

Catching a ride, 1975

by [Paul Willis](#) in the [April 22, 2020](#) issue

When the Colonel from Monterey picked me up  
at a gas station in Rock Springs, Wyoming,  
he said it was my short sleeves—no tracks to hide.  
I had just combined a bowl of grapenuts with powdered  
milk at a rusty sink in the men’s room, having hitched  
a day and a night from Sawtooth Ridge in Yosemite.

I never liked traveling east, away from the Sierra Nevada,  
but the Colonel (I have forgotten his name)  
made it unexpectedly easy at 59 miles per hour,  
just four miles above the limit, taking me all the way  
to college in the suburbs of Chicago, where  
I only missed the first half hour of my biology class.

He was crossing the country to golf with his fellow survivors  
of the Battle of the Bulge, which was all he could talk about—  
how every one of his field commanders was shot dead  
before his eyes, how he became the one in charge  
at just my age. He couldn’t believe he was still alive,  
driving across the summer snow of cornfields in Iowa.

Colonel, I salute you now, steering against those memories  
with a boy so full of his own adventures  
he hardly had an ear for yours. But violence  
makes us generous to our former selves,  
I know that now, and in the shadows of gas stations,  
of classrooms, I am the one still looking for the ones we were.