TWO MONTHS

being the account of life as a prisoner of war

Horace Smith
O tan-faced praire-boy

O tan-faced praire-boy,
Before you came to camp came many
a welcome gift,
Praises and presents came and nourishing
food, till at last among the recruits,
You came, taciturn, with nothing to give-
we but look’d on each other,
When lo! more than all the gifts of
the world you gave me.

Walt Whitman
on prisoners leaving Belle Isle

Can those be men? Those little livid brown, ash-streaked, monkey-looking dwarfs? - are they not really mummied, dwindled corpses? They lay there, most of them, quite still, but with a horrible look in their eyes and skinny lips (often with not enough flesh to cover their teeth). ... The dead there are not to be pitied as much as some of the living that have come from there - if they can be called living - many of them are mentally imbecile, and will never recuperate.

Walt Whitman
4 - Pleasant day but quite cool. Good many are suffering for want of clothes but pants and shirts and poor things at that and not even a blanket or piece of tent to wrap up in nights. Hard face this.

5 - Clear and pleasant today but cold in the morning. Quite a frost this morning. Little warmer towards night. A small squad of prisoners brought into camp today. Captured from a gun boat at the mouth of the Rappahannock.

6 - Warm and pleasant today. A little sprinkle of rain this evening. The Rebels had a cartridge factory blown up today across the river. I wish it had been the whole Southern Confederacy.

7 - Warm and pleasant but oh what short rations. There is some provisions smuggled in through the guards occasionally but I have no money to buy with. They sell three small biscuits for $1.00 and 75c for a small pie. It is hard getting anything of the guards if the officers catch any trading with the guard they take their money from them and back and gagg them for half a day.
8 - Clear pleasant and warm, we were taken out and counted over again today. I wish they would count us off the island but no signs of that yet, the Boers are sending them to Tenn.

9 - Warm and pleasant through the day, little shower this evening and cool. nothing going on in camp but our regular skirmish drill with the lice, whittling bones and eating our rations.

10 - Cloudy and cool. the quartermaster turned off some of the cooks today for stealing salt from him and selling it in camp at the rate of 25s for a tablespoon.

11 - Clear and Pleasant and cold nights. Keller commences drawing rations for the squad today. we draw a half teaspoonful a day now.

12 - Pleasant and warm, some of the boys got letters from home today. we hear that Lieut. Jenkins of our Regt died in Libby prison a short time ago.
13 - Warm and pleasant today cold nights. Had a heavy thunder shower last night. A few more prisoners brought in today. The guard shot a man dead tonight for passing out to the Privy after dark. He was crazy and had been sick for some time. It does not seem much like Sunday today, but am in hopes we will soon get out of this hell-bound place.

14 - Warm day, a few more prisoners brought in today. From Burnside's army, we were taken out and counted again today. Nothing but the regular routine of camp duties going on today. Good night.

15 - Clear and pleasant all day. Isaac Akers of our Regt Co A died in camp last night. A great many of the boys are sick in camp now. I was weighed today, weigh 118 lbs. A great difference between that and 180.

16 - Cloudy and cold. No changes in camp today. We do not have a chance to go to the river to wash now. I guess they mean to kill us all.
17 - Cloudy and cool and a little showery. The Rebs commenced paroling the men over again today, report is that a squad is going away from here Friday or Saturday but my faith is not very strong.

18 - Cold and rainy. I think our equinoctical storm has commenced, some more prisoners brought in from the Army of the Potomac today. They say our Regt is at Alexandria doing guard duty there. I wish we were with them. the Rebs are paroling some of them again today, some that have money are buying their chances of going out with the first Squad that leaves.

19 - Cold and rainy all day. I was sick today so I could not take my rations. Vomited some, feel better this evening. Very cold night. we all suffer for want of blankets to wrap up in nights. no squad leaves here today.

20 - Clear and cold all day. wind in the N.E. slept cold last night. I feel pretty well today. can eat my little rations as usual. there is talk of a squad leaving here today but don’t believe it. don’t seem much like Sunday.
21 - Clear and pleasant but very cold. so cold we could not sleep last night. frost this morn. a squad of 800 left camp today for City Point. report is that we all leave this week. God knows we hope it is so. we got no soup tonight but our little 4 ounces of bread for supper. hard, hard fare. very cold night. took our tent down to sleep under tonight.

22 - Clear and cold, wind in the N.E. slept very cold last night. no signs of any leaving today. we got the soup this morning that we should have had last night. it was sour as swill and not half as rich as we feed our bogs at home. cold night. we have to take our tents down every night to keep us warm. we have 8 of us in a tent about 8 x 9 feet square.

