

To the Woman at the Front Desk of the Americas Best Value Inn & Suites

JAKE GRIGGS

It's too early for cheery remarks
But you've been up for hours
Started your shift at 4, you said
Made the coffee
Assembled breakfast
Apologized for things not your fault
And likely put up with the worst of us
As we settle up, my daughter and I quibble
About how to best split 20 hours in the car
8 and 12...13 and 7...11 and 9...
You join with a grin
Suggesting new numbers—new math
I am not in the mood
Another grumpy traveler
But in that moment, I stop
And I watch
And I listen
And I saw you
Haggard yet chipper
You with your thin hair pulled back tight
You with your band-aids and bruises
You with your cheaters hanging from your neck
With your tattoos, names
And other numbers
 Life and death displayed
Of what might be your journey
Cigarettes at your side

That emerge from your purse
Whose leather is beaten, cracked
Faded and tired
Maybe the smokes help
To get you through your 10-hour shift
Your second in as many days, you said

These words contain my ignorance
And my gratitude
For the coffee whose grounds are not your fault
For the turbulence I imagine you've had
For you and what you bring
For your smirk amid the desolation
For your perseverance
Thank you, I say
For our receipt
Born of opportunity
When my daughter asks
 I bet she doesn't get paid much
 Probably not
 Why is she so happy?
I survey the price of gas
Ascending over the summer
Across the highway and down the street
To a hawk that leaves a litter-filled ditch with its kill
Her young hand pauses on the handle
To imbed in memory

As we get in the car
Head west
Head north
Across the ink
And the scars
Of America

