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The washing of the bodies

by David R. Slavitt

*The Trojans . . . found it hard to recognize each dead man,
so they washed away the blood that was on them and, weeping warm tears,
hefted their bodies up onto the wagons.*

—Iliad, VII

The temptation is not to look, to let the names
go as the life had gone from each of them.

What difference does it make anymore?

But you can't do that.

You have to know. It hurts, but you have to
and you wash away the blood, for them of course,
but for yourself, too, so you know whom you have lost,
and the salt sea water you use begets salt tears.

Heros, yes, but others, cowards, fools,
a kid you barely remember from school whose face
brings back the kid you were, for a moment alive,
and then, like him, gone again and forgotten.

But do not mourn too long. There is work to do;
the wagons are waiting; the sun will soon go down;
and tomorrow we will return to the shedding of blood
that hides so much that we could not otherwise bear.

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