

## CONVENIENCE STORES

We both know the smell of a convenience store at 4 am  
like the backs of a lot of hands. She sells me trucker crack  
(Mini Thins; legal speed). She doesn't make me feel  
awkward about it. She can tell it's been a long drive.  
It's only gonna get longer. She offers me  
a free cup of coffee but I never touch the stuff.  
Besides, I'm gonna need more speed than that.

We notice each other's smiles immediately.  
It's our favorite thing for people to notice  
our smiles. It's all either one of us has to offer.  
You can see it in the way our cheeks stretch out like arms  
wanting nothing more than to say

*You are welcome here.*

She shows brittle nicotine teeth with spaces between each one.  
Her fingers are bony, there are no rings on them  
and she would love to get her nails done someday.  
One time she had her hair fixed.  
They took out the grease, made it real big on top  
and feathered it. She likes it like that.

She will never be fully informed on some things  
just like I will never understand who really buys Moon Pies  
or those rolling wrinkled dried-up sausages  
but then again, she's been here a lot longer than me.  
She's seen everything  
from men who grow dreadlocks out of their top lips  
to children who look like cigarettes.

I give her my money, I wait for my change,  
but I feel like there's something more happening here.  
I feel like a warm mop bucket and dingy tiles  
that will never come clean.  
I feel like these freezers cannot be re-stocked often enough.  
I feel like trash cans of candy wrappers  
with soda pop dripping down the wrong side of the plastic.  
I feel like everything just got computerized.  
I feel like she was raised to say a lot of stupid things

about a color and I feel like if I were to identify myself  
as gay, this conversation would stop.

It's what I do.  
I feel.  
I get scared sometimes.  
And I drive.

But in one minute and forty-eight seconds I'm gonna walk outta here  
with a full tank of gas, a bottle of Mini-Thins and a pint of milk  
while there is a woman still trapped behind a Formica counter  
somewhere in North Dakota who says she wants nothing more  
than to hear my whole story (all ninety-two thousand seven hundred  
and seventy-five miles of it).

I can feel it though, y'all: she's heard more opinions and trucker  
small talk than Santa Claus has made kids happy, so I only find  
the nerve to tell her the good parts, that she's the kindest thing  
to happen since Burlington, VT, and I wanna leave it at that  
because men – who are not smart – have taken it further,  
have cradled her up like a nutcracker and made her feel as warm  
as a high school education on the dusty back road  
or a beer in a cozy.

I feel like she's been waiting here a long time for the one  
who'll come two-steppin' through that door on eighteen wheels  
without making her feel like it's her job to sweep up  
the nutshells alone when she's done been cracked again,  
who won't tempt her to suck the wedding ring off his dick,  
but will show her, simply, love.

She doesn't need me or any other man but  
she doesn't know that either  
and I'm just hoping like crazy she doesn't think I'm *the one*  
because the only time I'll ever see North Dakota again  
is in a Van Morrison song late *late* at night, I promise.

I feel like she's 37 years old wearing 51 badly, dying inside,  
like certain kinds of dances around fires, to speak through you,  
a forest, if you weren't so taken with *sparks*.  
But she was never given those words.  
She has not been told she can definitely change

the world. She knows some folks do but not in convenience stores and *not* with lottery tickets, so I finally ask her what I've been feeling the entire time I've been standing there, still, gettin' scared like I do sometimes, really ready to drive, I ask

*Is this it for you?  
Is this all you'll ever do?*

Her smile collapsed.

That tightly strapped-in pasty skin  
went loose.  
Her heart fell crooked.  
She said, not knowing my real name,

*I can tell, buddy, by the Mini Thins and the way you drive,  
that we're both taken with novelty. We've both believed  
in mean gods. We both spend our money on things that break  
too easily, like people. And I can tell you think you've had it  
rough, so especially you should know  
it's what I do.*

*I dream.  
I get high sometimes.  
And I'm gonna roll outta here one day.  
I just might not get to drive.*