

This Train Isn't Bound for Glory

Can't sleep. The neighbors have grown too quiet.
Old dogs don't bark at the moon anymore,
and teens who left in noisy jalopies
return at Christmas in family cars
with "Baby on Board" tags stuck to windows
obstructed with blankets and Teddy Bears,

just as they did in the neighborhood
where I grew up and longed to escape.
But Ann and Rick in the corner house
got out before me — though I didn't envy
Ann when she entered a nunnery,
or Rick when he married and joined the Army.

Lounging, Sundays, on my childhood porch,
I'd duck behind the funny papers
so as not to have to say "Hi!" to Rick
when he pulled up in his Chevy wagon
with his tiny wife and little brood,
in his Second Lieutenant's uniform,

and I shuddered when I thought of Sister Ann.
By now she must be a Mother Superior,
like Rosalind Russell in "The Trouble with Angels,"
converting feisty convert school girls
like Haley Mills into Servants of God.
That movie's been playing in my head all night.

Why didn't I switch it off while Haley
and her friend smoked stogies in the boiler room?
That's when I glimpsed their future approaching
like a locomotive, coming to crush them —
to mangle Haley into a nun
and her dumb friend into a mother.

“Watch out!” I groaned at my flickering screen.
 But even if I could have saved them
 for the Big Party that had just begun —
 sex without babies, nuns chucking their veils —
 I couldn’t have slowed that unstoppable train
 that rolled over Rosalind decades ago;

that’s hauling Haley, her friend, and me
 now through the valley of middle age.
 Watching the dead level winter landscape
 through smudgy panes puts some to sleep,
 like uncurious cats curled in the windows
 of the large, dull middle class houses we pass,

but not me. My face is pressed to the glass
 between me and that darkening scene.
 I’ve added no children to the playgrounds
 we rumble by, picking up steam.
 Their puppies, unbought, haven’t barked all night
 for a dozen years, then suddenly stopped

leaving behind a vacuum of silence
 the bitter wind whistling past fills in.
 At 25,000 miles per hour,
 our boxcar houses are dragged through the dark —
 are you with us, Mother Ann? and Colonel Rick? —
 towards Nowhere by No One, our Engineer.