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An American Story

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ALEXANDER JANTA

AN AMERICAN STORY

The map-wide open wastes, a continental
wilderness lassoed by lean loops of rail
radiating silver bright and with no end
across a sunswept landscape of adventure
which covered wagons conquered going west
tenaciously to open the big trail .

Who wonders why
the heroes of those deeds fall back and die
forever unremembered and so clearly
extinct—mere casualties of a blunder
which places other glories far ahead
though here they had the guts to come and live
to fight it out to leave what now is left

Now we (the train, streamlined in aluminum
and with springs winging the weight of each journey)
move speeding through and under
or over so much memory and pain
and watchful strength which once upon a time
began to make a nation in this land

That movement measures distance while that speed
easily spans two oceans in two days
what once has challenged brave men's boldest mind
is tamed today by tracks timetabled for
effortless crossing and so we can have
an easy view from windows to partake
of the still restless rugged precedence
and wear an air of partners in adventure
who say it's great but scarcely care it's there

Administering high indifference
the passengers of our present tense
take in the shapes set sharp against the blue
which is electric over ardent sand

The privacy of summits unattained
will faithfully bear witness and no fruit
to those inhabitants who here inherit:
conquistadors riding in vista-domes
thoughtless, untroubled by ancestral deeds
insured against all risk and satisfied
basking in lazy boredom and in boast

Encased in pullman plush superior salesmen
of what they don't produce nor ever buy
smoke filter-tips exchanging tips and talk
of what one makes to meet the coming payments

A couple bright with honeymoon and promise
a spinster never tired to be old
beaming with wrinkled charms and wagging words
a sailor going home, a priest, a book
that catches the eye with the sharp title Murder

A fat bald fellow solving crossword puzzles

A voice in white, the waiter comes to say
that lunch is being served. The dining car
is three cars to the rear. Mixed grill and coffee
are shaken down by happy vehemence
under the sky where storms brood low, the clouds
descend in avalanche with sudden night
over the mountain breeding deep the danger
of precipice and boulders and the bear

Such was the enterprise of men
who lived to leave a road of gleaming rail
across the ever wide open horizon
with distance multiplying and no mercy

This architecture of unbeaten tracks
inscribed in stone, tunneled by gorge and canyon
long waited for the steel and spanning bridges
which now we cover in triumphant thunder
of certainty, rolling on hundred wheels
strangers already to the recent story
riding already our own far faster.