

COUNTRY ROADS

By Kevin McKelvey

The oldest roads snake the land. Creeks or landmarks
or the burg they lead to name the roads.
Elizaville, Strawtown, Mule Barn, Holmes Station.
Along Jerkwater Road, locomotives stopped to take on water.
But roads never escape the square-mile grid
that made order and ownership of forests and swamps.
100, 200, 300, 400, East, North, South, West.
The straight roads only ever cross or T, rigid as a circuit judge.
You know every house along your drive. They know you.
At county lines, the roads turn to gravel or just end
and return you where you started. The only way out
the highways or interstates condemned across the grid
to connect cities that might as well be islands. One lane
or two or eight; asphalt, chip-and-seal, concrete, gravel;
the interstate down to one lane and the gawkers.
The road grader blades the washboard smooth each spring.
The grid a mnemonic that locks the past of who
married who, who died and how, of silence for
fatherless babies, murders, drunks, arrests, suicides.
When I pass people I know and they wave two fingers
from the steering wheel, I recoil, startled.
I want to be unknown. But I'll stop and block the road
to roll down my window for unfettered talk.
And if I don't recognize the person, I wave my two fingers
from the steering wheel as welcome, to witness.