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Interstate 57
David McGrath

She heard him rattling in the kitchen—sunrise in January,
Illinois snowdust, Sunday, but no church anymore,
No reason to get up anymore.
She should rise from her bed, tell him don't go again;
It's been three years for Christ's sake.
But the bare wood floors were like ice and what was the use.

The Ford's engine murmured in the driveway,
Its idle conveying cold and uncertainty.
He put on gray silk driving gloves,
Draped his overcoat across the empty seat.

Time to take the boy back to school, he thought.
Christmas over at last. Dawn was the right time,
No traffic, no murderous drunks—a peaceful journey—
And they hadn't much time to talk before.

Tires squeaked on cold, dry powder.
Overnight snowplows had cleared Interstate 57,
Like a glistening blank page, comforting in serene possibilities,
A wistful invitation southward.
"A road trip is tonic," he said turning his head.

"I know you don't like getting up this early. I was the same.
Nineteen, slept till noon, an eating, sleeping machine."
He saw the bashful smile, youthful concession to the old man,
Saw the green eyes turning away, saw him hug his arms to his chest.
"That's fine, you'll need the rest,
All the hell raising you'll be doing when you get there."
And he felt that stomach-twisting mixture, like sweet poison;
Wanted to touch his shoulder, draw him to him.
Yet he knew the boy would have been embarrassed.
"Get some sleep."

The sky faded south of Kankakee—
Cloud bundles drooping, occluding orange flickers in the east.
Wind-waves across the broad river plain,
Shadow colored sheds interrupting the white expanse,
A clapboard farmhouse silent in the snow, its chimney smokeless.
Decades of road salt have killed the oak trees,
Flattened the windbreaks, widened the highway's sterile swath
So that gale-driven streams of snow soot
Rolled like ashen tumbleweed across the frozen asphalt.

"Never mind, sleep, sleep, we'll talk after Rantoul.
Get us some breakfast if you want. One of these days,
You try those biscuits and gravy. You're a city kid though,"
And he smiled to re-see batting practice in that penned yard,
Those oversized eyeglasses touching the bill of Sox cap—
He never did have an eye for ball.
"Boy, you could sure run, though, run like a deer,"
And he quietly cursed relentless time from which even the rock-hard
Mud beneath these crusted fields found no sanctuary.

As the car hit the apex of an overpass,
He could feel in his lower back the tires less sure,
An infinitesimal loss of friction over the scattered rugs of
Blown snow frozen to the suspended roadway.

He whistled softly, having absently reached a speed of ninety,
Eased up on the pedal and glanced in the mirror.
The rear glass was fogged, so he stared ahead
Into the eternity of the interstate, seeing the boy only nine,
Seated on a bucket on a frozen lake.
He had kept him out ice fishing too long for a child's fingers...
Crying...another day shouting, challenging...shielding his mother...
Too old for eyes to tear...how hard to level on those eyes again.

*Then he smelled it, still sharp through life-layers of three years,
Salty smell of boiled anti-freeze, its green puddle spreading and
Creeping closer to the two hollow emeralds in the bloodpool.*

Mars lights now flashing through the rear window's lacy frost,
The Ford coasted to the snowbank along the shoulder.
The trooper searched the driver's face, peered into the vacant car.
"Where you headed?" and "Snow squalls, road closed,
I'll give you a pass this time, only turn back;
What's the need of getting to Champaign anyway?"

Exit at Paxton.

A church-dressed family marching silent through the cafe door,
He changed his mind about coffee, sped back onto I-57 north,
No longer the hoary virgin ribbon he hovered over earlier hour,
But slower with other Sunday drivers littering the gray
With their own private emissions—
Just a road he'd follow back to the city, back to her,
The woman she once was also savaged on that other pavement.
He set the cruise control, sat like stone.