Fall 1975

A Long Drive Made Shorter by Thoughts of You

Andrew Grossbardt

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Down the bar at Vic's Tap
a man sits loosely
filling his Mobil uniform
like a robe
every few minutes he motions
to the bartender and points
a finger thick as a young carrot
at his empty shot glass

Quietly I sip my beer
glance at his heavy face
the cheeks glazed with dirt
the three day growth of beard that looks
like it won’t come off

After his third he turns to me
says “bet you can’t drink em like this”
with his head he guides me back
to the glass and I watch him
grab a salt shaker in one hand
and clutch it like another thumb

as he dusts the clenched fist
of his other hand I notice
the dead skin on his knuckles
gleaming like fish scales
around his finger the thick circle
of gold crusted with grease

A huge tongue protrudes
from its border of lips he licks
the salt hard swallows
the brown liquid and grunts
when he turns again his eyes
wet and flecked with blood I smile
back at him in my dumb way
The next morning I am up early in the cold finding the quilt drawn to your curled body like a child I dress in the dark and leave you sleeping

It is October 1st and the first real frost coats everything I drive through the low hills of southern Iowa I can hear the corn dying in their wilted sheaths the sumac reclaiming its color as sun breaks loose in the eastern sky

The first rays slanting west strike me through the car’s window like a sudden blow already the cows are up licking ice from the grain in the creek bottoms it is still dark the brush stands white and rigid like frozen hair I remember yours standing by Lolo Hot Springs shivering in twenty below

I know by now you must be awake drinking coffee by yourself sorry you missed me leaving and somewhere close he’s been up hours his hands numb from the touch of metal his terrific headache fading in the fumes of gasoline

I come over a rise through a grove of maple hickory and elm turning orange with fall it is nearly eight nearly Missouri nearly another day