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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
depth 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.