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Truckstop Reliquary

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TRUCKSTOP RELIQUARY

Clay Matthews

This is a story of what gets picked up along the way:
a coffee counter and fountain soda that won't stop
running. Spring up O well of everlasting life.
Oh well, the old man beside me says.
He hacks into a napkin, buries it into his overalls,
throws a dollar on the counter and waves goodbye
to everyone. Everyone should at some point
say something personal to a stranger in the restroom.
Books on tape, *Moby Dick* played in a cab across Iowa,
the hills of Northern Missouri, down Mississippi way,
Alabama, and Stubbs, saying: But I am not a brave man;
never said I was a brave man; I am a coward; and I sing
to keep up my spirits. I sit with silverware.
A real cloth napkin. Hot gravy. A sense of home
for myself, for the fifteen truckers, for the family
too tired to pull through another drive-through,
just wanting a cold glass of water, a booth, a little time
to unwind, to talk. I could stay in this place forever,
I think, if it were home. Perhaps sometimes
it is. So I sit in another truck stop and try to avoid
thinking about politics, the dramatic tension of a conversation
two booths down. Or not politics but politics
as I understand them. The personal level. The ashy arms
of the waitress wiping away the mess a child has left
behind, no anger in her wipe, but rather compassion there,
love, as briefly an entirely different life of swing sets
and soggy teddy bears walks slowly across her mind,
paced to the tick of cowboy boots, clicking on the tile floor
behind her. Taped to the windows, dollar pledges
for medical research, the donors' names displayed
on paper stars. Post your sorrows. Post your hopes.
Buy a little ridiculous something at the counter
because being ridiculous is the best way to feel

like a good consumer. A good customer. I tip her well and hope it's enough for the hot plate, the timely coffee refills, Just a little to keep you warm, she says, and outside, circus tents, boxed up on flatbeds, twenty trucks in a row, and tarps and tie-downs and the wailing moans of tired and exotic animals, calling out all the secrets of the magician's magic underneath. The snake charmer takes a seat on the bench outside. The scaled man practices blowing fire from his mouth. Home is nowhere, in this moment. Home is mashed potatoes, a hot roll, and after a long day on the road sometimes the simplest things can almost make you weep. Then she lowers the blinds as the sun comes down, and through the windows it cuts across the countertop, and on and into a thousand small gadgets, extra lights for the trailer, leather gloves, automotive oil. Roses for those who need roses, postcards for those writing home. Hello, there: Just stopping through for a chicken-fried steak in Joplin, MO. Be home soon. It is cold today. I miss you. Yours, me. In the distance, only a mile away, the interstate hums, and the machines rush in either direction, making pathways with their lights, leaving, arriving, traveling on while on the side of the road the large sign for this place offers everything they could want, everything but where they want, and how, and who. They go on and off, at 80 miles an hour, passing the glow of this place, preserved in memory, a holy relic of the journey, the long and at last, this exit from which they had no way to return. So many state lines and alcohol or no alcohol behind the counters, on the shelves, cold beer in the cooler or no beer at all—a dry county and 30 more miles if you be a thirsty one. At the gasoline pumps they shiver and watch as the wheel turns, the dollar turns, the price turns over and up, another gallon of milk, a bucket of honey. This the land that stretches out in the middle, and the red suspenders of a trucker crawling out of his cab, yawning, waking to a world of late darkness, early dawn, a frost

as he pulls the tight elastic off his shoulders, stretches and reaches toward the low pitch blue of a morning sky. We go as the wind goes, today: wild and long and slowly bawling its way from the north, moving as the weather vane turns, the metal horse atop the central building, pointing the other way and with a tailwind at her back, wanting to run. Passengers and a hard push against the car door. Open. Sometimes something outside ourselves pushes back. A trashcan beside the pump to get rid of all the memories too painful to carry anymore, thrown under the seat to ride and ride another thousand miles before the stench becomes too much to hold, too much to bear, and comes out of the darkness, to the light of an open sky, an open highway, opened up there out of its foil wrapper to the fluorescent parking lot, setting itself in a hundred directions of free. A five-dollar haircut and men wait beside the men's shower room for the barber to return. Video games in an arcade buzz in the background, and a middle-aged trucker sits with his son in a small, dual car game, as they race each other and keep driving through the night, even as they have come to this place for the road to temporarily end. And it is the end of the road, sometimes—a dinner bell, and a place to take your boots off. At the Petro station in Kingdom City, MO, there is even a tiny movie theater, a popcorn machine, all the comforts of a small town wrapped around the inner and outer effects of American architecture. Hot food served in iron skillet. Tin posters of the Tin Man. And behind the curtain, the wizard is out for now. He will return, as on the journey back from the west coast, the same trucker will return, and buy the same meal, thank the same woman, stare longingly at the same postcard for the same Caribbean island that has held the same place in his heart as it has beat for so long now, tucked beneath the same brand of cigarettes, rising and falling in his shirt pocket as he breathes. Breathe in, and the smell of bleach. Telephones in each of the restaurant booths. A long distance call, and it is so good,

tonight, to hear your voice. I eye the pocket knives
and wonder how well they hold their sharpness.
I eye the lighters and wonder about the duration of the flame.
I eye the menthol smokes behind the counter, the coffee,
the Budweiser, the crowbar display and the rest of the tools.
Aye, aye, captain, and outside the ships set sail. The diesel motors,
the gasoline motors, the motors that fuel each of the singular captains
on their long way of going or coming or just getting out of the house.
The door opens, and inside a bell rings. The sound and signal
and sign of a human, a ghost, a being entering, or leaving, or lost
or lonely. And outside the door waits an abandoned dog left to beg.
It wags, and I take it a bit of food, something warm to eat.
As do the others, all of them, whatever they have left to offer.