bankside trees  
Rode on the back of Simois to sink  
In the wide waters. Reflect how history's

Changes are like the sea's, which mauls and mulls  
Its salvage of the world in shifty waves,  
Shrouding in evergreen the oldest hulls  
And yielding views of its confounded graves

To the new moon, the sun, or any eye  
That in its shallow shoreward version sees  
The pebbles charging with a deathless cry  
And carageen memorials of trees.

III.

Now, old man of the sea,  
I start to understand:  
The will will find no stillness  
Back in a stilled land.

The dead give no command  
And shall not find their voice  
Till they be mustered by  
Some present fatal choice.

Let me now rejoice  
In all impostures, take  
The shape of lion or leopard,  
Boar, or watery snake,

Or like the comber break,  
Yet in the end stand fast  
And by some fervent fraud  
Father the waiting past,

Resembling at the last  
The self-established tree  
That draws all waters toward  
Its live formality.

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