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Letter to Friends East and West

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LETTER TO FRIENDS EAST AND WEST

What's new? I'm still in Illinois,
and the pamphlet says I can find white squirrels
in Olney if I wait long enough. They're rare
you know, and a dung-daubed boy from Kinderhook
swears how their whiskers are each attuned to one
of the four Primeval Whites: snow,
milk, sperm, moonlight, but that's just a rumor;
the squirrels are fact. And there's a gorge "nearly
200 feet deep" near Starved Rock; if it's no
Grand Canyon, Diane, if cracks don't zag here
quite like they do near the nation's extremes,
your awesome Western schisms, still even *my* disappointments
won't fill 200 feet though I chunk them like stones
all day at the face in the crick at bottom. All night
a wind howls through, and scours out Skeleton
Cave, The Giant's Bath Tub, Well-In-The-Wall,
and hones the Illinois rock: Twin Sisters, cradled,
Needle's Eye, pierced, The Devil's Smokestack, pared and polished,
you'd have to see such wind to understand
what shaped the raking hands
above my sleep, you'd have to let it
sodomize you too or hear it lap once
at your mattress. It's not easy here, white squirrels
are never easy. I wouldn't lie to you. But
Abraham Lincoln christened the town of Lincoln,
Illinois by squeezing a watermelon onto the dust
and it's hard, as you could intuit, to run from a state with stains
like that; and even you, as far as Maine or Florida, will think
of that story the next time a sweet rivulet of any kind
froths, rich, across your lips. And didn't you write me,
Ron, to say how deer in California print the Silverado Trail right up
to your sill, you parse out apples, four deer legs are dark bars

squares of sunlight cool in. Well in Illinois we've sows
like troughs of oleo, we've rat-packs in Chicago
till our sewerpipes shake with all the will
of epileptic nerves, and a broom-handle
chopped across the gnawing snout-bones sometimes
does no good. But, though there's nothing so far north
in my life as the bear, so thinking
as the porpoise, here in Illinois is dark
the thickest filament from a sweet corn
couldn't glow through, here's a dark in the field just made
for our own mammalian radiation and, though it's low,
it's light, this star in the Illinois night,
this udder. All I need do is bide my time:
no kidding, Olney hosts white squirrels
"unique in all the world" and I adopted the stance
of a beech last week to coax them,
wish me luck. The search is difficult, yes, and nothing
even so small as a white incision tooth or whitish pap
as yet rewards my diligence. But, honestly, a plaque
outside of Byron commemorates soldiers under Major Isaiah
Stillman

who shot point-blank at a band of Black Hawk Injuns approaching
with the truce flag; you can't just high-tail out
of a land like that, it deserves a certain observation
or, perhaps from the damp underside of the brain,
one root. In any case, Ron, when you visit
bring Cheri, tell me what a twin bed's like, here
"once each year the town of Nauvoo celebrates The Wedding
of Wine and Cheese Festival"; it's true, I'll show you.
I'm in Illinois. I know: a statue of William Jennings Bryan
"created by Gutzon Borglum," I have: trilobites
in the Jersey County quarries, shell bracelets, chert blades
and stemmed stone hoes from the giant Cahokia Mounds.
When you were in last May you'd say the ocean
defines *expanse*, report how you chugged up from New Haven,
Conn.
to the Cape, there are stories of co-eds and jellyfish, Michael,

I believe them all. Now
you must believe me: I'm still here, remember,
Illinois? A man could kneel to Apple River to drink
and let the touch of his tongue go
mainlining, quick, a fix, through the evening prairie;
maybe my mouth gone silver in the rush of the Kaskaskia,
the Sangamon, the Sinissippi, Big Slough, Vermilion River,
or the Kankakee, is even now a shine at the lip
of far-off faucets, intimacy with me will not sustain
and still: I'm here, I'm pouring, I know, if one is patient
there are white squirrels. I wouldn't bullshit you,
my friends. I'm stuck, half-chance, half-choice, and some
left over to weep in the stand of virgin white pine
along Rock River. Really. Can you imagine? I'm
still in Illinois, I've waited long enough
for anyone else to meet and mate
and raise a whole teat-dangled brood, and still
the Olney Woods has not released its secret beasts
for my catching. Someone. . . Can't you see him,
year after year, running for squirrels like these with the taste
of Devil's Kitchen Lake in his cheeks,
sun on his scalp and dust up his breathing,
screaming through Geneseo
and Bald Knob and Burnt Prairie and Peoria
and Kickapoo "I'm here
I'm here in Illinois with the nation's
oldest evaporated milk plant!"
How could it *not* be true?