

AMERICAN SOFTWARE AT TAKOMA PARK
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OH, COLUMBIA!

your [coliseum streets] your lofty Uber clogged
traffic circles your [gaggle] of lunchtime lobbyists
[doubling down] on M street haunches [consorting]
and [reporting] Big Jim [the old man of the firm]
holding forth [counseling] his partners ["Sail on!"]
["Sail on!"] in seas of flying fish at Metro Center
just up from the spawning grounds of Bethesda
while the president [still in his underwear] at noon
[looks over the roofs] of tourist shops [the march
of middle school penguins] across Constitution
and Independence keeping their [young punk's eyes]
on the shiny shoes of Cleveland Park interns
[Banana Republic] millennials catching lunchtime
rays ["Sail on!"] ["Sail on!"] in the minutes of meetings
[printing] and [reprinting] tweeting] and [re-tweeting]
learning to read the lips of [tireless smiles] of kitchen coups
of [unseen knives] even the leather faced beggars
of Gallery Place look away in pity [as white skinned]
police cars sweep up the crumbs along the Francophile
squares [of pigeon coated generals] shouting
from their leaden horses ["Sail on!"] ["Sail on!"]
up the crooked stairs of the Hotel Washington
to watch [Gandhi] directing traffic on Mass Ave
before going on break at the [Phillips] to walk
into the last remains of [wood] up oil fragrant stairs
varnished in a wiser time [to lunch] with Caillebotte
and Renoir to whisper to yourself the only words
a city can ever say [Sail on!] [Sail on!]

THE ORIENTATION

[Good morning] [so glad] [to meet you] [we'll show your around] [your cube will be over there]
[where Mr. Davidson] [had an office] [before he retired] [and Sandy from HR] [took over]
[because Mr. Davidson] [was a "lifer"] [and had to go] [he used to take the train] [up to New York]
[on weekends] [to visit a guy named Sam] [who was his lover] [but you couldn't say that]
[in those days] [Sam was in advertising] [so he could be] [more open] [but his secretary]
[Betsy Williams] [was one of eight girls] [from a religious family] [up in the Bronx] [with a father]
[who worked as a printer] [with a union card] [and he did not like gays] [and wouldn't work] [with them]
[since they were not] [like him] [or his buddy Bill] [who had a job] [reading meters] [for Con Ed]
[and he was let inside] [a lot of homes] [and fathered twenty children] [in his territory]
[in the neighborhoods] [between Brooklyn] [and Queens] [and one of them] [was an Irish kid]
[they called "Eddie the Red"] [who would laugh hysterically] [whenever he smoked pot]
[which he did a lot] [since coming back] [from Vietnam] [where he lost his friend] [Jimmy]
[whose mother] [Joanie] [was the brightest student at Christ the King] [but didn't go to college]
[because that was not an option] [for girls] [so she took a job] [at the Playtex factory]
[where she never] [filled the hole] [left by her dad] [who lost his left arm] [in a car crash]
[coming back] [from the second] [world war] [and settled in as a regular] [at the American Legion]
[where he was known as Bob] [until he died] [sometime] [back in the 60's] [so there]
[do you have any questions] [make yourself at home] [we'll stop by later] [see how you're doing]
[make sure] [everything] [is all right] [welcome aboard]

EVERY MORNING, MADDIE

we meet for coffee
diner windows flush with dawn
she comes in from the street
we share a plate of bacon strips
my once vegetarian child
never this old

I'm driving her to the methadone clinic
these rain damp streets a maze
of traffic cones and sideways signs
we go right at the railroad crossing
I don't ask where she's living
anymore

nowadays its NPR in the car
neither of us listening
I'd like to know her favorite song
as if she could hand me a burned CD
as if we could just waltz it all back
she has no phone

almost 90 mornings clean
her shiny black hair unwinding
all tight skin and darting eyes
her thin knees clutching the seat
somewhere between urgency
and nonchalance

I've come to know this place
people milling around the clinic
there's a Chinese take-out
a burned-out doughnut shop
a storefront church
and then a space comes free
and I let her out

SATURDAY MORNING

we were out [for a haircut] and [I had taken his hand]
and we were [walking through the alley] between the [coffee shop] and
the [Salvador Market] with the [smell of trash] from a [damp green dumpster]
and it was his [first haircut] and I gripped his small [unpredictable] hand
and there were [a couple dozen birds] up on a wire and the sidewalk
was [lined in long shadows] and we went into the [barber shop]
[together] because it was [his first haircut] and they [had a special seat]
for him and the [scissors] sounded in taut metal [squeaks] as [the clippings] fell
silently to the floor and his [small tongue] came out to bear the barber's work
and [when it was done] they found a piece of licorice [in a cup]
near a [pile of fresh towels] placed square on the barber's white shelf
and [the floor] was swept clean with a [broad flat mop] and we went out
and [I took his hand] again and a [shine] had come to the windows
of the stores and the shadows on the street had [pulled back]
a little [and we both looked up] at the wire [and the birds] had left
and we [walked back into the alley] where the [morning] was disappearing
into the shade between the stores

