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Infrastructure

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Jonathan Holden

INFRASTRUCTURE

The overnight train to Moscow is now
departing, passing steelmills, arclights, passing
prefab factory roofs, the outskirts
of St. Petersburg thin,
the rotting orange-slice of moon low
to the south beginning to accelerate
through the trees. We've barred
the compartment door diagonally
with a one-by-two against bandits
as the moon picks up speed, is flashing now
through birches, evergreens, frost has splayed
its claws on the window and the snowdrifts
are racing past lickety-split, nothing
outside but a lonely seldom farm,
hills and evergreens now bustling past
at more than a mile a minute,
the cold beginning to seep indoors
as we head deeper into depression
as into the ruins of far western Kansas
where the Great Depression never
ended, barns like elaborate model ships
once kept in bottles, sprawl
marooned in prairie, bleaching in the weather.
We are returning like Chekhov to the hinterland.
But there is nothing romantic about it.
What Hollywood script-
writers called The Farm Crisis
has no neat
beginning, middle, and end.

★

In his book about the fall
of the Shah of Iran, Ryszard Kapuscinski
postulates the exact moment
when a collection of angers, a collection
of hungers, a collection of people, a crowd
attains critical mass—
a moment like the moment
of inertia in physics
when something will fall
*when one policeman
walks from his post toward
one man on the edge of the crowd,
raises his voice and orders
the man to go home
but the man doesn't run.
He just stands there looking insolently
at uniformed authority.
He glances around and sees
the same look on other faces.*

★

When the Shah of Iran decided
to modernize his kingdom
he thought a modern economy
like a brand-new Mercedes SL
could be bought
straight off the shelf.
But when the freighters arrived
heavy with presents,
the docks
were too cramped to contain
the freighters' hulls.
They had to back up in a holding-pattern.
There was only sand and such

heat that the food which didn't spoil
and should have been trucked
*(except the drivers for what
few trucks there were
had to be imported)* spoiled anyway
which didn't matter
because those with enough education
to read the instructions
about how to assemble
the snazzy, do-it-yourself machines
and teach the next generation
were gone.
They had found you could make
a better living
elsewhere.

★

In St. Petersburg we dined
under moth-eaten velvet curtains
in the main ballroom
of the Hotel Octybrskaya.
All along the cracked walls
tufts of electrical wires sprouted
from rows of fixtures
without bulbs, without lampshades
as if the very walls had been stricken by drought.
How like clowns the waiters looked in their tuxedos,
solemn, stiff with dignity.
It was like having dinner with a married couple
who're in the middle of a divorce
but nobody can mention it,
like the pathetic sign outside of Ogden, Kansas,
proclaiming OGDEN, A CITY WITH PRIDE
which means "a city with hurt pride,"
as stricken as the Shah's fleet of trucks
gathering dust, a stage-set

left derelict in rain and sun
to bleach.

★

My neighbor complains about how hard it is
to find a good housecleaner.
Others chime in. "You know it's so hard
to find good service these days."
And I think of the desperately silly
conversations in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*
and of how a civilization falls.
With usura the line goes fat.
One evening, when dining out,
the waiters are not quite
as friendly as usual.
The next day somebody notices
in the southeast corner of the ceiling
a cobweb.
He wonders how the janitors could have missed it.
The next day it's still there.