The train had come a long time ago; now it was winding through the Pennsylvania mountains and further into the night. In the morning, green grass with patches of snow sped by my window. The rocking of the train teased my excitement. Washington, D.C., was the next stop, President Kennedy and only things on TV.

My world was changing; the stop in D.C. was brief, switching trains only and off again, further than I’d ever been. I sat looking out the window. It was pretty at first. The January morning was bright and fresh as the train rolled through the green hills of Virginia. Then it must have been the fast track, the back track, the way I’d have to go. North Carolina now, and brown shacks and sheds barely standing, yet I felt they had been there forever. Old bony mules grazed on bare brown ground. The mules seemed to be the same tobacco color as the brown shacks and sheds. Dark-brown-skinned children with pale-colored coats and jackets sometimes stood staring at the train.

The hills had flattened, the day had faded into night. South Carolina now; the hour was late, way past midnight. The train slowed, then stopped and seemed to quiver on the tracks.

Shouts came into the train.

“Get up on your feet, goddammit. Move it, move it. Why are you asshole little girls starin’ at me? When I say move it, goddammit, move. Move, move, move.”
The shouting voice roared through the car and into my sleep. Time spun wild, twisting and turning my feeling of everything, any yesterday and any fucking tomorrow.

Shouts called the cadence of our time.

"Hut ta three, hey da la, hey da la, hey da la. Hut ta three, hay da la, hey low, hey la, hey low, hey da la."

"Column left, but.
"Right shoulder, arms."
"Platoon, but."
"Goddamnit, move it."
"If Jesus Christ comes here, he'll shave, shoot straight too. Or I'll kick his ass out of my Marine Corps."
"This is your rifle. It kills. The only reason you are here is to use this weapon."

Oceans, gray ships, green shirts, and blackjack came to play. Fast cars, lonely highways, brown girls in W-town with bright skirts put color in the night. Sweat and wine and sound of song came alive in the night, lived quick but longer than Presidents.

Bright skirts and "Dancin' past the midnight hour . . . Yeah baby, let the night catch on fire . . ." and I could shoot straight too.

Arthur was there one day; he came from before, back then, up the way, schoolbells and blue band jackets. When streets had stop signs and I knew the faces on the porch. He was older than me, hung with the big boys, running touchdowns and big-timing at parties. Got him a nice scholarship too, went to a big school. But he was here now; he was in my world, my oceans and my brown-girl towns.

Arthur was waving and talking now. "Hey man, that you? Hey, home, when you come in?"

I spoke. "Hey man, what ya doin' way down here? I been in for about two years. Just got back from fucking around in Panama. How long you been in?"

"Shit, man," Arthur was saying, "I been in for about seven months. I'm in motor T, over behind Tenth Marines."

"Yeah," I said, "I'm with three-eight L Company. I saw Ramsey, he's up in air wing. He got it made, he got a nice woman up in K-town."

"Damn," Arthur said, looking at me, "you make corporal?"

"Yeah," I said, "I made it a couple months ago."

I hadn't liked Arthur too much before; his "Hey man's" were too
quick, he only saw you if he bumped into you—but he had fallen from his world and I had emerged in mine.

Time was screaming, “Move, move, move.”

Arthur looked away but was saying, “I got my papers, I’m bein’ shipped over the way. Man, this is some shit comin’—fuckin’ Nam, man.”

I spoke quickly. “Yeah, I got my shit too. I got some leave time coming, then I got to be on the West Coast at the end of the month.”

“Same shit here.” Arthur was looking back and saying, “Let’s get together up the way. Paul’s havin’ a party. Here, let me get your number up the way, shit, maybe we can get together, get some partying in?”

“That’s cool,” I said quickly as I scratched my number down on something. “I’ll check you out up the way.”

Trains were slow, too slow, stopped too many times. The tobacco-colored shacks and sheds were still there; the green hills were there too, if I looked. The Chevy moved through the night and into the day and back to before.

