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History

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History

Dean Rader

 The Kenyon Review – "History" by Dean Rader

 SOUND CLOUD

I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.

—Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1784)

The dead are done with their declarations.
They have put down their pens and called

for our attention. They want to teach us
a lesson about remembering and how

it is a test for living. History is neither a
reprieve of the future nor the past.

And perhaps this is why, when my young son
walked into the room where my wife and I

watched our country on the streets of
Charlottesville, we asked him to sit with us.

I do not know if I am a good parent or a good
American, but I tell him that sometimes we learn

through despair. He nods like someone in a dream.
Sometimes, I wonder if our legacy is nothing more

than chains, bayonets, flags, guns, statues,
stockades, fields, uniforms, iron, and auctions.

Sometimes, I imagine the ghosts in my bones
are ropes that have turned into smoke. We all

wear burns on the inside. Even you, Mr. Jefferson,
author of America. Sometimes, I imagine it is 1619,

and you and I are together on the banks of the James River.
It is late August. The first ship arrives. It is called

The White Lion. You do not miss the irony.
I tell you I am going to write a poem about events in

Charlottesville 397 years from now—almost to the day.
You nod at me like someone in a dream. History is never

what it is, but it is more. In your lap is a book; in my hand
is a knife. You propose a trade. I believe you know something

about the future that I do not. I am thinking of my son
that is not yet born but who is suddenly between us.

I am thinking now is our chance. Our country has been dying
for such a long time. Sometimes, I think we should move

beyond monuments of body or mind. It is time
to start living forward into the history you did not write.



Dean Rader has written, edited, or co-edited eleven books, including *Works & Days* (Truman State University Press), which won the 2010 T. S. Eliot Prize, *Bullets into Bells: Poets and Citizens Respond to Gun Violence*, edited with Brian Clements and Alexandra Teague (Beacon) and *Self-Portrait as Wikipedia Entry* (Copper Canyon), a finalist for the Oklahoma Book Award and the Northern California Book Award. He is a professor at the University of San Francisco and the recipient of a 2019 Guggenheim Fellowship in Poetry.

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