JOHN HODGEN

Upon Reading that Abraham Lincoln Spent His Summer Nights as
President at a Cottage on the Grounds of the Soldiers' Home on the
Outskirts of Washington Rather than at the White House, and that He
and Edwin M. Stanton, His Secretary of War, Spent the Better Part of One
Evening Freeing Two Peacocks that Had Become Entangled in a Tree

Father Abraham and Stanton on their hands and knees, climbing
trees, the war weighing on them heavily, as if the sky itself were
pressing down upon them, even denying birds their right, the
peacocks, cock robins, sky fallen, their feet tied with jute strings
to wooden blocks to keep them on the grounds, now tangled in
the trees with the soldiers, the coffins, the earth itself opening up
again and again.

You can see it sometimes, a homestead family pulling up in a
station wagon with Illinois license plates at Walter Reed some
night, good people. And you know they’ve driven all day, sandwiches
in the car, and they’re getting out of the car the same way they
would if they were going to church. They’re like brightly colored
birds in the dim shadows of the evening with the jute strings of
their grief around their feet, as if they were dragging wooden
block coffins to keep their hearts from flying away, as if they’ve
tried to fly away so many times that their hearts are permanently
tangled in the trees now, each day growing more frantic, more
alone. Here in Washington the president is sleeping. It is past
nine. But Lincoln watches from his armchair, the white stone of
his eyes, his heart untangling them, emancipating them, setting
their bird hearts free.