“Good to see ya, man, when ya get back in town? Saw Pee Wee last week sometime. Yeah, man, he’s still crazy, still bangin’ Debbie. Kenny got busted behind some shit, him and Melvin stickin’ guns up in people’s face. Hank’s doin’ fine, man, got him a nice thing goin’, drivin’ one of ’em gas trucks. Yeah, man, I heard ya were home, how long ya got? Yeah, I’ll be checkin’ ya out before ya be leavin’.”

Streetcars and stop signs, stop sometimes but keep on trucking. Party lights sparkled, home faces smiled, laughed too. I ran into Arthur down at the club, dressed in his uniform, tie loose and just dangling from his neck. The band music blasted, bright skirts wiggled, and Arthur was there swaying with the sounds.

“Hey man,” he would say, “I think I’m stayin’ here, fuck some over the ocean.”

The gin danced in his eyes. My wine was talking. “Yeah,fuck that shit.”

The drums were pounding; we could hardly hear, our hands grasped in a home shake. “Stop up Paul’s,” he shouted. “I’ll be up Paul’s, stop up if you can.”

The time came, the time to move, hurry, not enough time for slow words, too fast a time for Mom.

“You got everything you need?” she said, milling around.
“Yeah,” I answered quickly.
“Don’t forget to call your grandmother, she’s waiting.”
“I’ll call.” My words were quick.

I looked around my room, looked at the things on the wall, looked at
the pictures on the dresser, thought some things before I went down-
stairs. I knew it would have to be quick; it had to, I had to go.

“Listen, Mom,” I was saying, “I don’t want you to worry. A year’s
not that long.”

“We’ll be okay,” she was saying, fumbling with something in her
hands.

“Where’s Sherry and Stacy?” I remember asking for my little sisters.
“They’re out on the porch with your father,” Mom answered as I
saw the tears coming to her eyes.

My father sat quietly on the porch. There was a quick handshake,
fast words, and a good look into the eyes. I turned quickly; he knew I
had to go. My sisters, just children, I called to.

“Come here, give me a kiss and hug. You be good,” I would say, but
the hug would be more. The hug would be the smell of their hair, the
wetness of their tears on their cheeks, a quick turn with their faces deep
in my mind. I had to go.

The car was packed; my friends John and Walt stood waiting to take
me to the airport. My eyes would glance at the house, the porch, the
home, now, quickly. It had to be done.

“Mom, I got to go. I love you.” Her arms held me tightly. Then I
was gone.

Down the corner, one look back. The waves were still there, as the
silence was still in the car. “Fuck it, let’s go.” I sighed and turned away.

Met Arthur at the airport. The plane and gin flew into the night.
Chicago was there, but not too long; a couple of looks and we were
back in the sky. Talk was easy and slow.

Arthur was saying, “You lucky man, you be out as soon as you get
back.”

“Yeah,” I was saying.

The miles and the moments kept flying by.

Arthur settled deeper in his gin, then was saying slowly, “I hate this
shit, man.”

I sighed some, saying, “It’s not all that bad. W-town was somethin’.
The shit ain’t that bad all the time. You get used to it—it’s better than
the streets. Half the dudes in jail already, ain't a job nowhere, mills ain't
doin' shit."

Arthur got quiet. I did too. The plane flew on into the night. I didn't
say it—maybe I should have—but it was good not to be alone. Arthur
was here in my world, he was in it like me, and it was moving too fast
for us to let go.

Los Angeles was the bus station, a wee hour in the night, and some
dude with a clean Chevy convertible parked outside with the radio
blasting song. Then we were gone further into the night.

"Corporal, the barracks are up on the right. You'll be in Unit 106. Reveille
goes 0600, chow goes 0700. Here, keep these orders with you."

"What's your papers say?" Arthur asked as he fumbled through his.

"Looks like I'm going by ship next week," I answered, then asked,
"What's yours say?"

