

Fleda Brown Jackson

ELVIS GOES TO THE ARMY

“Goodby, you long black sonofabitch,” he says
to his limo as he climbs on the bus to basic training.
The U.S. Army has him on the scales, then,
in his underpants, baby-fat showing, mouth downturned
in sorrow or fear. Not that we should make him out
a martyr, but he could be losing his career, here,
and he could have gotten out of this. It is
worth noting, when a person leaves his mama
and his singing behind and gives over to the faint signals
picked up by his inner ear. So what if the signal
in a particular case is mundane: the unremarkable
desire for love, for lack of ambiguity.
He’s more alert than he’s ever been, time clicking
away with the greater ritual’s small appointments:
dressing and undressing, tightening bedcovers, reciting
the valuable gun, becoming part of the diorama
where danger is everywhere, a good reason to blend
khaki with the earth. Now, thirty years later, uniforms
are back in favor, following the lead of the Catholic
children in navy and white, soldiers of God
and high-scorers on SATs alike, sure
of their place in the universe. “This is the Army, son”:
even a King like Elvis might hear that
and relax at last between what’s come before
and what will be: the dead hair of the past
buzzed off in a second, the skull of the future
rising under a battalion of stubs that hope
to live up to the example of the fallen. We will not laugh
at the shorn head, but will consider a long time
the incomprehensibility of our desires, and the way
we beg ritual to take them off our hands.