Captain America on the Battlefields of Brooklyn by Howard Skrill

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Howard Skrill, Captain America { Barclays II], Oil pastel, oil stick, chalk pastel, colored and graphite pencil on paper, 14" x 17", ©2016

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A crowd has gathered in Brooklyn's Prospect Park on August 10th, 2016 just south of a carousel on its Eastern border. The crowd presses together towards a raised dais, sheltered beneath large trees and under umbrellas shielding them from a light drizzle. The crowd is large and festive and cheering Captain America's arrival on the battlefields of Brooklyn.

Captain America's face is covered by a mask extending to the bridge of his nose with a capital 'A' stenciled into the mask at the center. He stares downward and holds a shield above his head with his stiffly extended left arm. His right arm is bent at the elbow and hovers directly above his right thigh. His right foot, bent backward and raised, is covered with a boot with a heavy tread and three thick straps that also wrap around his ankle and calf. His right foot is supported by a rock ledge elevating his right leg. His left foot, likewise booted, is turned slightly inward and is fully extended below the right leg, pressing flat onto the ground that the rock ledge rises from. Captain America's entire body is covered with the same thick, formfitting fabric as the mask except for a solid breastplate contoured to his chest with the A from the mask repeated at the center. His jaw is tightly clenched and a chin strap holds his mask in place. The lower portion of his costume is fitted with large flat pockets attached at the thighs and he wears a thick belt with thinner pouches, bunched together in threes, threaded onto either side of the belt. Captain America is frozen in bronze and supported by a large boxy stand inscribed in front, 'Just a kid from Brooklyn' in brown lettering. In the 19th century, Prospect park was overlaid over almost the entirety of the battlefield that Captain America has arrived on in August 2016.

Captain America began his life as Steve Rogers, a frail youngster growing up in the teeming tenement flats of the Lower East Side of Manhattan just across the East river from the battlefields of Brooklyn. Born in the early years of the twentieth century, Rogers grew to maturity as the Second World War loomed. He attempted to join the American military in order to fight in the war but was rejected due to his continued ill health. He eventually participated in a secret government program where he was injected with 'super-soldier' serum that transformed him into Captain America. Captain America goes on to defeat the Germans aided by his chemically enhanced physical powers. As the war draws to a close, Rogers' body is placed in suspended animation and encased in ice until he reanimates in the 1960s to confront and defeat Soviet Communism. After 9/11, Rogers relocates to the Brooklyn waterfront neighborhood of Red Hook, transforming him from a poor kid from the tenements of the Lower East Side into a kid from Brooklyn. Red Hook is just to the southeast of my long time neighborhood of Park Slope and the site of the major waterside fortification of Fort Defiance (now disappeared) on the battlefields of Brooklyn.

On August 26th, 1776, two hundred and forty years before Captain America's appearance on Brooklyn's battlefields, a young farmhand is standing on a ridge of a small hill that rises above where Captain America is standing. The young man stares southward as does Captain America who is standing on a flat out-wash just below the farmhand's hill. Captain America is staring in the direction of an unseen enemy at very close range. The farmhand's enemy is further to the south and he is staring beyond Captain America. He does not see his enemy either, but rather the flickers of sunlight glinting off slivers of metal that spark and disappear below the tree line and that spreads for miles. These flickers are reflections off of a pulsating mass of sharp blades attached to the muzzles of guns held in the hands of thousands of the farmhand's enemies. The farmhand is unaware of many additional flickers of light dancing off of the

Howard Skrill, Captain America { Barclays Two], Oil pastel, oil stick, chalk pastel, colored and graphite pencil on paper, 14" x 17", ©2016

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weapons of another enormous mass of his enemies immediately to his east but hidden entirely behind a blind of trees.

The farmhand is standing amongst other young men and he nervously banters with them as he points out the flickers creeping ever closer to both him and Captain America. The men holding those guns will soon be swarming past Captain America and towards the farmhand and his compatriots. Captain America, who should have intervened in the nick of time to save the farmhand, arrived two centuries too late to assist his American compatriot and his brothers in arms. Frozen in bronze and virtually immune to the passage of time, Captain America, if he was present on this battlefield in August 1776, would have been a bizarre presence and useless in resisting the invaders swarming past him and up hill towards the farmhand.

Compared to the svelte form fitting uniform, the thick boots and indestructible shield of Captain America, this young man's boots and those worn by his compatriots are caked with mud and worn through. The farmhand, like most others on the hill, had grown to maturity, like decades of his ancestors, on a farmstead in a land of farmsteads with coastal towns and modestly sized cities interspersed. The hill he is standing on is at the southern border of the town of Brooklyn that spreads from the shore of the East river towards this little hill. The village of Flatbush begins on the out-wash that Captain America is standing upon. Northern Long Island is dotted with many similar towns and villages until the land eventually runs out at the shore of New York harbor.

The farmhand had given up his spade and shovel to wander through woods and along rutted roads of his homeland towards the coast. He has left his homestead, the only home he had ever really known, after learning from neighbors that his homeland had been invaded by the men he is now nervously observing inching ever forward, their progress revealed by the glitters of light. He has rushed towards this hill and in the direction of the invaders to defend that homeland. The hill he is standing on is now the principal battlefield in his homeland's ragtag efforts to defend itself against the invasion and his presence on that hill is central to those efforts. Modest clusters of other ragtag defenders are thinly stretched along a few other hills dotting a ragged line running east to west in Brooklyn. I have lived for over thirty years at the base of one of those modest hills.