LYNDON JOHNSON

I don't think a man ever gets to know who he really is
I think, we are all disinclined in that way, and though
I would like to say, that
I saw everything and that it was all laid out before me, that
I was presented with the facts, that my decisions were well informed, that
I knew what I needed to know, and
I think that for the most part
I did, but now at the end of the day,
I can't say for sure that
I ever really knew. You know

I did not start that war
I did not go in there thinking, "Let's get these god damned gooks"
I did not wake up one morning dreaming of choppers spitting fire from the sky
I did not go out there and pull these young men off the streets
I did not lure them to this war like some Sunday morning glory dreamer
I did not, but
I also know in another way that
I did. Or maybe it was just that

I was born into a state too long and too wide to be fully comprehended, and
I was never able to shake off the cold coming down from the hills
I had big dreams in those Texas mornings
I mean a man can see himself one way and also see himself completely different
I can love you or make you think I love you and it really doesn't matter which is true
I saw my mom and dad and they wore their love like a holy stone
I saw their ordinary mornings; her hat, his hand
I saw the dust all around them
I saw the dust, but as I think back on it now
I never saw it at all
I couldn't see.

I think you could come down here and think anything was possible
I knew a man came down here with half-a-dollar in his pocket and made a fortune
I believed
I could do anything, make things happen, get out in front
I thought I had a clear sense of what was true, that
I had come up from solid ground, but somehow
I got tripped up, and it was all quicksand, and
I believed I was doing the right thing, but now
I don't think
I ever knew. And that is why

I say a man never gets to know who he really is, more than that
I dare not say
I am not going to try to redeem myself, and
I am not going to harbor regret as would a weaker man, and
I am not saying that everything I did was right, but sometimes
I wonder if there's a way to know the score, and
I would like to know the score, but
I also know that to some extent
I never will.

COMING ATTRACTION

[Now] [at last] [the story can be told] [a story of deceit] [and self-delusion]
[a story] [right out of our daily lives] [a story] [so shocking] [they said]
[it could never be told] [until now] [The Man Who Played by the Rules]
[who was he] [where did he come from] [what was the secret behind]
[The Man Who Played by the Rules] [you'll meet] [The Child] ["but mommy
I just want to be like the rest of the boys"] [you'll see] [the temptation]
["what are you afraid of it's just a little weed"] [you'll experience] [the lust]
[the desire] [and the heartbreak] [of the Girl he left behind]
["sorry baby your art school lifestyle is not for me"] [you'll walk the streets]
[ride the bus] [buy the car] [own the home] [go to sleep] [with]
[The Man Who Played by the Rules] [twenty years] [of education]
[in the making] [five years learning the ropes] [30 years on the job]
[they watched] [they prayed] [they saw] [him become]
[The Man Who Played by the Rules] [with Robert G. Grimsby] [as The Boss]
["so you like getting these paychecks, eh"] [Peter Lamplighter] [as]
[The Priest] ["the ways of God are not for us to know"] [and Little Jimmy Giles]
[as his Son] ["tell me again dad why did you give up your dreams"]
[you'll laugh] [you'll cry] [you'll want to live next door to]
[The Man Who Played by the Rules] [in] [Cinerama] [Technicolor]
[coming soon] [to a theater] [near you]

IT DOES KIND OF BURN. GOODBYE.¹

[he was burning] and [he was trying to tell us something]
[he was on fire] and [he was trying to be objective]
["it burns"] and [he was trying to tell us] that it was burning
and [that's what it "does"] it burns [and he was trying to tell us]
"I'm on fire" [and he was trying to lessen the burn] [kind of]
[so he used the phrase, "kind of"] yes [he was burning]
but only [kind of] like [having kind of a dream] and
[being kind of awake] like [being kind of happy] and
[feeling kind of blue] like being ["kind of"] on fire
and [he was kind of saying goodbye] and [he was trying]
to tell us [something][about][saying][goodbye] and
[he had this word] and [it only takes one word to say goodbye] and
[he was trying to tell us "Goodbye!"] and [he was burning] and
[he was kind of leaving] and [he was trying to tell us something]
and some of them heard him saying "goodbye"

¹ The final words of Jose Villegas as he was being put to death by lethal injection in the State of Texas, 2014.