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Jeff Simpson

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IF YOU AIN'T GOT THE DO RE MI

Jeff Simpson

Someone in the hall yells, "Dominoes!"
and just like that I'm shuffling bones
over a card table—the clink-clink sound
like dropping marbles into a wine glass,
fresh coffee, a slice of pie, and all appears
as worn and smooth as an old Zippo.
We have a radio and a space to eat,
a space to talk, and when you don't
feel like speaking, a space for silence
and an ashtray or a game to pass the time.
I play the double six, sip my coffee,
and gaze into the faces of men who never
went to war, never fought for peace and love
or made it to college, but would leave
the schoolyard in the seventh grade
and spend the last hours of daylight
welding horse trailers from the bare
bones of steel beams, oiled and smoothed,
then transformed into cages to haul
thoroughbreds to Shreveport, Santa Fe,
Oklahoma City, where four hooves
and a beating heart are the means
to a capital gain, a ticket for the small
things in life—new linoleum, new washer
and dryer, new teeth, the new smell
of a new car.

If I'm lucky, I'll lead this hand
with a dime or a nickel—anything
for a break, a good start. I take a bite
of pie. I run my thumb across the pips
on the tile as if reading the future in Braille,
picturing casinos off the interstate
shining like Vegas, Mecca of blinking
lights and three-dollar steaks, where before
there were only hay barns and unbroken

lengths of sky. I picture sparrows on a fence,
mockingbirds in the trees, farmers
planting subsidized corn in the dark,
knowing it will fail, knowing if the roots
take hold they can fertilize every acre
until it burns and withers back into dust
for the coming spring—anything for a little
disaster relief, a handout in the heartland
because you can forget your stock portfolio,
forget about strapping what's left of your
belongings to a Model T and heading west.
There's no more California, no more prospects
of fortune. The only gold rush this state's
ever known was in '68 when impulsive
welders went north to work on the pipeline,
sealing gaps with exquisite beads,
pretty as Victorian penmanship.

After all, this is where the wind
comes sweeping down the plains,
where license plates tell us everything is OK,
and it is, I suppose, so long as there's honey
in my honey bear and milk in the fridge.
For every gray sky, the kiss of spring.
For every dead field, rodeos in July—
the odor of cotton candy and horseshit,
popcorn and keg beer. We sit in the stands,
waiting for a renegade bull or a clown
to get what's been coming for him
his whole life. Strange how much we love
disaster. Strange how I'll watch the Daytona
500, hoping for a collision, praying for a spill,
until it's not so much a race as an assembly
of motorized billboards smashing into one
another at 188 miles per hour—100 more
than the 88 required to get back to the future
and away from clock towers and the pressure
to ensure your own existence.

Someone changes the station and America
sings out on the radio—Crystal Gale followed

by Marty Robins followed by Woody Guthrie
and his tiresome locomotive blues—
song of the dust bowl, song of the banjo,
song of the boxcar and red clay dirt.
I check my watch. I drop a tile and look
for a pattern, though I've got nothing
but a double blank. I think I'm just better
on paper. There's more danger in a Popsicle
stick than my fingertips. The trick is to be
on the go, the way alcoholics' mouths
move even when they're not speaking.
On the muted TV, they're showing images
of the Murrah building—song of the Ryder
truck, song of ammonium nitrate.
The hours pile up like seeds in a grain elevator,
but if you got the money, honey, I got the time.
We start another round, draw another hand,
and I start to wonder about the places
I could've been tonight—song of AstroTurf,
song of the reservation, song of the doublewide,
the La-Z-Boy, the microwavable pancake
dinner. The tiles start to resemble a jagged
spine misshapen after years of bad posture.
I try not to over think the next play.
I tell myself that in the end, every move's
the same, so you might as well take off
your coat and drop another quarter, say another
prayer, score the odds on horses and weather,
the likelihood of an early spring—
song of the cattle prod, the seed catalogue,
the convergence of pressure systems
that'll huff and puff and blow your house in.