The farmhand is about to encounter tens of thousands of able bodied, seasoned and well equipped soldiers of the British empire, the most powerful and far flung colonial empire on the earth. This formidable force had been brought to the shores of New York City on a massive armada of sailing ships now bobbing at anchor in New York harbor on that late day in August. The British have also been joined in their methodical assault on the farmhand's hill by a formidable contingent of German mercenaries. Captain America will encounter, in the imaginings of cartoonists, film makers and storytellers, later generations of German soldiers on European battlefields in the mid Twentieth century.

The clothes that the farmhand is wearing as he shifts anxiously from foot to foot are the one set of durable garments that he has been wearing since he left the farm. He came originally to the coast as a member of a provincial militia that formed when he joined other young men from his community and traveled eastward. His militia was then piled onto ships once they reached the Atlantic ocean that were sailed into Boston harbor. Boston was the first target of the invaders. A winter in an uneasy standoff with the British resulted improbably with success for the farmhand and his compatriots. The battlefield then shifted southward towards Manhattan and Brooklyn. The farmhand sailed and marched, along with

his compatriots, to Brooklyn where he is now standing in the gentle early sunlight of a late August morning. I visited his hill, two hundred and forty years in the future in mid-August 2016 and just after Captain America appeared on the battlefields of Brooklyn.

Along with my wife and a small group of others, we had gathered in Prospect Park to commemorative the farmhand's battle. The event was attended by people mostly like me, graying local residents of the neighborhoods that have been established in American Brooklyn within close proximity to the farmhand's hill. Our guide, a friendly, young man with a beard and a Prospect Park Alliance T-shirt had brought us to the farmhand's hill. We wandered up its meager slope and stepped over used condoms, cigarette butts and crushed soda cans strewn below the untended brush that had grown tall through the years since the farmhand has stood on it. Despite living so close to the hill, this was my time visiting it.

The invaders were marching towards the farmhand in order to push through him and the other defenders towards Manhattan Island, the birthplace of Steve Rogers just across the East river from his future Brooklyn home in Red Hook. Manhattan was then and still is the economic heartland of the farmhand's homeland. The farmhand is standing on that hill to thwart their ad-

Howard Skrill, Prison Ship Martyrs Monument, 15" x 30" oil stick, oil pastel, chalk pastel, graphite and colored pencil on canvas panel, ©2017

vance. His coarsely woven clothing, having recently endured a long siege in Boston and an arduous journey to Brooklyn, are now torn in multiple places, permanently streaked with mud, yellowed by perspiration and covered with patches in a kaleidoscope of fabrics. Ribbons distributed by the farmhand's officers, are tied around the his upper arm, thus enabling him and his compatriots to recognize each other in the confusion of the battle. Captain America has thick straps around the same area of his upper arm, in addition to geometric elbow and knee pads. The swarming enemy wears mostly crimson coats, some blue coats, in addition to a variety of peaked hats decorated with elaborate patches and feathers. They do not need ribbons to recognize each other or for that matter, their enemy.

The young farmhand possesses little or no formal education and he barely grasps the grand ideas that, for that months before he arrived on the hill in Brooklyn, were being argued and ultimately agreed upon by educated and well-dressed men in distant Philadelphia. These ideas resulted in a consensus that the men in Philadelphia have pledged their lives and sacred honor to bring to fruition. They declared that the farmhand's homeland would separate itself from Great Britain. The separation a direct consequence of Great Britain's ruler, and by extension his soldiers and administrators, violating natural rights of those living in the farmhand's homeland. The fine men in Philadelphia claimed that God has granted these rights to all men in their nature. They followed this declaration with a catalog of circumstances where the British king had violated those rights. They formally declared that the farmhand's homeland would be independent of Great Britain as a consequence. They also called for the establishment of a new type of nation where these natural rights would be protected and defended.

This Declaration of Independence was then transcribed in elegant cursive on a single sheet of paper, signed by the men in Philadelphia, copied on printing presses and widely distributed. This call for both independence and a new kind of nation was read aloud throughout the farmhand's homeland. A month later, the farmhand has sailed and marched to this hill in Brooklyn, placing his body in front of an advancing and well armed horde, as the first true defense of the words composed in Philadelphia. Thousands of British colonial troops, bolstered by their mercenary German allies, have arrived on hundreds of boats into New York harbor to deny by force separation and to strangle this new type of nation in its cradle.

The young farmhand and his compatriots had very little existential investment in whether his homeland would be a part of the British Empire or separate from that empire. Issues of independence or separation mattered much more to the daily lives of merchants, lawyers and landowners gathered in Philadelphia, in addition to the officers directing his movements. The farmhand, now that independence has been declared, has become a soldier in the newly formed army of the United States of America. Captain America will also join this army after his injections with 'super-soldier' serum. Colonial provinces are now states (each represented by the men in Philadelphia). The states pledged unity with each other in order to bring about separation and a nation built from these lofty ideas about God and man.

The farmhand is not motivated by ideals and abstractions but rather by defense of an physical place with rolling hills, rivers, lakes and seaside towns. He has rushed to Brooklyn to defend this hill and the island beyond from the further advance of invaders that have been trampling over his homeland's hills and valleys, sailing upon its rivers and lakes and swarming the shores of seaside towns like Brooklyn, Flatbush and others in Northern Long Island.

