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## American Scene: A Grant Wood Triptych

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## AMERICAN SCENE: A GRANT WOOD TRIPTYCH

### (1) The Breaking of Iowa's Virgin Soil

Four strong horses drag a steel plow  
deep into the tangled roots of untouched grassland.

One white frame house with a steep Gothic roof  
upended from black soil and a red barn  
set in the soft contours of these rolling hills.

Blocks of smooth round trees rise in  
a kind of steamy haze that mixes sun with sweat.

The rooms are spliced open to bowls of snap beans,  
mashed potatoes, platters of sweet corn, ham.  
Warm bread, heavy butter, cream floating on  
a pitcher of milk and the threshers on the back porch  
washing up.

All this is heaped on a blue china plate,  
elbows set on the table and the back-breaking  
feast of work begins. Outside a windmill

spins water into a wood trough and someone  
who still dreams of the earth turning  
wrestles a girl farther and farther down  
a row of corn leaves. Whatever they touch is

soft and pungent as a high load of hay  
set out in a field.

Love is a strange word to drop here, between  
hard chores and hot sun, but only here  
can you be lost and in over your head

with nothing but high grass to see through.

(2) Victorian Survival

See how soft the land is now that you live  
in town. After a hard rain chunks of earth

come loose with an easy twist of a pitchfork.  
You can hardly work a sweat up.

Even in these lean and hungry times  
a small detached human spirit hovers over  
the feed store and the dry goods.

And the ladies with teacups in their hands  
lay out the lineage that drift back  
to a gaunt New England figure from which  
everything earthy has been cleansed.

Here is the bitter busy work, waxing  
the carved edges of mahogany veneer  
and prying the starched curtains open  
on the narrow yard. She has carried

a potted plant cross-country in a wagon  
and set it down here  
on the one side of the river  
with a tidy parlor.

How to get back to it without leaving  
the front porch. These are the grandfather's dreams  
as he loads his rods and rifles in the back seat

and brings home trout and pheasant. In this chair

with pipe and newspaper spread out he is

the engineer again on one of the rare occasions  
when he speaks of growing up on the farm  
and leaving it with some affection.

(3) Death on the Ridge Road

The curves are more dangerous now. Yellow lines  
bend in the middle of black asphalt.

A black sedan is stalled midroad and straddles  
the center line. A truck flies around the curve  
at high speed and the Ford in the foreground  
slowly moves toward the scene of a three-car collision.

These are the roads we remember: two lanes and always  
slightly dangerous when wet. At this moment

rain pours from the dark clouds and the drops  
settle on the high strands of wire on wood poles.

On each side of the road, lines of barbed fence  
a trail of fresh skid marks. The junked parts  
of a family excursion spin into the ditch  
alongside the smashed side-swiped fender of

a wild drunken party. The careening load of grain  
and seed corn presses against them where the ditch  
indents into matted weeds from which come  
roses called dust pink and the blue glazed cornflowers.