

After Spotsylvania Court House

I read the brown sentences of my great-grandfather,
As if—not even as if, but actually—
Looking into a brown photograph as old
As his writing is. In his sentences
Two innocent naked young men, Methodists,
Bathe in the morning in the Rapahannock River,
At Fredericksburg, Virginia, eighteen sixty-four.
Brother Pierson and I went out and bathed in the Rapahannock.
Returned to take our breakfast on coffee and bread.
I can see the young men bathing in those sentences,
And taking their breakfast, in the letter home.
We sat down on the clean grass, in the Garden;
Around us strawberries, cherries, gooseberries, currants
Were ripening, though not yet ready for use

An unluxurious incense, intense, dry, pure,
Rises from this letter and from his life.
The morning air seemed to take up the song of our praise.
It is a wonderful honor to be here and to do good.
The river is flowing past the hospital,
Nearly as wide as the Delaware at Trenton,
And like it shallow. I can see the young men walking
Through the early streets, on the way to the hospital,