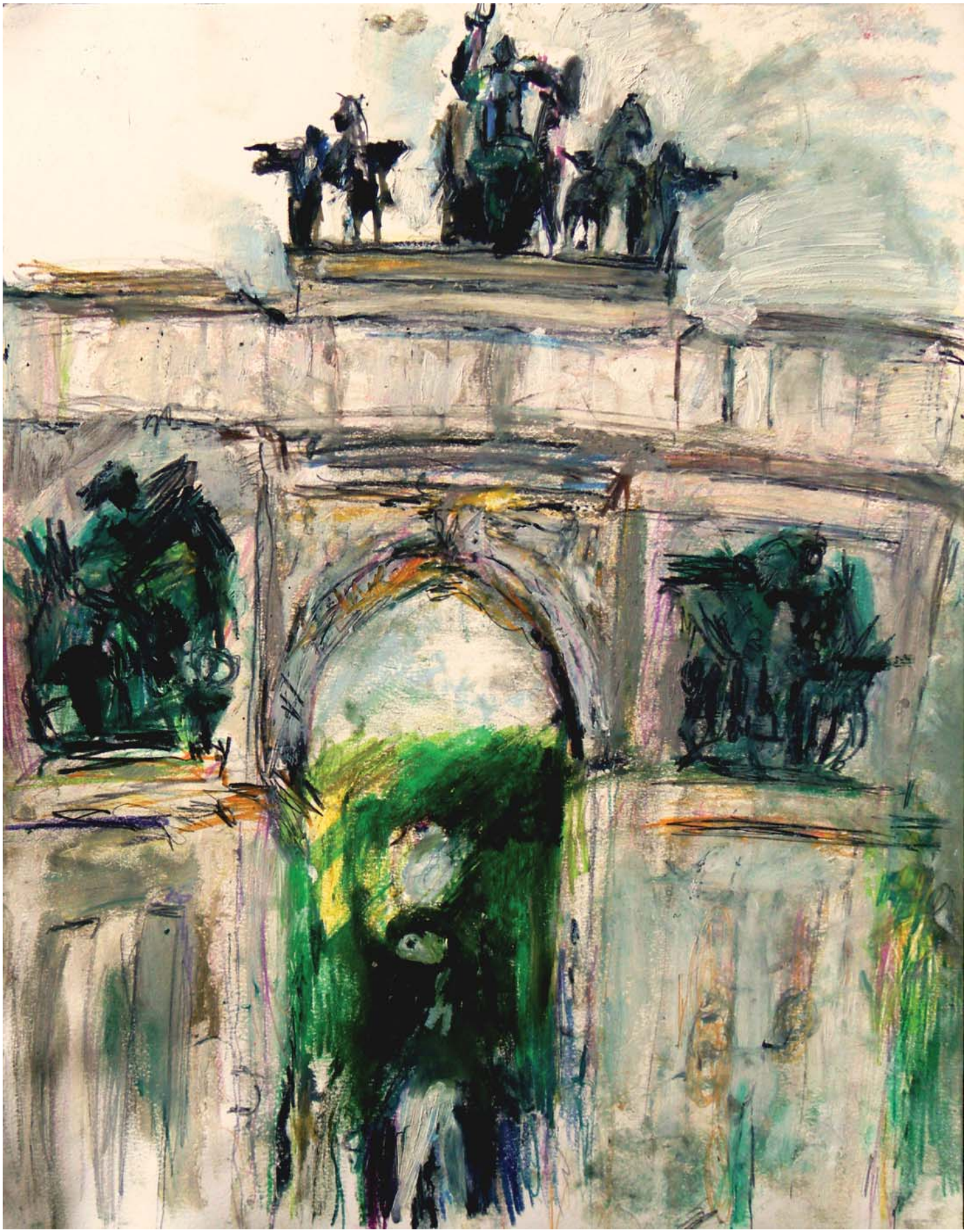
It must have seemed strange to a person who passed his days by the rhythms of the seasons that words that he could not read

and ideas that he could barely comprehend could lead him to this small hilltop in late August to observe dappled sunlight reflecting off of menacing weapons held by thousands of clenched hands. Shortly, balls discharged from these weapons will fly towards him and the blades attached to the ends of those guns will be aimed at his midriff.

Howard Skrill, Absence of Captain America from the Battefields of Brooklyn [with wall of carousel, Oil pastel, oil stick, chalk pastel, colored and graphite pencil on paper, 14" x 17", ©2016

Most of the invaders had arrived in New York City by sea and through an expansive harbor close to Steve Rogers' home in Red Hook. Nearly four hundred and fifty ships have landed throughout the spring and early summer of 1776 on the Southeastern coast of Staten Island just across New York harbor from the shore of what will become the borough of Brooklyn. The entry ramp of the Verrazano Narrows Bridge looms currently over the site of their landing on the Brooklyn side of the Vendeventers (now Verrazano) narrows that separates Staten Island and Brooklyn. Short palisades dotted with warehouses line the shore across the water in Staten Island.

Tens of thousands of these troops have for weeks been rowing the short distance of the narrows and disembarking at shore of Gravesend Bay. The actual site of the landing is now buried under the Belt Parkway that wraps around contemporary Brooklyn and Queens like a corset. Another fort at Denyes' Point (current day Fort Hamilton on the water's edge of Brooklyn facing the harbor) was quickly abandoned by American troops scrambling northward towards the farmhand's hill



Howard Skrill, Soldiers and Sailors Arch, Grand Army, Plaza Oil pastel, oil stick, chalk pastel, colored and graphite pencil on paper, 14" x 17", ©2015

Howard Skrill, Figure group from the East Pier of Soldiers and Sailors Arch, Grand Army, Plaza Oil pastel, oil stick, chalk pastel, colored and graphite pencil on paper, 14" x 17", ©2016

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and other hills that form a terminal moraine, a deposit of boulders from a glacier's ancient passage that gives New York City its physical contours. My long time neighborhood of Park Slope sits on a gentle decline from the farmhand's hill towards the mostly flatter areas closer to the Brooklyn side of the East River. The invaders followed on the heels of retreating Americans moving relentlessly northward through forested glens dotted with fields and occasional wooden shacks and rough taverns as they made their systematic progress towards Manhattan.

