Performance Poets

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Dressed in boots and camouflage, shooting an empty pistol he leaps over tables, over chairs, ranting about Serbs, apartheid, faulty pop-top cans. The teacher mutters, “Ambitious,” classmates shuffle papers, a woman works on a hangnail.

Swaggering back to his desk, he listens to a girl in a drifting black dress whisper her “Ode to a Prairie Flower.” The teacher murmurs, “Lovely,” students applaud. He sneers, gazes out the window, secretly admires her images.

Next day he pours out a love lyric — a longing to care for the girl as if she were a philodendron on his coffee table. His voice cracks, his hand reaches toward her. She snickers. Laughter spreads like a virus through the room.

Shoulders hunched, collar up, he muscles the departing poets aside, runs home, fills his notebook with thoughts from a new mine: how her pale eyes glint hard as diamonds, her laughter sweeps him away.

— Constance Vogel

Off the train we move, person to person recycling gas-fumed oxygen sharp angry honks screeching tires whooshing air brakes. You welcome me, Chicago wrap your arms around so tight I suffocate.

— Patricia Petros