

# On La Cienega

(After Schiller's 'A Maid From Afar')

John Tranter

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By the filling station on La Cienega a burger joint  
somehow survives. This Sunday morning  
a pink Thunderbird sags at the kerb,  
and an old Studebaker, paint flaking.

Suzy got a job waitressing there, she doesn't quite  
remember how or when. She turns up for work  
just as the first bus trundles by, shifting gears  
at the corner, the double diesel's throaty roar  
making the plate glass tremble and glitter.

She didn't come from around there — nobody did.  
'I left the Midwest — don't ask me when,'  
she said once. This morning she gets the key  
and goes to the john. The empty sky  
has that pale hazy look that means a hot day.

I like it when she stops to talk awhile.  
She brings a second cup of coffee, and  
'You should try the espresso,' she says. 'God,  
I could do with a drink.' But with the boss watching  
she makes sure to smile at the customers:

old Ed with yesterday's paper, the bag lady  
from down at the Marina, who used to be  
a Hospitality Executive, if you can believe that,  
even that wasted couple in the corner  
rubbing their arms and not noticing anything:

not the spilled milk, not the cigarette burning down  
between the girl's fingers, not even the view  
through the speckled window: the hills  
covered with dry scrub, and in the parking lot  
a cop checking out their rusting car  
and talking on the radio. I can't stand

losers like that. 'They just got married,' Suzy whispers,  
wiping the counter and looking over her shoulder at them.  
Then she takes the little vase of flowers from  
next to the cash register and puts it on their table —

and of course they don't notice, the girl biting her nails,  
the guy staring into his plate — some daisies  
that she'd picked from a neighbour's yard  
and a sprig of freesias the colour of cream and butter  
whose dreamy scent competes with coffee and gasoline.