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D NER

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Ethan Gilsdorf

D N E R

Pay the waitress for everything that's happened.

—David Clewell

Forty-five minutes north of Loomis,
an eager drive always worth the gas and time
winds you up that notch off 52.
Nights still like this, you try the dial
to distract the silence but every turn
is just the turn of the earth,
antennae grabbing at waves falling away dead.
This route eats stations all night.

Over that last rise and you know
you're at that favorite here, blinking
D . . . blank . . . N . . . E . . . R, letters set up
in succession, knocked out, then together,
cherry red lined by lemon on an indigo sheet.
In the lot, rigs rest side by side,
parking lights on and off like eyes
in the uncertainty before sleep.
Before you pull in, another single father
cuts you off in an empty family wagon,
parks outside the lines. You find a slot,

lock what's not even valuable,
push your body way inside.

Entry way locks air, stirs the humid
with the cold blast within, holds you
like caesura . . . before throwing customers
from depression to polished chrome,
to light oozing from spheres with rainbow rings
like distant planets close enough to touch.

Grease: both smell and feel, sitting
thick on air, a regular.

Its waft from everywhere and nowhere
at once, wanting you, and you need
the thick, aqua-rimmed dinner plate
dripping with the nourishment
grease promises, the weight.

Tonight the waitress has everything
you want at three a.m. Water. Omelette.
Toasted cheese—American, what else
you think, since what country am I in?—
hot with mushrooms from a rift
in the kitchen floor straight to hell.
Shakes she broke the mixer for.
Fries, forget it. You've searched
this imperfect world for the perfect plate

and this one's in the running. Settled in,
knife and fork in hand, you figure
maybe this is everything for once.
Going right, at least for the few minutes
between ketchup thrusts and salt
and fat swimming upstream in your blood.
Like nothing that ever happens long enough,
so short and rare you never notice you
with yourself, holding a conversation
and not on edge. You spin on the stool,
once around, once around, fingers gripped
tight to formica, turning with the world
for a change. Faces not on you, but quiet
and straight ahead. Cigarettes drag inside
every body, without judgment,
ashes smoldering from individual pyres.
You with the rest of the flightless,
poking at a last slice of cobbler.
In your kitchen, each coffee sip
sounds too loud, becomes the room,
but here, you have a handful of loose change,
the cook's sweating head hard on the wall,
the waitress, arms akimbo, slumped
at the register, wondering what schmuck
will wander in, wanting something next.
Against and with this mess, the sharp click

of your shaker on the counter, your mark
and contribution to a dull, neon throb,
a scrawl called ALWAYS OPEN,
and bright letters spelling D NER,
one space blown blank for your I.