"Damn," Arthur said, "looks like I'm flyin' out the end of the week.
Shit, look at this—looks like they got about ten damn planeloads flyin'
out. Shit, that ain't too long. Fuck."

I spoke quickly. "Fuck it, man, at least we got a few days to check out
L.A."

Back to L.A., searching streets for song, bright skirts, with fast
thoughts and slow hellos. Strangers among strangers, dark smiles smil-
ing at the nights. Everything was spinning; time was dancing, swinging
and swaying. Yeah, we were here.

The hot days spun by and the nights and wine remained hot, but
there was a chill somewhere deep in the night. I wasn't certain what it
was, but it wasn't in the bright skirts or the faceless faces flashing by.
But I could feel a chill.

I remember the walk. Arthur's plane was flying out that night, and I
walked him down to the pay phones. I stood off to the side as Arthur
called home and spoke to his mother. I could hear him ending with "I
love you, Mom. I'll write soon."

He turned, and his face was just there, his look silent. I joked,
"Damn, man, you won't have any money till Christmas the way you
fucked your pay up on parting."

He was quiet for a while as we walked through the night. Then his
voice was low, but his words were clear. "I'm not worried about it. I got
a feeling I'm going to die."

I said, "Damn, man, knock that shit off."
He spoke again. His words were faint; he seemed to be letting go of everything, ready to get off. “I just feel it. I just know it.”

“Look, man.” I spoke slowly. “You’ll be okay. I talked to a guy yesterday that just got back. He said that just one guy in the whole company got killed. You’re going to be in motor T, that should be okay. They’re not going to stick you in some foxhole.”

I kept talking.

Arthur’s steps were steady; his head was up, and he stared out into the night as we walked. I could hear him saying, “I just got this weird feeling, I know I’m going to die. I can’t explain it. I just feel it.”

I didn’t know him then—I wanted to, but I didn’t. The night huddled around us. He was older, a year or two ahead of me in school, distant from me, only a face in the hall, a quick “Hey man” here and there. But now he was closer than the dark in the night.

I spoke slowly again. “I’ll be there soon. Heard most of us are going to Da Nang. The shit is not going to last long—we’ll probably be back stateside come Christmas.”

I listened for him to speak. I wanted him to laugh, say, “Oh, fuck it,” say something. I wanted him to get back on, but he was quiet. Our hands grasped in the night. “Look, man,” I said as we shook, “you’ll be fine.”

“Okay.” He sighed and walked away.

“I’ll check you out when I get there,” I shouted as he got farther away.

The night spun into morning and chow time came—orange juice, eggs and bacon, and a thousand faces. I could hear some of their words.

“Hey man, when you get here? Walker’s here too. Did you see that one girl last night? She was something. We’re going back down tonight. Did you hear what happened last night? One of them planes went down, flew into the side of a mountain.”

I stopped eating and looked up from the table. I sighed and then spoke, asking, “Anybody make it?”

The stranger looked over, then said, “I don’t think so. The word is, everybody got fucked. They got the list over HQ.”

I ate quickly but didn’t taste the food.

Eleven planes flew out. I knew it just could not be. I walked up the steps to the HQ. I felt uneasy, off-balance, but I spoke quickly to the guy behind the counter.
"I got a buddy that flew out last night."

"What was his name?" the guy asked as he got up from his desk and came to the counter.

"Arthur Slaughter, PFC."

"Slaughter, Slaughter," the guy mumbled as he opened a thick file on the counter and started sliding his finger up and down the page. I watched his finger slide, then stop. He closed the file and looked up and shook his head.

Arthur was dead.

I turned and left. Outside I felt distant, didn't seem to hear or see things around me, but I had to move on. Everything seemed so long ago, even last night, but I could still feel its chill.

How did Arthur know? Was I going to know? Or did I already know?

Eighty-five guys died when the plane crashed into the mountain, but I watched Arthur die before the plane flew into the night.