



How westbound engineers saw Earlville, Illinois in 1999

Echoes of Earlville

When someone first revealed to me
that I lived in Earlville, Illinois,
I had no inkling there was ever
any other place to live.
Show me another town where trains
would wail from creek to crossover,
glissando-ing like slide trombones.

I remember winter nights in bed
when long steam-engine whistle toots
would bring about deep slumbering--
reliable as lullabies.
Soon progress dared to usher in
the brassy, strident dissonance
of diesel horns, "long-long-short-long,"
which set the window panes a-buzz.

Percussion also spread through town
from near the Farmer's Elevator--
during harvest rush, staccato
pops from John Deeres lined up near
the scales sent complex polyrhythms
further east than the Legion Hall.

Earlville was small, so most knew most--
for everybody's good, it seemed.
Few homes were listed, bought, or sold
without a buzz of estimates
proceeding through the telephones.
Transgression stories relayed at
the noisy downtown coffee shop
made patrons want just one more cup--
and filled the owner's till enough
to pay the waitress and the cook.

In Earlville, peaceful though it was,
occasional embarrassments
were held quite close to home and hearth.
Shrewd townsfolk having secrets knew
the power that perfect silence has,
so that even at the coffee shop
no mortal ever was the wiser.

I wonder whether Earlville now
is still the way it used to be.
Are the same things happening today
except to different residents?
Do trains still pound those west-end switches,
filling town with jazzy rhythms?
Do policemen cruise the streets at night
and watch for tavern stragglers
who think booze helps their driving skills?

The Leader prints the deaths of friends
I used to work and joke beside,
their laughter now a memory.
Obituaries fail to tell
the grief and joy these townsfolk knew.
If Roman Catholic, they find
eternal rest on holy ground
off Union Street just east of town.
For Protestants and "faith unknown"
the Precinct is the plot of choice,
out by the blacktop south of town.
I'll join my townsmen there someday
when hidden forces that I trust
decide it's time I go back home.

Although I can't be sure I'll hear
those trains at night from where I rest,
the living folks will surely hear
them on and off between their dreams.
As each nocturnal freight train bawls
through town, then fades out west or east,
light-sleeping heirs to Earlville's past
will pull their covers up a bit,
turn over, and go back to sleep.