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Reading "Mr. Lincoln's Army"

Katherine E. Young

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Reading Mr. Lincoln's Army
Sheremetyevo Airport, Moscow

I am reading *Mr. Lincoln's Army*
in a holding cell near Sheremetyevo;
Little Mac is writing to his Ellen
about the "Original Gorilla" (he
means Lincoln). A fluorescent tube illumines
me, for easy observation. I should
be grateful for my private cell, grateful
for this towel starched stiff and only faintly
stained, grateful for the chance to keep reading
my book tonight. "My dear Ellen," Mac
begins—he is being called upon
to save the nation. My watch shows ten p.m.,
but I have flown across the ocean, I'm
in some nether hour. It seems much more
likely that I could be that self-same Ellen
reading my lover's letter in the drawing
room—corseted, hooped, done up in sprigged muslin—
than my own self, arriving late, without
a visa. I stir, shiver, touch my hand
to the nightstand, its plastic grain aping
gentility. Every room in Russia
resembles this cell: the same beige walls,
the tiles crumbling in the bath, the same
gray linoleum rucked and buckled
across the floor. I maintain the fiction
that all's well this night; that I can't hear
my drunken guards playing cards; that I
am Little Mac writing Ellen about
saving the country from itself; that I
won't bolt awake in two hours' time,
mute, staring, paralyzed with fright.