23 - Clear and cold again today. we were taken out and . . . over again today. and moved into another tent. no more signs of leaving here. frost this morning. we have a new set of cooks again now our victuals are better salted than they have been.

24 - Cold frosty morning. I tell you we suffer nights from the cold. No news in camp today and no signs of leaving this cursed place. Our boys are busy making Brier root pipe today. almost too cold to bust lice today but we have to do it. have been on this Island two months.
25 - Another cold frosty morning, cloudy and showery towards night but cold. About 150 prisoners came in today from the Army of Potomac, all cavalry. They report the army as advancing towards Richmond. We shall sleep cold again tonight, no signs of leaving Belle Isle today. One year ago today we were mustered into the U.S. Service.

26 - Clear and cold again this morning. We passed a tough night last night. Another squad of prisoners 150 came in today from Charleston. They commenced paroling again this afternoon. Report is that a squad leaves in a day or two. We are all anxious to see them leave. I year ago today I went home from Jamestown on a furlough but little did I think we should pass the anniversary of that day on Belle Isle. Clear cold night.

27 - Another frosty morning, wind in the N.E. 400 prisoners came in today from Charleston. They were taken 2 or 3 months ago. The Rebels paroled 3 or 400 more prisoners today. They say a squad will leave here tomorrow. It does not seem much like Sabbath day. I wonder if our folks at home are thinking of us today.

28 - Cold foggy morning but warmer towards night. A squad of 200 left tonight for City Point. That looks good. I hope they will keep doing so. Not very cold this evening.
29 - Clear and cold this morn. nothing new in camp. we moved into another tent today. one year ago today I left home for Jamestown. quite a change since then. we started for Dixie 1 year ago today. now we are all on Belle Isle picking lice.

30 - Another cold foggy morning. slept very cold last night. I had an ague chill this morning. there is a fair show for us all to die here on this Island. our tent is very cold to sleep in. there is 12 of us in a field tent about 10 feet square. we have to lie down on the bare ground like so many hogs and nothing to cover us nights. we are not even allowed to go to the river and wash our clothes or bodies. we are lousy, dirty and ragged. some of us all naked. 1,000 prisoners from Rosencrans army came into camp last night. they have no tents to shelter them. the guards tell us that the citizens in Richmond made a raid on the Government bread that was being brought over to us prisoners.

1 - Foggy morning again but warmer towards night. things move on as usual in camp. one year ago this morning we arrived in Washington for the first time and slept on Arlington Heights that night.

2 - Cloudy and cool and rainy. we drew a small chunk of bacon instead of soup tonite. it tasted bully. we have got to sleep cold again tonight but there is no use grumbling. this is the fate of war.
3 - Clear and pleasant and not very cold. no news in camp today. one man died of Diphtheria in camp last night. there are a good many sick in camp now. but we will get out of this somehow.

4 - Clear and pleasant and not very cold. it is Sabbath today but not much like a Sabbath day at home. no news and no prospect of leave here yet.

5 - Clear and cold. passed another cold night without much sleep. 10,000 prisoners that came in last left this evening. report is that they march to City Point for exchange. some of the squads drew wood this evening. had bean soup for supper. it half of it worms, bugs and dirt. not fit for hogs.

6 - Pleasant but cold. we were counted over this morning. our squad drew meat for supper. it was a mixture of mutton, pork and beef. the Confederacy are hard up for meat. they kill cows, yearlings, sheep and hogs and poor stuff at that.

7 - Pleasant and warm in morning. cloudy and rain hard towards night. was squaded over again this morn. rice soup for supper and good for Belle Isle but we would think we were insulted if such stuff was offered to us in our army.
8 - Warm and pleasant but cold nights. the sick were taken over to the city to Hospital, report is that a squad is going away in a day or two. we drew some wood tonight, had a little fire in our tent tonight. the guards bring in some stuff to sell. peas 50¢ onions 15¢ a piece, salt $1.00 per pound peppers $2.00 per pound.

9 - Warm and pleasant day. cold nights. 10 men died in camp the last two days. a small squad of prisoners came in today.

10 - cold foggy morning. clear and pleasant afternoon. another week gone and no signs of leaving here yet. we drew meat for supper. some eggs in camp for sale at 10¢ a piece. our tent drew a stick of wood this morning. report in camp is that the commisioners of exchange have agreed to take all prisoners within their own lines. we are in hopes it will be done soon.

11 - Another Sabbath morning dawns on us on Belle Isle. the 12th Sabbath we have spent here. I hope it is the last. Clear and pleasant but cold. N.E. wind all day. Ben is about sick today. drew bean soup for supper.

