

SUMMER DAY, 1861

Here they come. The boxes are so small.  
My Billy's more'n six feet. He's all cramped up.  
The wagon wheels are out o' kilter and the coffins  
are jostlin' bad. Oh, I wish Jenny Frances would hush  
wailin' so loud for George. Billy made me promise  
to be strong if it ever happened.  
But my knees are wobblin' like those wagon wheels.

Wish I could've seen him one more time.  
They wouldn't let me see him now, said the caskets  
were sealed. Maybe he's not even in there. Maybe  
it's not him, maybe he's all right somewhere,  
maybe he--

No-- there's Captain Adams ridin' escort on the roan.  
He was with Billy and George. He called Billy  
the hero of Manassas. Even Joe Johnston said so  
in the letter. The preacher's goin' t'read  
that over the grave. My sweet William  
was always my hero. Fine and good. That's why  
I married him instead of George. A year ago  
Billy wasn't even sure there should be a Confederacy.  
Now he's dead for it. One night before he left,  
he cried. He was scared. Not for himself, but for me.  
Because I was so alone with Mama and Papa gone.

George used to say it was a lost cause  
if it came to fightin'. He'd been way up North  
to cities bigger'n any of ours.  
They had so many factories and better roads  
and railroads and even huge ships. There were more  
of them than us. He said he'd like t'live in New York  
or Washington, be one of those talky politicians.  
I'd get to go to fancy city balls and teas and wear  
clothes like I'd never seen. But George  
was not for me. Sort o' slippery and maybe  
not always truthful. Still, I'm sorry he's dead.  
I'm sorry anybody's dead. Why does it take death  
to settle things? What's really changed?

I hope it wasn't this hot at Manassas. Billy hated those scratchy wool pants. Least he was spared the winter. One night I overheard him tell his uncle it would take longer than folks thought. He said the winter would be worse than what we read about the Revolution. Somehow it seems like we both knew he wouldn't come back. I even think I know the minute it happened. The clock chimed, Mama's Haviland bowl broke in my hands and the room swayed. Next thing I knew, an hour had passed.

Wish I could stop this strange ramblin' thinkin'. Just remember my happy sweet William days. But then I'll ravel apart and he wouldn't like that. He'd be embarrassed if I carry on like Jenny Frances. Only last month she told me she'd marry Tom Lassiter if anything happened to George. Guess she wishes she hadn't said that.

Maybe if I move closer to her I can comfort her. Maybe if I hold her hand-- But who will comfort me? And oh, God, won't those wheels ever stop turnin'?