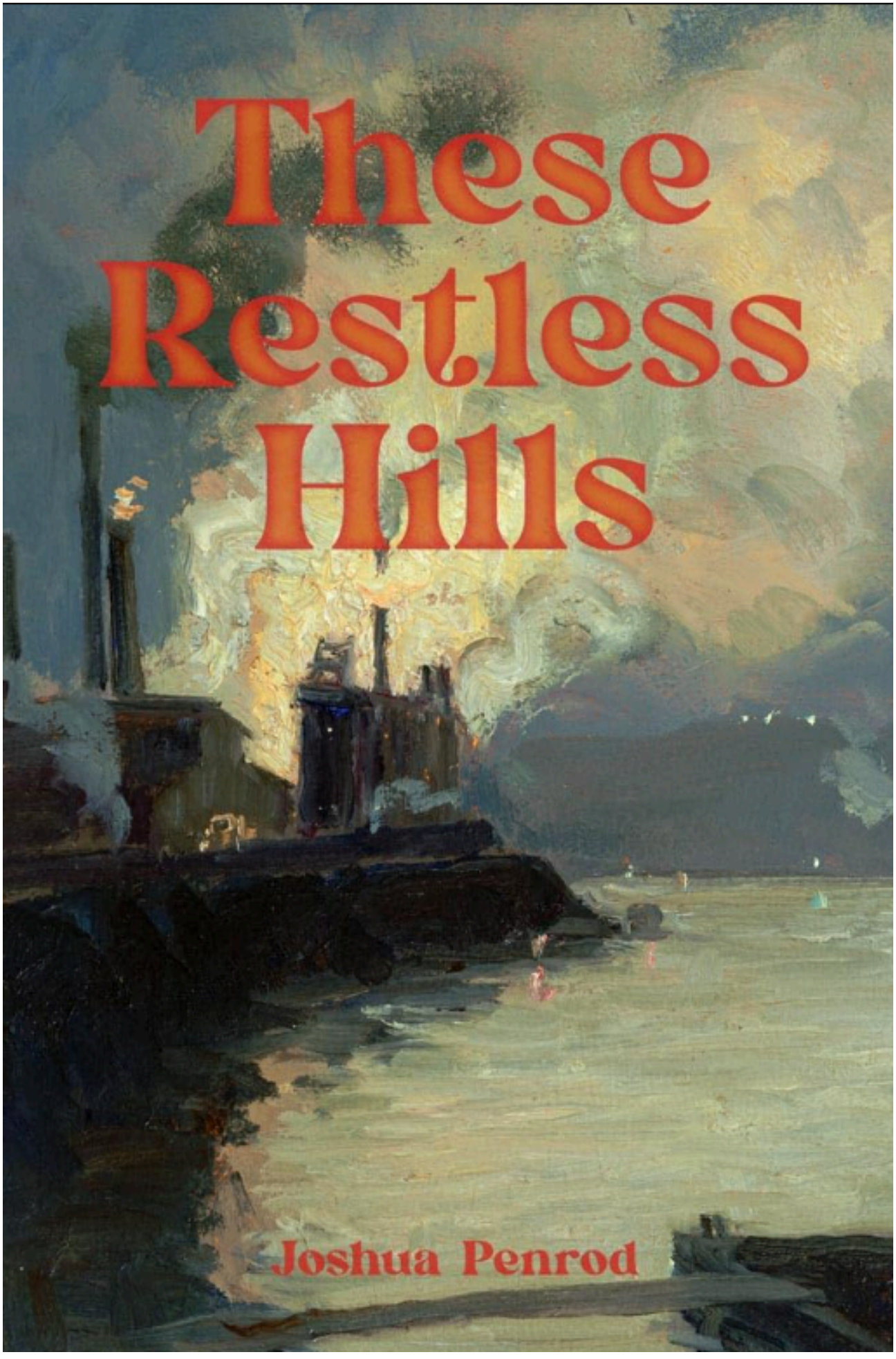

These Restless Hills
Joshua Penrod

I feel fortunate for a few minutes as the rain slams down, just in the sense that it carries away some of the feeling of gloomy and uncertain politics in this city, cast away in favor of the gloominess of this late May sky. Is Decoration Day not supposed to be the celebration of a new warm season? It seems, at least in these highlands, the warmth has been forsaken in favor of the cold deluge, but the politics . . . well, the politics are the same no matter where I go, even if the names are different. You'd have thought I'd be better at it, or at least more used to it, but I harbor no illusions. I'm a dog, an attack dog with a surname that makes my betters feel comfortable. The people remain the same, as is the poetry that they read to me, the words they've recited well to everyone but most especially to themselves. Words of prosperity and abundance, production and building, creation and re-birth into a new country, a new time. That hasn't been my experience, not exactly. My poetry is one of a world of brutality and the destitute, filth and mud, and destruction and death. The difference is not one of my life's path or the path of anyone else's. The difference is one of fantastic dreams and that of reality. One is truth, demonstrated by daily events and the circumstances surrounding all of us. The other is horseshit.

