

July 4, 1863

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

To my dearest Eliza:

I hope this letter finds you, for I am not certain that the post runs from the ether, or Purgatory, or—God save me—this Hell that I have found myself in.

I write you now as Yankees come through the pockets of my men, the fallen of the 28th Virginia. They do so brazenly, in front of my very eyes and are not to be repulsed by saber, shot or Rebel Yell!

Certainly, I will spare you from the observations and strategic minutiae that I, in my humble position as Lieutenant, am privy to (to lay such burden on the mind of a woman—especially one already stricken with grief, as you must be, especially one already so prone to fits of melancholy; especially the mother of my children—would be improper). I will, however, say—again, from my humble and possibly incomplete understanding of such matters—that a grievous mistake has been made here. I have not seen such a slaughter in all my days in the Army of Northern Virginia.

The burial trench where my body is laid sits in a gently sloping

field, within sight of a copse of trees that I can say little about, except that they are there. The area would be scenic, if not for the tattered mounds of grey (and less frequently blue) that litter the ground.

If it is 'me' who is in that trench, then on top of me, under me, and to my sides lay several of our numben-blacker and more swollen than one of Mr. Johnston's little nigger children after an indulgent Saturday lunch—who have suffered a fate similar to my own. Faces pocked by grapeshot. Center portions blown apart by shells. Arms, legs and heads missing. Of course, for decency I will spare you the condition of my mortal form, but know that it is forever marred.

This is not the first time we have been buried.

On the first morning after the battle, strong rains fell. They washed away the pittance of soil that the Yankees had covered us with.

Then the hogs came.

With much rooting and prying, these tusked demons have undone the work of the lurid parties a countless number of times. I must admit that these Federals, bastards though they are, have shown persistence and true Christian diligence in seeing to the rest of so many planters' sons!

Indeed, there have been times when I have felt my soul (in its palely-manifested remnant) fading away from this world as the dirt holds me in its bosom. So where, I cannot say, but it is my belief that God is merciful! I should hope to be in His arms soon, sweet Eliza, and wait for your arrival in the Hostia company!

But there is a problem. I fear these hogs will not leave us be. As the sleep of death, final and certain, starts to take me, I shudder and am woken again by the sounds of digging, a scratching from a Hell that is above instead of below. These trenches are as overcrowded as the tenements that blight the North—some 25 men residing in each one!—and the hogs have made short work disheveling and unearthing the dead within.

We cannot rest easily, and so we linger spiritually desolate, haggard, and bored.

As I write this, I confess to you a great distraction. My men have started to play a "game," which distresses me greatly.

It is not any form of gambling (something I, as a lifelong Christian, have worked to purge from my ranks!), and eschews dice and other means of chance.

Truth be told, it can scarcely be called a "game," and is more of a mix of low-brow stage theatre and those fits of pretend that occupy small children in their middle years, before youthful curiosity gives way to more staid interests.

What it can be called is loud, obnoxious, and bordering on desecration, all issues which I have communicated to no avail.

For posterity I will record the workings of a typical "round," less for your benefit and more for the scrutiny of any Higher Powers that may wish to preempt (or at least punish) its play in the great hereafter. For surely is it true that the Devil plies sloth and dereliction for evil purposes!

To play, you must first have men.

The 28th Virginia is a proud regiment, steeped in Southern values and Christian ethic. I am somewhat disappointed to report that my men now fraternize with Yankees, in as much as haints who float through the rocks, trees and damnable fences can do so. The group now playing includes sixteen of the 28th (a mix of mostly privates and corporals), two Yankee artillery commanders from the very battery that rained down fire on our heads, and at least five Yankee privates.

If it yet must be said, the men must be deceased and unburied. This rather grim fact is integral to play, as you will see.

A preponderance of famished wild hogs is a must, though I suppose one could substitute wild dogs, wolves, coons, or other carrion beasts of the ground. I do not think that scavenging birds would be sufficient, as keeping up with them would require flight (dead men, apparently, are still as bound to the earth as live men).