If the farmhand owned a gun to defend himself, it is the one he had used on the farm to shoot deer or turkeys. Perhaps he only possessed a hatchet or a pike, a wooden pole with a metal point at its end, given to him by his officers. Despite being designated a national army under the command of General George Washington after the Declaration of Independence, these men remain as ill-equipped and short-handed as an army as they had been as a collection of militias battling the invaders in Boston.

If the farmhand survives the balls and sharpened swords of the invaders, he may quickly find himself running for his life through Park Slope, scrambling through the muck of a swamp a block and a half from my home, That swamp is now the still, fetid and profoundly polluted superfund site of the Gowanus canal. The neighborhood of Carroll Gardens sits on the other side of the swamp (now canal) and flattens out until the shores of the East river. On December 10th, 2016, I wandered in the opposite direction of the retreat and over the canal, staring upwards towards the bluffs that many of the troops assembled by Washington had quickly abandoned as the wave of invaders broke over them. I imagined the sight of these men scampering down the long descent towards the swamp, craning their necks behind them as they stumbled over uneven ground and sloshed through the swamp with the enemy advancing towards them. I further imagine the enemy calming bending their knees in straight rows and discharging their weapons at the backs of the retreating Americans fleeing from the hill.

Unaided by Captain America, a small regiment of Americans from Maryland turned from the retreat next to a tiny stone house minutes from my home in order to slow the advance of the enemy on the Park Slope side of the swamp. Most of these Marylanders fell and were buried in an unmarked mass grave somewhere beneath the concrete sidewalks of an ordinary intersection about a half mile further to the south.

Well-timed fire from cannons in Fort Defiance in Steve Rogers' Red Hook neighborhood and a late summer storm stopped the British from sending warships up the East River. Americans spared by the Marylander's stand were therefore able to escape the battlefields of Brooklyn by boat towards Manhattan. If the farmhand had not died that day or escaped with his general, his fate would likely have been imprisonment on prison ships that the invaders, shortly in complete control of the two hometowns of Steve Rogers, Brooklyn and Manhattan, placed at anchor in a horseshoe shaped harbor, Wallabout Bay, on the Brooklyn side of the East river. British prison ships, notorious for their wretchedness, bobbed in Wallabout Bay for the seven long years that the British occupied New York City after the American military disaster of the battle of Brooklyn.

In 1783, American separation from Britain's colonial rule was finally achieved and Washington reentered the Capitol of the United States, Manhattan, on a charger followed by his victorious army as the British abandoned the city. The farmhand, perhaps no longer young and his farmstead home a distant and cruel memory, may well have been languishing in the squalor of a British prison

Howard Skrill, Captain America { Barclays Three], Oil pastel, oil stick, chalk pastel, colored and graphite pencil on paper, 14" x 17", ©2016

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ship, perishing long before that glorious day of triumph in 1783. Captain America also had no role in the eventual triumph of American arms in the Revolutionary war. Despite the enthusiasm of his myriad fans, as a fictional character, he also had no role in the many military triumphs, stalemates and disasters that the farmhand's army had experienced after American separation from Great Britain.

As he languishes on a prison ship, the same clothes that the farmhand was wearing on the August battlefield barely cling now to his back and offer no protection from the dampness of the prison ship's drafty and dank hull. His face is concealed behind a scraggly beard covered with soot and his emaciated body a tapestry of open sores. Finally he succumbs and his body is dumped in a mass grave with other American prisoners on the shoreline of Wallabout bay. Prisoners perished by the thousands on British prison ships as Manhattan was transformed into the headquarters of the British Empire's ultimately unsuccessful and often brutal efforts to reverse the course of American separation.

