

The Grant Boy

I

The barracks are quiet in the dusk
And stand like rows of black piano keys—
Private Richard L. Grant, 37670248,
You bear your number with weight tonight,
And your sultan shirt is pied with sweat
From the hot breath of the evening
Blowing sullenly over your bunk.
You chew your stub of pencil
And mouth the words trying to make them sound right—
Erasing again and again
For love does not fall easily into words . . .
They cried when the busses left the courthouse square,
But life is too costly to spend for tears.
They have put away the gray shirts and overalls.
They will put away the tears.

II

High overhead and out past the windows
The echelons of noisy planes
Crash through the blue linen into the far clouds,
Each a silver boomerang—
But here the sun through the skylights
Glow on the long yellow tables
Where the parachutes are stretched—
Corpse-white patients waiting a specialist's attention.
As you lift each panel and follow end to end
Looking for stains and tears—
The silk, sensuous to your memory and touch—
You think of weddings—
And Marian—
She's waiting, Richard,
Just as the silk waits, its long white tenons folded,
She waits.

III

A ghost veil of steam
Prowls by the Pullman's windows
And the engine's whistle braids the night air with sound—
Home—
And the soft pollen smell of the ragweeds
As you sit on the south porch steps
In the night's blue quiet—
The blurred rows of white beehives
Under the old apple trees—
A wind-sky sieved with stars
And a milk moon rising out of the cornfields—
The soft flutter of a pullet
Keeping her balance in the maples—
Home—
The train can not go fast enough
Until you reach the long shining curve
The hollow trestle over the White Fox
Home—

IV

I watched your faces
As you waited to break into single file—
Faces boxed in formation like a calendar's numbers—
Some smiling, some thoughtful,
Others with nonchalant yawns
Masks of reality—
And the long thread like unraveling knitting,
Winding off the square—
Up the plank—
Into the gray ship's belly.
You are America, the mature and ready.
No longer the brazen child of the earth's veins—
No longer the stripling of great golden prairies
And vast different peoples—
But America, the blond young giant,
With steady blood—
With new hope—
You are Richard L. Grant—