

Fall 1975

A Long Drive Made Shorter by Thoughts of You

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Recommended Citation

Grossbardt, Andrew (1975) "A Long Drive Made Shorter by Thoughts of You," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 5 , Article 24.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss5/24>

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**A LONG DRIVE MADE SHORTER
BY THOUGHTS OF YOU**

for Martha

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