

David Middleton

Erasers

north Louisiana, 1959

They come back now from sixty years ago,
Not wholly on their own or by my will,
These memories that change yet stay the same,
All but effaced, though I can see them still . . .

The building was already decades old
When I went there to learn the elements,
A grade school that had been a high school once
For Cedar Grove when cedar trees grew dense.

But then the river city spread up hills
Absorbing crossroad, hamlet, village, town,
Some schools, like mine, repurposed and renamed,
And every one-room schoolhouse taken down.

So *Fairfield* would survive, its limestone, brick
Creating space for coolness, warmth, and light —
Tall windows, taller ceilings — ceiling fans
And coiled gas heaters keeping the air just right.

*

Each classroom had a blackboard made of slate
And underneath a finished pinewood tray
Where stubby chalk sticks lay in their own dust,
By hand and mind worn down till worn away.

There, too, were felt erasers, used and left
By teachers and their pupils being done
With sentences or problems, diagrams
Of knowledge and its one long proof begun.

My desk held other tools that grade by grade
Helped me to measure, read, write, make, construe —
A pencil, newsprint, compass, ruler, book,
Construction paper, crayons, scissors, glue.

And every year my latest teacher saw
 How I worked best when doing so alone,
 A quiet child, content with inwardness,
 A boy to trust outside and on his own.

*

So in the hour before the final bell
 Midafternoon I pushed back in my chair
 Whenever I was called to gather up
 Erasers white with dust from board and air.

I walked the long main hallway end to end,
 Then passed through an arched side entrance under 卐, 卐, 卐,
 The ribbed erasers held against my chest,
 And stepped down to a playground without noise.

Backstops and swings, hoops, monkey bars, a field
 For racing, a knightly piggyback fight,
 Or Smear where we would chase the outcast 'It' —
 Yet not a child except for me in sight.

And there with absence and its solitudes
 I made my way where I had gone before
 Bringing the blocks of matted wool across
 Mown grass that once had been a forest floor.

*

At last I reached the trees, two first-growth pines
 Spared by the builders when they cleared the ground
 And laid a school's foundation, leveled earth
 By those tall trunks with sun and silence crowned.

Then one by one I beat the erasers hard,
 Clouds rising from the bark and grooves and gum,
 A ghostly image left on flaking plates,
 Rectangles of a powdered calcium.

My duty done, I paused, then went straight back
 And placed the cleaned erasers on their tray,
 Ready below a blackboard once again
 To lie in dust and wipe the dust away.

All this was long ago . . . a story told
When memories connect, as by design,
White chalk across a board of shale and clay,
Motes floating gold in light from pine to pine.



The Buried Dixie Cup

Saline, Bienville Parish, 1961-2021,
in a field not far from my maternal
grandparents' house

So many years and still that paper cup
Stays buried in my mind as in the ground
Though memory and will would dig it up
And spill a boyhood's treasures all around:

Two soldiers locked in combat, blue and gray,
A Yankee and a Rebel bayonet
Crossing in some unchronicled melee
Where long lost brother toys are fighting yet.

Beside them, coins — a penny, nickel, dime —
A wheat-back Lincoln, chief and buffalo,
Liberty winged, each struck by place and time,
And one gold curl I cut to go below.

I scooped out sand where rows of corn once grew,
A Caddoan "old field" cleared of girdled trees
On wolds whose rippling hills were shaped anew
For ages by the tides of inland seas.

Then gently working the cup down in grains
Until pure sand gave way to sandy loam
I made a grave in Eden for remains
Of legends that had now become my own.

Years passed, and country kin, their house was sold,
And yet the cup would haunt me, sunken deep,
A story with an ending unforeshadowed
Whose words would draw me on in waking sleep.

And so I took a road I knew so well
Through north Louisiana where it leads
To memory's grave and grave goods that compel,
The land and mind one map an old man reads.

The field was there, but by thick brush reclaimed,
Yet still I found the resting-place I made,
Wild corn stalks tall near things no marker named,

Tasseled like flags waved in the cannonade.

My splotched hands sifted sand from piles built up
Till in my palm I held them once again,
My soldiers, coins, discolored, but no cup,
Its elements dissolved by sun and rain,

Or curl whose strands had spiralled out of time
Like history itself, which in the end
Brings all that was and is to one full rhyme
As *Dixie* brims when all its meanings blend.



Note

The Dixie Cup was invented by a Boston lawyer, was named after dolls made in New York City, was originally manufactured in Pennsylvania, and is now owned by Georgia-Pacific, an American pulp and paper company headquartered in Atlanta.