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Hackley Park

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HACKLEY PARK

E. W. Oldenburg

Silent Lincoln, looking south,
sits among the crocuses,
his bronze back turned to the April wind
off Muskegon Lake--
turned too to the sawdust past of the town:
the whiskey-whiskered ghosts
of the boys at the Red Light Saloon,
raucous brawl of Water Street, screaming mills
and smell of pine,
the lumber schooners sliding past the dunes
to escape land's clutch
creak at the first whitecap's slap,
sailing west with gulls for company.

No smell of pine now but foundry smoke
on the April air;
no swagger of red-sash brigade,
but traffic's gleaming stream
three lanes one-way westward; the cars
sane, orderly, sedate,
obey the light's unhurried beckoning
without complaint of tire or horn,
tamed beyond savageness
to acquiesce in the rhythmic law
of stop and go.
Lincoln offers no comment,
taciturn among the crocuses.

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Perhaps his eyes this April day
still see the Union dead
of another April morning,
the awkward dead at Shiloh,
surprised to death cooking Sunday breakfast:
lumberjacks and farmboys
from Michigan, Wisconsin, Iowa,
his own Illinois: the crude stuff
of Grant's western army.
If his eyes go there he knows
the rhythm of stop and go,
remembering Antietam,
Vicksburg, Gettysburg, the Wilderness.

The quiet cars meanwhile flow past
those staring ruined mansions,
Victorian wrecks from the gaudy
lumber baron past
become now the ghetto tenements
of moulded gingerbread
and sooty baywindow blank despair.
"I kinda hope those nigger bastards
try something tonight,"
says the young cop checking
his riot gear and guns,
while the ghetto only waits
for the day stop and go lights shatter.

Silent Lincoln, sitting among the crocuses,
what then?
When history's stop and go, begin and cease,
shatters red
on the bloody littered asphalt paving
and "burn, baby burn" sounds
around your ears, what will you do, Lincoln?
Call Grant who stands a block west
complete except for cigar,
and Sherman behind you there
who knows all about burning:
butcher and pyromaniac,
call them back to keep our fragile peace.

Silent Lincoln, sitting among the crocuses,
will give
no promise, extend no consolation,
breathe no fond hope
for chilly April winds to scatter.
His back turned on the past,
his dulled bronze remembers no speeches:
"These dead shall not have died in...."
And mercifully
the glazed eyes with opaque gaze
see nothing now at all.
Lincoln offers no comment,
taciturn among the crocuses.