I know that Strickland and Ferguson alike were non-plussed by some of the things that I noted, the way I said them, what I observed, and the ways in which I related my opinion on such matters. There are many to whom I'm indebted for being able to engage in this manner; an educated man like Strickland or Ferguson or that ilk are just expecting what they see when I darken their doorway for the first time; an older man, laden with scars and with a reluctance to talk niceties. That much certainly is true, and it is also true that I do not readily demonstrate literacy until I absolutely must. For me, it is a power best kept secreted close to my breast, much like a hidden stiletto or single-shot conversation-ender.

My grandfather had been an educated man when he fled England with his parents, seeking some type of new start in William Penn's colony. They were not Quakers nor, as near as I could tell, a part of any other sect which would have been an immediate point of attraction for the Commonwealth. That has been lost between the generations. What my grandfather did impart to me, however, before he died just after my own 9th birthday, was an ability to read and his own willingness to spend time showing me the words in the books. My father then sold the books promptly after my grandfather had died, but of course, the damage had been done.

Later in life, when I courted Mary Elizabeth, I think she and her family were astonished by my ability to recite poetry that I had learned by rote and they had been impressed with the recitations from Horace and the ancients and most impressed of all by the statements from the Bible. Still—the poetry, told to Mary Elizabeth on blue and golden days of summer before I marched to the beat of the Grand Army of the Republic's war drums. At that point as well, I had been thrown together in a defile at Antietam and made the acquaintance of a schoolteacher from New Jersey, who had volunteered to serve with the First New Jersey. He had studied a number of things. Always thought he would be a minister, and then a schoolteacher, which is what he had become, even if for a short time. He knew Homer, the Bible, and a number of other things and was beside

himself with joy that there was another man nearby who had read and understood these things as well.

I have never really had much in the way of friends, at least since childhood. One of the realities that I have had to face is that people don't last, and neither will I, so it is indeed difficult to see the point of any such thing, at least when one has had the itinerant life that I've had. The would-be bloodstained chaplain from New Jersey would have been the closest thing I had to a friend, and I saw what was left after he had had his jaw blown off at the Wilderness during the Overland, the meat grinder that the men got fed into by General Grant. What was left of him while he still piteously clung to life was another one of the scarred visions that I keep sequestered between my ears but comes back to visit me when I try to rest my eyes. He competes with the many other similar visions, but he had been something like a friend . . . which of course tends to make it that much worse.

I held a chloroform-soaked rag over what was left of his face until his struggles stopped. It took a few agonizing moments; he clutched at my forearm, something burning and glistening in his glaring eyes, even the one that had popped partly out from its socket and had been turning cloudy. I never have been able to deduce whether it was fear, hatred, or gratitude.

Perhaps all three. I had said, "The dust returns to the ground as it was, and the spirit will return to the God that gave it." The war had its own way of prodding men into the words and deeds of Ecclesiastes.

I wondered then and still have occasion to wonder now where his God had gone. By 1864, of course, and the Overland Campaign, I had long known that there was no God. It wasn't clear to me that there never had been one, but it was obvious to me by then that he had long-ago fled this country and this world. Tens of thousands of men died, some times pulverized to bits by cannon, sometimes shredded with grapeshot, sometimes struck clean through the head with a Minie ball, sometimes crushed by a wagon, sometimes wounded and lingering for days or even weeks as pestilence sought purchase in their flesh and would eat away at it with the noxious smell of decay. Those men, still alive, could smell that they were rotting to death.

My own self-educated literacy could do precious little to help then. And it has left me to wonder, all these years later, why and how I had been spared when so many good men perished, sometimes in the most gruesome and horrific manner, beyond imagination, beyond description. I had turned to the Coal and Iron Police as a path to make my way in life when the battlefields closed their operation; I found new operations instead and turned them into battlefields.

God helps us all find a path, is that I've heard. What God wrought a path for a man like me? I know that the common thing held about me is that I had been somehow damaged by the war, and that I came out the other side of it this changed man, a bastard, a scoundrel. Truth is, the war did change me, but only as far as it changed anyone with my disposition and humors; it made me into more of what I already was, which was a bastard and scoundrel. It wasn't anything about

CIP that made me this way, or any of the other men who darkened the doorways on their behalf; our betters wanted men that cut a certain jib. I was able to do that, as was Jimmy Welsh, or any of the other of us carrying that badge. We had no reason to expect redemption, nor truly any desire to find it. We are who we are, and we carry the knowledge of our own character quite comfortably, with eyes wide open. As Tacitus said, great empires are not maintained by timidity.

There are no excuses for me. Only a road to damnation, paved by God's busy hands.