

**Rupert Fike**

## **Western Lit in Poultry Science**

--1966

After French we had fifteen minutes to leave  
the columned quad, climb Ag Hill and find  
*PoulSci*, its smoked-glass doors our portal  
to a fetid planet, its atmosphere  
the face-slap you never got used to -  
chickens in the basement being chickens.  
Our professor offered no jokes, welcomes.  
Yes, an angry young man, we thought. Finally.  
Perhaps he even read *The Village Voice*.

Easy to now see he was a grad assistant  
pissed at this departmental exile.  
*Why me?* he must have thought. Why did *I*  
get sent to the barnyard, far from Park Hall  
where the tenured read their ancient lectures  
in the eternal air of burnt coffee,  
where round-bottomed girls leaned to copiers  
in the halls whose walls bespoke verse.

He sighed at our orange plastic chairs and  
the green blackboard with its smudged equations.  
He said it'd be tough to read Homer here,  
even though Greece had maybe smelled like this.  
And in that first class he used *in medias res*,  
he skipped ahead to get our attention,  
to Helen's sigh, "Shameless whore that I am."  
We liked hearing that word in a classroom.  
This was college, where you didn't giggle.  
The thick air coated our throats all quarter,

forced us to spit it out after class,  
a smell that didn't bother the *PoulSci* majors  
in their white t-shirts and unpresed Levis  
who would soon be rich from using hormones,  
genes, drugs to grow strips, fingers, McNuggets,  
vanilla protein the coming world would crave.  
We brushed elbows with them in the hallway  
on our way to read lines from the old world  
with our still grumpy teacher. We invented  
back-stories for him – a lost love, a jilt.  
But mostly we worried how he'd grade.  
There was a war, and we could be drafted.

## Honky-Tonk Milk

*Run get your father. His dinner's going cold.*  
I am maybe eight, dispatched to "the joint"  
up at the corner, a job I know well,  
one of his buzzed buddies, as usual, hoisting  
me to a stool, the shiny red seat where  
I can see the barman's long stained apron.  
A drink for me is proposed, seconded,  
milk produced from somewhere, quite suspect,  
already warming in its just-washed mug.  
The milk sits becalmed, contaminated  
by the glass whose life's work is to hold beer,  
and there is so much of it, topped off  
by the barman who surely has no kids.  
The talking goes on. I stare at the milk,  
now mine, an unwanted social fate.  
His friends keep the strong-breath questions coming --  
do I have girlfriends and how many?  
Any answer I give is well received.  
The pin-ball machine makes modern noises  
over in the corner, begging for quarters.  
I want to play but too shy to ask.  
My mother is waiting. The milk is waiting.  
My father is talking to somebody else,  
and now my own food is going cold  
in the quiet light of home at the table  
where I am fed, where I want to be.  
I put my lips to the glass for one sip.  
It's awful. I manage a Mmmmmm. They cheer.