1997

Elvis Goes to the Army

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4858
"Goodby, you long black sonofabitch," he says to his limo as he climbs on the bus to basic training. The U.S. Army has him on the scales, then, in his underpants, baby-fat showing, mouth downturned in sorrow or fear. Not that we should make him out a martyr, but he could be losing his career, here, and he could have gotten out of this. It is worth noting, when a person leaves his mama and his singing behind and gives over to the faint signals picked up by his inner ear. So what if the signal in a particular case is mundane: the unremarkable desire for love, for lack of ambiguity. He's more alert than he's ever been, time clicking away with the greater ritual's small appointments: dressing and undressing, tightening bedcovers, reciting the valuable gun, becoming part of the diorama where danger is everywhere, a good reason to blend khaki with the earth. Now, thirty years later, uniforms are back in favor, following the lead of the Catholic children in navy and white, soldiers of God and high-scorers on SATs alike, sure of their place in the universe. "This is the Army, son": even a King like Elvis might hear that and relax at last between what's come before and what will be: the dead hair of the past buzzed off in a second, the skull of the future rising under a battalion of stubs that hope to live up to the example of the fallen. We will not laugh at the shorn head, but will consider a long time the incomprehensibility of our desires, and the way we beg ritual to take them off our hands.