



## FOR THE UNION DEAD

by Robert Lowell (1960)

*Relinquant Omnia Servare Rem Publicam.*  
("They give up everything to serve the Republic.")

The old South Boston Aquarium stands  
in a Sahara of snow now. Its broken windows are boarded.  
The bronze weathervane cod has lost half its scales.  
The airy tanks are dry.

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;  
my hand tingled  
to burst the bubbles  
drifting from the noses of the cowed, compliant fish.

My hand draws back. I often sigh still  
for the dark downward and vegetating kingdom  
of the fish and reptile. One morning last March,  
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanized

fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,  
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting  
as they cropped up tons of mush and grass  
to gouge their underworld garage.

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic  
sandpiles in the heart of Boston.  
A girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders  
braces the tingling Statehouse,

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw  
and his bell-cheeked Negro infantry  
on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,  
propped by a plank splint against the garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,  
half the regiment was dead;  
at the dedication,  
William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes  
breathe.

Their monument sticks like a fishbone  
in the city's throat.  
Its Colonel is as lean  
as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,  
a greyhound's gently tautness;  
he seems to wince at pleasure,  
and suffocate for privacy.

He is out of bounds now. He rejoices in man's lovely,  
peculiar power to choose life and die--  
when he leads his black soldiers to death,  
he cannot bend his back.

On a thousand small town New England greens,  
the old white churches hold their air  
of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags  
quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic.

The stone statues of the abstract Union Soldier  
grow slimmer and younger each year--  
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets  
and muse through their sideburns . . .

Shaw's father wanted no monument  
except the ditch,  
where his son's body was thrown  
and lost with his "niggers."

The ditch is nearer.  
There are no statues for the last war here;  
on Boylston Street, a commercial photograph  
shows Hiroshima boiling

over a Mosler Safe, the "Rock of Ages"  
that survived the blast. Space is nearer.  
When I crouch to my television set,  
the drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw  
is riding on his bubble.  
he waits  
for the blessed break.

The Aquarium is gone. Everywhere,  
giant finned cars nose forward like fish;  
a savage servility  
slides by on grease.



The *Platypus* Affiliated Society presents  
a film screening and discussion of

# Glory

directed by Edward Zwick (1989)  
starring Matthew Broderick, Morgan Freeman  
and Denzel Washington



**Friday, May 11, 2007 4:30PM**

**MC 112 S. Michigan Ave. room 707**

*Glory* is based on the letters of Robert Gould Shaw  
son of New England Abolitionists, chosen to lead the first black  
regiment in the Union Army during the American Civil War  
After the 1960s, revisionist historiography questioned the nature  
of the Civil War in the fight to overcome slavery.

Post-Reconstruction anti-black racism seemed to belie the  
struggle for social equality and freedom exemplified by  
Abolitionism, but, as Robert Lowell wrote during the Civil Rights  
era, this history continued to demand redemption.

The *Platypus* Affiliated Society organizes reading groups, public fora, research, and journalism focused  
on problems and tasks inherited from the "Old" (1920s-30s), "New" (1960s-70s) and post-political (1980s-  
90s) Left, for the possibilities of emancipatory politics today.

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