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Rock Island

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WILLIAM FORD

Rock Island

Oh, the post-partum blues of Christmas,
That Southern Pacific train, laboring, full
Of aging people heading back to where
Polish and Czech are readily spoken.
Unkempt in their dreaming, they smell
Of sweat and oranges, their faces
Like burlap creased from many foldings.

It is my first time alone since the army.
They show me their photos from L.A.
And pay for my sweet rolls and coffee.
At Santa Monica in full color
Their grandkids are playing Vietnam
With plastic guns from World War Two,
The boys already with crew cuts.
In the background, hippies are marching by
Holding bed sheets stained with semen
“Make Love Not War” and “Screw LBJ.”
They are very lucky, I say, we all are,
And that I, too, admire the red-tiled homes
Drafted from Mexico and the great muscle cars
Like the Mustang—the power they have
To dig out fast and burn rubber bad.

As for me, I’m on my way to Iowa
Not to farm, just college, and a few ooh and ah
About John Wayne and Bix Beiderbecke,
The film *State Fair* and the deep, black dirt,
“A land of plenty in the Depression,”
Says a librarian, “not the pitchfork
Severity of *American Gothic*
But the apple opulence of the Grant Wood
Who knew his Monet and Cézanne—

The wheat stacks of the Amish, round,
The roads and hills and the people, round
Nothing like your Edward Hopper.”

On the Coast, the old ones had traced the blood
Of their fathers in the faces of the young
And had found it growing darker and darker
From all that money and sun. What had
They brought from the Rust Belt cities
That would be of any use, truly?
The kitchen was quickly denied them
And the car and the new lawn mower—no help
Wanted except at night as baby sitters.
For them home is forever the Midwest.

After the Colorado River, we head
Into the night watching ancient saguaros
Raising prickly arms to the moon like
So many abandoned lovers. Stretched back
As far as my coach seat permits, I rest
Fitfully under the turned down globes,
Trying hard to imagine a girl who'll say
She wants me, regardless, until the sun
Leaks through the blinds and the old ones
Are waiting for the diner to open—

First call for women with children and those
Without good motor skills. It is just like
The army, when I'd hurry up out of
A bad sleep to wait until the sarge checked
My name off a list. Then I'd wait some more
Until my stomach was ready to sell
Its inheritance for a plate of mush
Or I'd volunteer to go out on point
Though not for real, I'd grin, just practice.

Later I play poker harder than I know
With a veteran of Okinawa
Who has a dent right between the eyes
Then gin with a woman who wins
Every game and keeps meticulous score
And wants to take me home with her
Because I remind her of her son, dead
From friendly fire in the Mekong Delta.
Then more pictures and mid-morning coffee
And long examinations of the map
To the north for things we can't see from the train—
Phoenix and the Valley of the Sun
On the way to the silver and turquoise
Of Kayenta, Monument Valley,
And the ruins of Mesa Verde, where some
Lived as close to stone as anyone could
Without going mad.

At Tucson we stop
Long enough for a bus load to visit
The airport where a few vintage planes sit,
Some with propellers still tipped with yellow,
Mummified in desert air.
I ask why the government bothers with them
If jets have ruled the sky since Korea.

“Don't ever throw anything away,”
Wryly says the man from Okinawa,
“Unless it's of real use to somebody”
And then talks of the mountains of food
Bulldozed into the sand after the war
Though much of Asia is near starvation.
Surely I should know this or any
Other soldier who'd stood guard or KP,
The absolute waste of the government.
When we go downtown, I buy a serape

And a Che Guevara beret
And burn my mouth on jalapeños.

We leave in mid-afternoon for the hills
Made famous by Geronimo and Tombstone,
The air powder blue, the dust so small and dry
It sifts beneath the train's window sills.
We climb into the night to the promise
Of New Mexico and El Paso, the Great
Divide one or two peaks behind us, the Great
Plains stretching out like a buffalo robe
Stitched with roads and rails.

At Tucumcari

The Rock Island's diesels take over
And we step off the train to buy the last
Hothouse flowers of the Apache
And saltwater taffy and cold drinks.
Within the hour petals drift everywhere
Giving the coach an impossibly sweet smell
And the porters are shaking their heads
Over pathetic dust pans and brooms.
Then everyone is laughing and giving
Each other names and addresses
For when the pictures are developed.

By Kansas my friends sit angled and jagged
In the fouled johns, some smoking,
Some just watching the sun going down on barns
Where cows stand together in line
Rawed by flies and the press of themselves.
They wonder how it is possible in winter
For so many flies to breed
Or if their eyes have truly failed them.
I get off in Iowa twenty dollars richer
Because they wish me well in my studies.