

JOHN HODGEN

Upon Reading that Abraham Lincoln Spent His Summer Nights as President at a Cottage on the Grounds of the Soldiers' Home on the Outskirts of Washington Rather than at the White House, and that He and Edwin M. Stanton, His Secretary of War, Spent the Better Part of One Evening Freeing Two Peacocks that Had Become Entangled in a Tree

Father Abraham and Stanton on their hands and knees, climbing trees, the war weighing on them heavily, as if the sky itself were pressing down upon them, even denying birds their right, the peacocks, cock robins, sky fallen, their feet tied with jute strings to wooden blocks to keep them on the grounds, now tangled in the trees with the soldiers, the coffins, the earth itself opening up again and again.

You can see it sometimes, a homestead family pulling up in a station wagon with Illinois license plates at Walter Reed some night, good people. And you know they've driven all day, sandwiches in the car, and they're getting out of the car the same way they would if they were going to church. They're like brightly colored birds in the dim shadows of the evening with the jute strings of their grief around their feet, as if they were dragging wooden block coffins to keep their hearts from flying away, as if they've tried to fly away so many times that their hearts are permanently tangled in the trees now, each day growing more frantic, more alone. Here in Washington the president is sleeping. It is past nine. But Lincoln watches from his armchair, the white stone of his eyes, his heart untangling them, emancipating them, setting their bird hearts free.