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Spring Break

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MARY-SHERMAN WILLIS

Spring Break

Friday's Amtrak to New York is packed.
College kids are lolling on seats or propped
in aisles beside their bulky luggage:

narrow-hipped girls, midriffs exposed;
the boys, thin pelts of stubble fringing their jaws,
their hair gel-stiffened...

All of them thumb the cell phones they keep
like pet crickets for luck in their pockets or purses,
or cupped to their ears as if miming the act of listening,

linked to the wide world—a thing they take
for granted, like the cute Chanel clutch,
the wheeled duffel crammed with stuff,

and their parents (or a parent) waiting at home—
as I'll be next year, my own son
gone for college. He's a boy like this boy

slumped next to me: jeans, buzz cut,
a copy of *Maxim* on his lap, scrolling
his phonest, calling ahead to Philadelphia:

Yo, hey man, wassup...das cooh...
another weedy white boy sounding black,
then surly (to his mother?): *Pick me up at 30th Street.*

He signs off, stashes the mag, and falls asleep.
His cheek is smooth as a blank page. The trusting
self-possession of a public sleeper touches me.

I could have stroked the fur of his head,
but the slowing train wakes him.
You're almost there, I say instead.

Yeah! he answers, *Can't wait to get home.*
I knew it. And what college...?
Tikrit, he says...*in Iraq*...

Oh! I fumble for his arm, this *soldier!*

But he's talking:...*since last July*
and it was hell, he's saying, *sun blisters*
on our necks, and at night, we froze our...

...*And no one wants to be there...*
We're the enemy. They hate us. We hate them...
I don't hate him. But why this urge to hold him?

My shame wells up. Thirty years ago
we called them *Pigs! Baby killers!*
as if the stench of napalm,

Agent Orange, rotting corpse
was theirs; their lucky rabbit's foot
a Vietcong thumb, a jar of ears...

He reaches for his bag. *They wouldn't let me keep*
the stuff I found. Only this, he opens his wallet,
the Marine's Prayer: "Keep me true to my best self..."

Then he says, *I made two confirmed kills—*
his face still soft, but his eyes like stones—
and he looms over me and is gone.