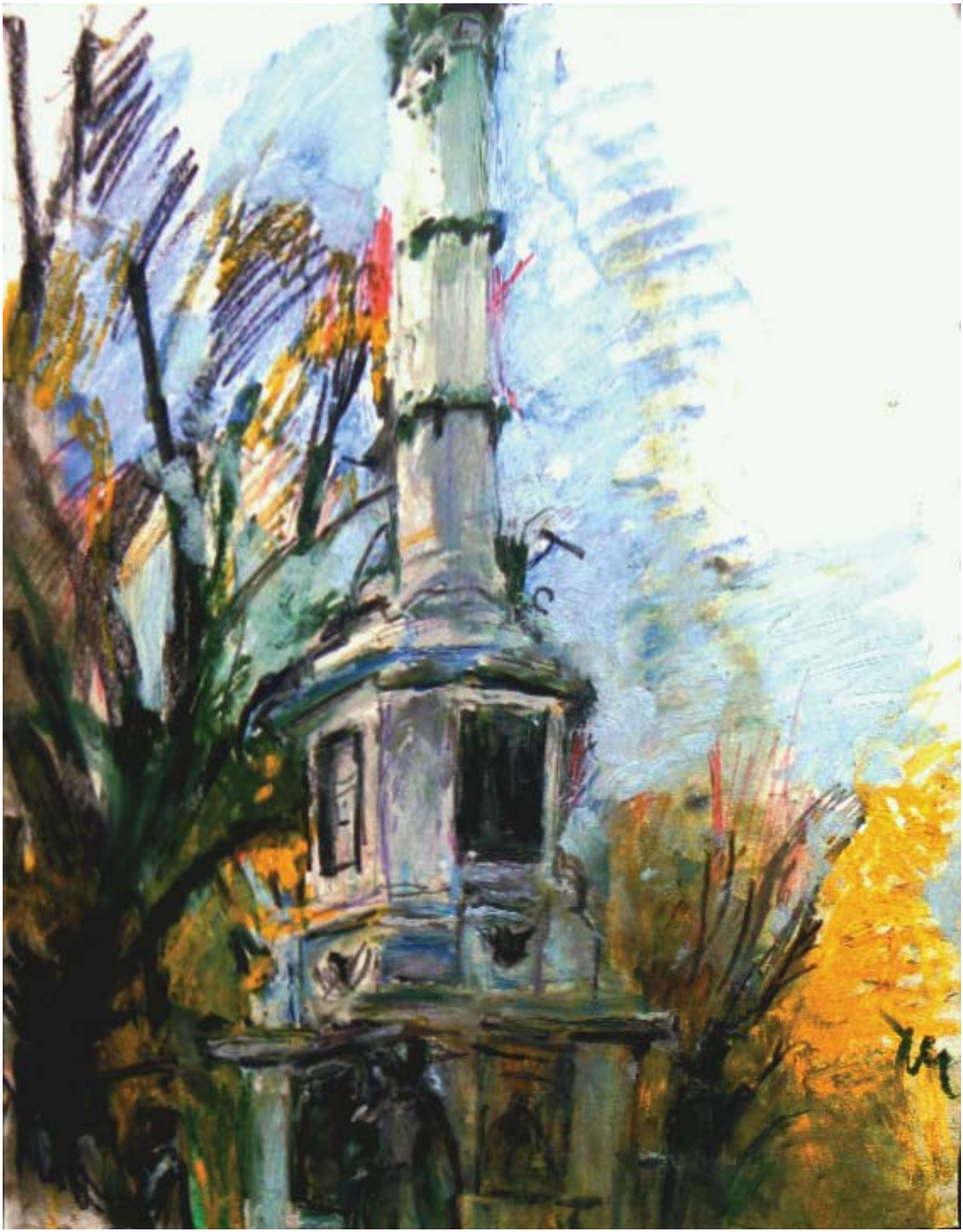
The remains of the ships' prisoners were eventually fished out of the mass grave and interred by victorious Americans just north of Captain America and the farmhand's hill under a towering obelisk, the Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument, on the site of a fortification on yet another battlefield in Brooklyn. The bones of the young farmhand or someone just like him sit, until this day, in a disorder pile in a crypt below the monument. I can walk from my apartment as I write these words towards the massive stair of the monument and stand at a bronze door, tarnished green from age and neglect, that provides access to the bones of thousands of British revolutionary war prisoners' anonymous repose.

Captain America's exploits are provided extraordinary amplification by my contemporaries in films, TV programs, online and in comic books consumed by an audience of millions. This mass of devotees certainly holds his achievements fixed firmly and durably in their imaginings. These achievements invariably led to statue of Captain America being unveiled with great celebration and a military honor guard on a battlefield in Brooklyn when the bones of the farmhands who actually fought there lay fallow and forgotten a mile and a half to the north and south of the celebration. If Captain America is a chimera and the prison ship martyrs are very real. August 10th, 2016 transformed the chimera into reality and reduced the real to ghosts.

Failure in Brooklyn eventually led to success elsewhere, so the words written down in Philadelphia survived in order to become America's project to fitfully make manifest and for Captain America to ultimately defend.

As the statue stands adjacent to the dais on August 10th 2016, Brooklyn civic leaders are also present, including the Brooklyn Borough President exchanging high fives with the gathered celebrants. I wish that I had been in attendance as well, but I have viewed a number of Youtube videos depicting the event. I do know the carousel very well. Numerous times when my children were young, my wife and I would push them in strollers across the hills of Brooklyn's terminal moraine to the brightly decorated enclosure of the carousel. We would sit together on painted wooden horses and enjoy the world spinning and the horses sliding up and down on their poles as songs echoed from tinny loud speakers built into the carousel's central pillar.

I have also jogged up and down the hill to the east of the carousel, ear buds jammed in my ears, on hundreds of occasions. Numerous times I have passed over spots where invaders and defenders long ago trampled; unaware of the ghostly footsteps I was barreling through. Those gathered on that 2016 day; appear in the videos to be in a buoyant mood



Howard Skrill, Civil War Monument [Battle Hill from the Battle of Brooklyn - Green-Wood Cemetery], Oil pastel, oil stick, chalk pastel, colored and graphite pencil on paper, 14" x 17", ©2016

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despite the drizzle.

Two weeks later, on August 27th, 2016, I was standing on another dais for the commemoration of the two hundred and fortieth anniversary of the battle of Brooklyn at its tallest public monument, the Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument, in Fort Greene Park. I spoke of the young farmhand, who is a character from my imagination as Steve Rogers is from someone else's imagination. My remarks received mention in one or two local newspapers, a far more modest platform than that granted Captain America on the farmhand's battlefield by the coordinated efforts of a corporate behemoth like Marvel Comics and by Brooklyn public officials. The young farmhand's dramatic fate that I conjured in my remarks cannot compete with the popular exploits of Captain America, despite the farmhand possessing a real life counterpart. Captain America on the battlefields of Brooklyn eclipses an actual U.S. soldier's experiences and perhaps his grisly fate on that battlefield and renders his experiences in comparison, unremarkable.

The presence of Captain America on the battlefields of Brooklyn was made possible by Americans for centuries systematically burying memories of that day in August 1776. Captain America, Brooklyn boosters including public officials and Captain America's fans simply stumbled into a gap created by the systematic erasure of collective memory undertaken for generations.

