Transience: Poems from Four Nations

No Chinese

The sign in front of the RSL club
On the main street of Young
Declared NO CHINESE.
Desperate for a few schooners

Of Toohey’s, having hitched
From Wombat after being stranded
For the night in a twenty-four-hour
Truck stop in Yass drinking bottomless

Cups of coffee while watching a Stones
Special on Rage, we gratefully escaped
The early afternoon December heat
And took refuge in the cool, dark

Windowless cavern of the RSL.
Welcome white boys, we played
Billiards free of charge, ate meat
Pies and pasties doused with tomato

Sauce, played the Oils and Chisel
On the jukebox, drank schooner
After schooner, never pausing
To contemplate our good luck.

Texas

We loaded up the car
And set off for Texas.
It seemed far enough away
From anywhere of importance.
Out there we could create
Our own isolated world
Among the lakes and pines.
We bought a trailer
On an inconspicuous acre

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And disappeared for a year.

It was a great way to start
A marriage: a secret life
Without distractions.
We didn’t need excitement;
There was enough between us.
Our beer, music, books
And bodies kept us happy.
‘Simplify, simplify!’
Wrote Thoreau –
Did we ever listen!

Check King

Hispanics and African-Americans
In a line extending out the door
Into the rain wait to cash
Friday-afternoon paychecks,
Some wearing hard-hats,
Safety vests, dirty overalls, uniforms
With names embroidered on the chest.
A middle-aged white man with long
Grey hair and a scruffy beard
Stands outside smoking, growling
To departing customers,
‘Spare some change, brother?’

Inside, ceiling fans spin below blue
Fluorescent lights, creating a strobe
Effect. gruff tellers work behind glass
And steel bars, beneath signs declaring
Pay Your Utility Bills Here
Western Union Transactions Only
Cash Checks and Money Orders Here
Send Money to Jamaica and Around the World.
Prominently placed Slim Jims, cigarettes,
Tylenol and pre-paid cell phones tempt
Customers to depart with fresh cash.
Slaving

Sitting outside the kitchen
Of a London pub,
Peeling potatoes
In the October afternoon
Sun, I feel like Orwell.
I may not be down
And out, and I’ve not yet
Been to Paris,
But I know too well
How it feels to be someone’s
Slave in order to feed myself,
Travel and write.

Transitory

A familiar country is left behind once again
And a new one is to be explored, made known.
From below my window, the Square where a statue
Of Lenin once stood, I hear chatter and trade
In Ukrainian and Russian. It is mere noise.
From my balcony I view the ruins of an ancient castle
Atop the mountain: a fortress from a time
A thousand years before the deposed communists
Formed their ideologies, came to power.
History surrounds, overwhelms, confounds.
I understand little, just the mist clinging
To the Transcarpathians, the singing of birds,
The daily struggle for food and shelter.
These things are constant. I am like the wind,
Always changing and moving to a distant land.

Nathanael O'Reilly