12 - Clear and pleasant but cold night. Oh how we suffer from cold nights. Ben and Jack Hogg are both quite unwell. it is a hard place to be sick here in this miserable stone den. but I hope the boys will soon get better. some of the sickest in camp were sent across the river to the city.
13 - Clear and pleasant as usual. No news in camp today. Ben and Jack are little better today. Looks little like rain this evening.

14 - Cloudy and a little rain but quite warm. Ben and Jack are considerably better but not well. No news in camp today.

15 - Cloudy but warm and rather showery. 2 boys from Co. H run the guards last night. I hope they will not get caught. Ben is considerably better today. Jack Hogg is quite unwell, yet. No more signs of getting away from here yet but there may be some lucky streak turn up in our favor before long. Men are dying off very fast in camp now. From two to five every day.

16 - Rather rainy today. Cleared off in evening. Jack Hogg is about the same. Bill Starkweather of the 64th N.Y. was taken out to the hospital sick this afternoon and died about half an hour after. Several boys tried to get away from here last night. Some of them succeeded. Warm this evening.
17 - Clear and pleasant and quite warm. 2 men shot last night in trying to get away from here but neither of them killed, one man was wounded when drawing water. we drewed another stick of wood tonight, they have put a double guard around us today.

18 - Clear and pleasant and warm. as beautiful a Sabbath day as ever dawned if we were only where we could enjoy it but it is a dreary day to us prisoners on Belle Island. no news of importance here in camp today.

19 - the morning dawned with a light showing of rain and a hard gale of wind which blewed down many of our tents. cleared off after sunrise warm and pleasant the rest of the day. we were taken out and counted today, we dug some wild onions and put in our swill for supper. tasted bully, report in camp is that we are to be sent to City Point this week but can't depend on anything we see or hear.

20 - Clear and pleasant and quite warm, today but very cold last night, no news today. Simmons of Co. H who tried to run away from here a few days ago was caught and brought back last night. James Madison who went with him was drowned in trying to swim the river. nothing going on in camp except eating our little rations and hunting live as usual.
21 - Clear and warm. Our rations of meat were increased to 25 lbs per 100 men. It makes quite a difference in our . . . . the sick were all taken out and sent to the city. Madison, who was drowned was found today in the river. Was buried this evening.

22 - Cloudy and cool. Rather a dull gloomy day. Jack Hogg still quite unwell. Big ration of meals still hold out.

23 - Cloudy but not very cold. Jack is no better. Drawed bacon this morning. Report in camp is that no more parole or exchange during the war and that barracks are to be erected for our winter quarters on Belle Island but we do not credit this report.

24 - Very rainy all day. 1200 more prisoners came on the island from the Potomac Army. Mostly conscripts and substitutes. They carried on so bad over to the city they could not keep them there. Some of them are very hard cases. We took one hoy into our tent tonight, very cold night.
25 - very cold but no rain. we suffered very much from the cold last night. the Sergt of the working squad was shot by one of the guards this morn. died soon after. it has been a long dreary Sabbath today. we suffer everything from the cold nights. Ben is getting very weak from the Diarhea.

26 - Cloudy and cold. we have passed another cold night. not much sleep. Ben no better. Ben, Jack and I are saving rations to by a blanket.

27 - Very pleasant but cold. we bought a blanket for $5.00 today. Pay in rations. we shall sleep a little warmer tonight.

28 - Very cold but pleasant. we did not draw anything until supper time. we drew our supper and breakfast all together. was out and counted today. we slept quite warm last night. Jack is getting better but Ben is growing weaker.
29 - Clear and pleasant but cold N.E. wind. things move on after the same old sort on the Island. Jack Hogg is quite smart but poor Benny Andrews is growing weaker every day.

30 - Not very pleasant in morning but cleared off at noon. 14 weeks today since we came to Belle Island. Ben is not able to go out doors without help.

31 - Not very cold but very rainy all the forenoon. cleared off in evening not very cold. Ben is growing worse very fast, we drewed some more wood tonight. Jack is quite smart.
October 16, 2002 - Heavy frost today, clear and pleasant but cold. This project started 15 months ago but the idea has been with me since 1965. The text remains uncorrected on varied papers, some with gelatin sized color. The two months are taken from Horace Smith’s diary in the Archives Division of the Wisconsin Historical Society.

The images evoke wounds, scabs, pitiable scraps, and how these things become badges of honor. Within days of printing the September 11 citation, disaster struck and it was impossible but to acknowledge the event by adding to the text.

Jeffrey W. Morin