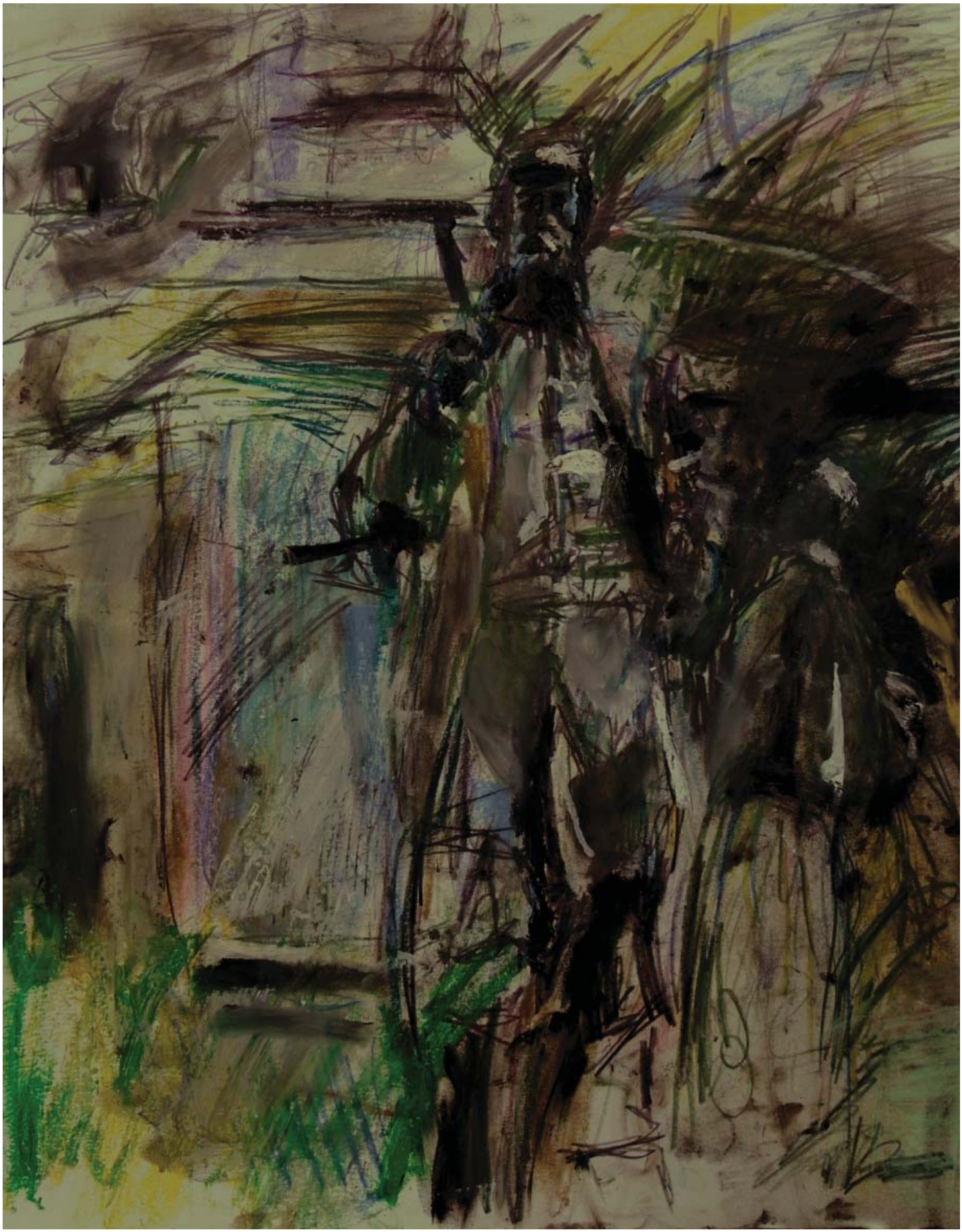
The unveiling of a monument to Captain America was attended principally by young devotees of comic books and films and some of those that attended dressed as Captain America in the vibrant practice of Cosplay. Their minds must have been buzzing with Captain America's heroic exploits as the statue was unveiled. Those attending my remarks were retirees, veterans, historians and a few individuals who trace their personal lineages back to the time of the revolution. I spoke that day of memory's inconstancy and conjured the young farmhand in a short speech, participating in a pas de deux with the celebrants at the unveiling of the statue of Captain America on Brooklyn's battlefields.

The contrast between my fabrication of a farmhand's exploits that were drawn from actual experiences and the celebration of Captain America's fictionalized exploits reveals in its telling, the often unintended consequences of memory's erasure, since many of those celebrants cheering Captain America's presence on a battlefield of Brooklyn did so with only the dimmest awareness that the ground upon which they had congregated was in fact a battlefield. Their ignorance not a consequence of their own actions but of stories that were only whispered or buried entirely.

For the past five years, I have been exploring in on-site drawings of public statuary and words such as these, how public monuments maroon the past in the present. The appearance of Captain America on the battlefields of Brooklyn was an instance of the reverse, the present stumbling blindly into the past. The consequence of Americans deliberate choosing not to dwell on this military defeat and the prison ships that the battle spawned, fearing perhaps that this narrative of defeat would tarnish the pretty glow from the stories that flowed from Philadelphia and sites of future martial success that wended their way into history textbooks and onto currency.

Brooklynites by extension and for generations, viewed the farmhand's stand on the hill in August 1776 with a mixture of regret and ambivalence. That regret and ambivalence revealed by the monuments that Brooklyn chose to construct and those that it didn't.