The men are divided into squads, two men for each single hog, though there are no formal teams as in the Yankee sensation of long bats and small balls (an equally nonsensical pastime, if I am to be frank).

Within these squads, it is one man's job to spook their assigned hog through some means that I do not yet understand, and which have not been explained to me (despite my off handed queries, attempts to pull rank, and downright pleading) in order to ensure its constant movement. It seems that no living soul on this battlefield—not the Yankee burial details attending our earthly remains, the scavenging Yankee soldiers, nor the local farmers—can perceive our presence. Largely, the hogs ignore us as well. These men, many of whom succumbed hours prior to myself (while I, of course, held out hope of seeing you again, dear Eliza) have discovered a trick—some ethereal power—that I cannot wield. And they are hiding it from me! It is hardly fair, and I fear it reflects poorly on me in regards to my overall rapport with my subordinates.

In any event, the other man in the squad has the more... obtuse task. He follows the hog, sometimes stooped half upright, but most prominently on all fours—placing his body inside of the hog's—and endows the creature with a voice, similar to the way a stage actor breathes life into a Shakespearean character. It would seem that each hog is given a new life as a man, or whatever coarse, caricatured version of a man the "actor" sees fit to imagine.

I have seen the likes of General Lee imitated (poorly), his slow, Virginian drawl emanating from a hog's porcine belly. General Pickett is also a frequent target of this poor-man's satire, and for him I can only feel sorry. The men have been truly cruel in their lay assessment of his merit, presence of command, and manhood.

All this makeshift stagecraft, of course, is made incredibly difficult by the fact that one man is periodically spurring the hog forward, and the resulting tumbles, spills, and stumbling enhance the comedic effect. It is all in good humor, I tell myself—a soldier's brief respite from the field—but I must admit that I have never seen anything quite so silly and juvenile.

At least a few instances of scuffles have broken out as a result of play. When one of the deceased Yankees leaned too jovially into his portrayal of Lee, for example, there were fierce words exchanged, which escalated to insults implicating mothers and wives, and further to attempts at a ghostly whooping (spectral fists passing harmlessly through faces, crotches, and other regions). Though the men could not harm each other, I felt it my duty to wave my sabre menacingly and remind them of the chain of command. Eventually, the burial details finished their work at the top of the hill where the cannoneers fell, laying the offending Yank to rest, and with him, the argument.

There have been several "rounds" of this game played over the course of many days of heavy rains, entombing and re-entombing of corpses by the Federals, and wildlife activity. The men who play have christened this ground "Hogsburg," and during the nights when the hogs hold high feast among the carnage, the laughter and excitement is riotous. I have implored my soldiers settle down, even enlisting the help of a chaplain who apparently joined the ranks of the dead when his head was carried away by a skull. His attempts to gesticulate some sense into my wild company have mostly been cause for further insult and farce.

Earlier this morning, which I believe to be the fifth day of my unrest, the crack of rifle fire could be heard echoing from the town. Thinking our boys had doubled back to raise Hell on the complacent Federals, my entire company stood to attention and cheered.

Alas, it was only a few local hunters shooting the hogs.

Thank goodness.

In what I hope will be a final push, a nurse from some Yankee organization called the "Sanitary Commission" arrived today near our pit.



The look on her face was one of pure disgust and horror, as the diminutive varmints in the area ripped apart the dead bodies before her very eyes. I believe I saw her vomit. She admonished the Federal details for their slow and slipshod work, which, combined with the destruction of feral hogs in the area, will hopefully contribute to our permanent interment.

I do not know what is next for me and the men. May our Creator be merciful and gracious and welcome our souls to the next world, where there will be no pain, no strife, and hopefully no Hogsburg.

I think of you constantly, my darling wife.

With everlasting love,

Samuel

P.S. They still refuse to tell me how they spook those hogs. How in tarnation do they do it?