

TRIP TO PEORIA  
(Akin to "What did you do over the Easter Holiday?")\*

Well, admittedly, as a discovery tour of America, a trip to Peoria does offer one the opportunity to fully capture the nature of a small, decaying, Midwest industrial town, especially if that person suspected the truth of the statement that the farm-belt has been hard hit economically in recent times, although a trip from Chicago to Urbana should suffice as evidence. I mostly wanted to escape the stubble stumps of last year's stalks surrounding Urbana, which I didn't do until Bloomington, about 40 miles away, halfway to Peoria. There a very pretty blonde sat down next to me after I had helped her put her suitcase in the luggage rack. When I told her I was taking a day's outing to Peoria she gave me a rather incredulous smile, which I later realized was probably masking a carefully restrained guffaw. I quickly pointed out that the Illinois River flows through Peoria (I was missing the Neckar in Heidelberg on a spring day), that I hoped to find a short-wave radio in a shop there and that Peoria had a zoo. Then she nodded her head in affirmation 'Yes, you could go to the zoo.'

The landscape was a little better after Bloomington. The bus driver left the interstate and we drove through some light brown pasture land with even a few hills and groves. There were a few farmhouses, a herd of sheep or two, some discontented cows in corrals. When we arrived in Peoria my new acquaintance got off the bus with me to stretch her legs. In the one-hour drive from Bloomington I learned that she was an English major interested in the history of the English language as was I, had live in Austin, Texas where she hoped to return after her studies and was on her way home to the Illinois/Iowa border for Easter. I bid her adieu and walked into downtown Peoria. Later it occurred to me that I might have asked her for her address in Bloomington.

We had crossed the wide river coming into town--in a state of exultation I bounced up and down in my seat pointing at it as if "See, I told you there was a river here!" I headed for it right away--oil, cement, abandoned warehouses, a broken-down concrete dock with a half-submerged ship which had once been a restaurant, gravel, everything overgrown with weeds. Across the river was a grassy knoll with a house on it. I thought of walking to it but couldn't decide which of the three interstate bridges to take. Also as the river curved, it was impossible to estimate the distance. So I turned back to downtown, only two blocks removed from the river. All the stores must have moved out to suburban shopping centers and malls. There was a Sears and a furniture store, also Revco Drugs, but there were more personnel than customers. Outside the Revco two working class kids were engaged in a kamikaze skate-boarding--they propelled themselves to a brick wall, turning their skateboards when they smashed into it. That was a mall-like area and there were a few older people sitting around--it went up to 80 degrees F. that day--who reminded me of the sleeping dogs you see in those small northern Spanish villages with the stone and chalk houses on a hot summer day. Walking down the main street, I passed closed butcher shops, bars and 'Tanta Emma'

stores, whose signs could still partly be read. In addition there were a few dimly lit bars, two mini-skirted prostitutes--one white, one black--with small handbags on long gold chains. I walked into one of the pawn shops I saw and found an old Heathkit (Remember the build-it-yourself radios? My brother used to build them in the early 60's. Once he built a transmitter and insulted the girl next door over the airways until the FCC came to the house and fined him) shortwave for \$30, so heavy I couldn't have carried it to the bus station.

As the road was getting dustier and the buildings scarcer, I headed back the way I came, towards the zoo. Some of the initial wooden houses I came across I found charming. There was a bizarrely painted Masonic stone temple complete with mystic symbols. A similar stone fortress-like temple stood on an embankment to the interstate. One house had a veranda surrounding it and sundry small doors that looked like elve's entrances. Soon, however, these buildings gave way to more dilapidated ones and looking up I realized I was in the middle of a Black ghetto. People were milling about everywhere, sitting and smoking on the back porches, playing ball, listening to music. I changed my route and made my way back to the main road. The first intersection was at the corner of the city hospital; the emergency room had a large sign over it 'Trauma Center.' I walked from there for about a mile amidst the din of traffic past gas stations, motels, Harry's Used Auto parts, White Tavern hamburgers, Tom's Mufflers, McDonald's, stoplights etc. on a narrow sidewalk or the edge of the highway, unable to discern if there was a safer area to walk through on my right so I would be able to make it out to the zoo. When I saw a bus coming down the other side, I darted across the street and jumped on it heading back downtown. On my way back to the bus station, I passed the Peoria Theater. In the Greyhound station I opened up a book and read for the three hours before the next and last bus back to Urbana.

\*Written for Katie, Easter 1986