The battle of Brooklyn, treated as an historical footnote if acknowledged at all, was



Howard Skrill, Civil War Monument [Battle Hill from the Battle of Brooklyn - Green-Wood Cemetery figure], Oil pastel, oil stick, chalk pastel, colored and graphite pencil on paper, 14" x 17", ©2016

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the largest battle in the American Revolution and central to the birth of the American nation that Captain America, in his turn, was conjured to defend. The United States possesses many places where the American Revolution and its long arc are celebrated. Americans easily recall Revolutionary war battles fought in Boston and Trenton where American victory was secured. The battle of Brooklyn occupies my consciousness because I have spent a large portion of my life living on its battlefields. My neighbors also number their days on this battlefield but mostly with indifference or grudging curiosity as the battlefield, in the contemporary moment, spouts gleaming new towers of luxury condominiums, shopping malls and an arena for professional basketball and hockey.

Places where martial defeats are unacknowledged or grudgingly acknowledged also reflect unresolved feelings about those places and conflicting approaches to the act of remembrance, particularly when remembrance is not always a pleasant experience for the rememberer.

The narrative of the American Revolution that takes pride of place manifested in painstakingly preserved public squares, archives, architecture and commemorative statuary in the United States of America, took place six weeks earlier than the moment that the young farmhand stands on the hill in what will become Prospect Park. The place is Philadelphia and the time is July 4th, 1776. The mutually agreed upon place and time of the origin of the United States of America. The ragtag collection of men, including my imagined farmhand, were willing to sacrifice their bodies against enormous opposition to bring the words and intentions of July 4th, 1776 into fruition. They failed in Brooklyn and with remarkable efficiency their nation repaid their sacrifice and bravery with systematic neglect and muscular efforts to change the subject to happier collective memories, including those that involve Captain America that never actually happened.

One hundred and twenty-four years before the Borough President of Brooklyn attended the placement of a monument to Captain America on the battlefields of Brooklyn; President Grover Cleveland Alexander attended the unveiling of the massive Soldiers and Sailors Arch at a traffic island leading into Prospect Park and beyond. Prospect Park begins just north the farmhand's hill at the summit of the terminal moraine. The arch was constructed to celebrate martial success of soldiers and sailors as 'defenders of the Union 1861-1865' on battlefields in Pennsylvania, Virginia and elsewhere far from Brooklyn's own barely designated battlefields.

The Soldiers and Sailors Arch stands as a muscular act of repression of a Brooklyn battlefield in the collective memories of Brooklyn. A second monument to the heroics of Northern soldiers in the Civil War was built on top of a smaller battlefield on the moraines of Brooklyn in modern day Green-Wood cemetery. The Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument arose in the early Twentieth century. It took nearly one hundred and fifty years for the remains of those who perished on the prison ships and that were dumped in the pit to finally be relocated to a monument dedicated to the prison ship martyrs.

No monument was built for our young farmhand if he had fallen on the field of battle in late August 1776 whether on his hill or amongst the Marylanders languishing in their yet unexcavated mass grave. His bones may lie somewhere beneath my feet as I sally forth throughout Brooklyn near my home and for the Anna Pierrepont series chasing obliterated memories. The Soldiers and Sailors Arch preceded the Prison Ship Martyrs Monument and the monument to the dead on the prison ships quickly fell into ruin as the Twentieth century advanced.

Howard Skrill, Equestrian George Washington in Union Square Manhattan, Oil pastel, oil stick, chalk pastel, colored and graphite pencil on paper, 14" x 17", ©2016

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Eventually Captain America arrives on the farmhand's battlefield. His triumphal appearance enabled by all those collective erasers applied by earlier Americans to scrub from memory the sacrifice of young farmhands of the revolution whose bones may remain in the crypt below the Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument or simply be scattered about covered by topsoil in a meadow frequented by dog walkers or concrete sidewalks adjacent to delis and bank branches.

Captain America's appearance on the battlefields of Brooklyn is also brought about by the cultural amnesia that inevitably followed, enabling places such as the battlefields of Brooklyn to become filled with carousels, cosplay and superheroes such as Captain America, whose presence on August 10th, 2016 completes the job, began centuries before, of blotting out imperfect, not always triumphant, and profoundly messy human experiences from collective memory.

Captain America emerges from American anxiety that the Nazi threat in Germany is too formidable to be defeated by ordinary American soldiers, better equipped, but all too human and thus resembling my conjured farmhand. Captain America implicitly channels the division of humanity into uber and untermenschen that inflame the Nazi Social Darwinist ideology. The Nazi theories of genetic manipulation are adapted in chemical form in the Captain America comic books in order to transform an American untermenschen into an ubermenschen. The need to conjure an American ubermenschen reflects existential anguish about the insufficiency of American arms against the Nazi Wehrmacht.

The placement of a statue to the American ubermenschen on the site of the young farmhand's ignoble end centuries after the farmhand's disappearance also frames the farmhand's martial insufficiency. The statue of Captain America would never be installed amongst the American graves lining the fields of Normandy, France where Americans were also not aided by a contemporaneous 'American' ubermenschen to destroy the deluded and very human Germans.

The Germans impressive application of public architecture and monuments to suggest their natural superiority was an effort to mask their doubts about themselves under a similar cloak of super heroics. These fantastic constructions ultimately did not spare the Germans from the destructive wrath of Patton's Third Army. The sea of white grave-markers for the American dead in Normandy also demonstrates the costs borne by actual American soldiers in bringing the Nazis to heel without the aid of 'super-soldier' serum.

Captain America's appearance on the battlefields of Brooklyn resulted from a marketing strategy launched worldwide in support of a film that was shown in theaters and is now available on television, Captain America: Civil War. The statue was initially unveiled at that fulcrum of contemporary American identity, ComicCon in San Diego, California earlier in 2016. The ubiquity of superheroes in the collective mind of Twenty-First century Americans runs the risk of conflating or concealing with fantasy the actuality of American strength and resolve, replacing that reality with fantasy versions where triumphs manifested by those greater than us mere mortals are always achieved in the final reel.

It is highly possible that ComicCon's supporters of Captain America have little interest except for profit and are uninterested in Captain America actually functioning as a fulcrum for American or at very least Brooklyn identity, being that Steve Rogers is after all 'just a kid from Brooklyn'.

A life size bronze statue of Rocky Balboa was installed at the summit of the enormous entry stairs in front of the Philadelphia Mu-

Howard Skrill, Captain America at Industry City [Sunset Park, Brooklyn] Oil pastel, oil stick, chalk pastel, colored and graphite pencil on paper, 14" x 17", ©2017

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seum of Art in the early 1980s. The stairs are used as the iconic backdrop to a central scene in the 1970s' blockbuster film 'Rocky', becoming connected, in the public imagination, with Rocky to such an extent that they became known popularly as the 'Rocky steps'. The statue was installed at the steps' summit to coincide with the premiere of the film Rocky III until it was relocated in a small garden spot adjacent to the base of the stairs.

Visitors often dash past an enormous Equestrian statue of George Washington, a grand monument in a massive traffic circle in front of the museum, to gleefully take selfies alongside Rocky. I went to Philadelphia in the summer of 2016 just before visiting the small hill in Prospect Park with my wife and youngest son. We went to the museum on a sweltering July day. I had left my bag at the coat check and needed to return to the museum to retrieve it. My wife told me that while I was inside the museum, that a family had stood next to the statue and that one of the children was a boy with cerebral palsy. A member of the family had lifted the boy into Rocky's arms to snap a picture next to the statue and that the boy's face was beaming radiantly. The lack of selfies with the Equestrian George Washington in Philadelphia in comparison to Rocky suggests a clear popular preference for Rocky over George in the American imagination.

In order to make the plein air drawings of public monuments that I combine with my essays for the Anna Pierrepont series, I role a Whole Foods cart jammed with a folding chair, a Bristol pad (recently an easel and canvases), oil pastels, chalk pastels, graphite and colored pencils and oil stick by foot or mass transportation to draw these objects or sometimes their absences, in public places throughout New York City, with particular emphasis on those I find on the battlefields of Brooklyn near my home.

A short time after the installation of Captain America in Prospect Park, I rolled my cart towards the park in order to draw the statue. As I was heading east up Union street towards the Soldiers and Sailors Arch, I decided to double check whether the statue was still by the carousel. A quick Google search quickly revealed that the statue had been removed from the park and had been relocated to the Barclay Center, which is one of the closest subway stations near my home off of 5th avenue in Park Slope. I turned my cart to the north and headed the half mile or so to Barclay Center from the battlefields and unfolded my collapsible chair, laid my pad of Bristol paper on my lap, piled my supplies around me and drew Captain America at Barclay center.

I only draw from sight for the Anna Pierrepont series. I have also drawn the absence of the statue on the battlefields of Brooklyn after it was quickly removed. My conjuring of the farmhand is only in words, although I have drawn the Prison Ship Martyrs' Monument as well.

I returned two other times to draw Captain America at Barclay Center, framed by the arena and by the Atlantic Center shopping complex across the street. Dozens of people stopped in front of the statue as I drew it, and as with Rocky in Philadelphia, snapped the inevitable selfies on their digital devices. Parents hoisted their children upon Captain America's base for other shots. One young woman stopped to praise my drawing and to comment on how deeply she loves comics.

Captain America at Barclay Center raises his shield towards the pulsing video sign of the arena. Barclay Center is the home of the Brooklyn Nets, New York Islanders and concerts by famous performers. The intersection between public spaces and wealthy private interests is byzantine in the evolution of the Barclay center development and the Atlantic Yards residential complex that is being constructed in its shadow. The area of Brooklyn where the statue was standing is being radical-

ly transformed by big box stores in shopping malls in the shadow of Barclay Center and enormous luxury apartment complexes in the Atlantic Yards and other developments surrounding the arena.

We should not underestimate how Captain America and other fictional characters that flow so robustly from the American culture industry model collective identity on the battlefields of Brooklyn and elsewhere in ways that even reduce historical heroes such as Washington to after-thoughts as Rocky stands triumphant, his gloved fists raised in victory over George in the public minds in the birthplace of America, Philadelphia. If a towering presence like Washington is being eclipsed by Rocky, a farmhand whose bones lay beneath the Prison Ship Martyrs Monument or elsewhere on Brooklyn's battlefields has no chance to rise in the public imagination when competing for that space with Captain America, just a kid from Brooklyn.

Coda

Captain America was finally moved from Barclay Center in early 2017 and now stands at the center of the entry court to a sparsely visited shopping mall in Sunset Park, just down the hill from where soldiers met on that sprawling field of battle in Brooklyn. I drew the statue in its new home in June 2017. Captain America now stands with his back to the doors of the mall in a corridor of blank faced and unadorned buildings in relentless rows. This place is known as Industry City and a federal prison caps its northern end. Captain America at Industry City faces neither British nor German invaders but rather the glass enclosed entrance to Buy Buy Baby at the rear of the mall's first floor and is flanked by coffee kiosks and escalators leading towards the second floor entrance to Bed, Bath and Beyond.

Captain America on the Battlefields of Brooklyn by Howard Skrill

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