

A CAMARADERIE THAT ONLY THE COLD CAN PRODUCE (Thursday Night at a Transvestite Truckers' Bar in Michigan)

by Alice Hatcher

When old-timers accept the golden handshake from Tri-State Trucking and head south,
They always insist that they won't die alone in a peeling clapboard house,
That the boys in Miami are all beautifully bronzed, and that
You should think about Florida, too, and you do,
Every time you force your wrinkled foot into a damp shoe,
Every time you cross the snowy lot filled with brooding, salt-encrusted rigs
At the lonely truck stop north of I-94.

The night air sears your nostrils, and spreads a latticework of frost over your bones,
Or that's what it feels like, though there are no words, really.
Winter wind can wither a soul, you know, and you think maybe the old-timers were right.
That is, until you enter the dimly lit bar, where
A rainbow of jukebox lights, the lacquered tips of plastic fingernails,
And shrill laughter from powdered queens in ill-fitting pumps stained by dirty slush,
Cut through clouds of cigarette smoke.
You imagine your friends—those who left, lured by brochures about Florida—
Cradling rum-filled coconut shells and (if you can believe the postcards)
Striking up conversations with guys who've never driven stick or listened to Hank Williams.

At the door, an aging queen hiding a noon shadow behind a feather-boa,
Helps you out of your cracked leather jacket.
It's your second skin, horribly disfigured, protective and difficult to shed.
Sensing your awkwardness, she teases you,
Taps your chin and scratches a small patch of whiskers beneath your ear.
When she calls you *honey*, you imagine a sticky residue,
There, there, there—right where she touched you.
Reflexively, you wipe your face and immediately regret doing so.
Flamboyance and fragility are hardly strangers, after all.
You promise yourself that, later, when your contrition won't be so transparent,
You'll buy her a beer and ask about her kids.

You order straight bourbon from a bartender who appraises your yellowed pearls,
And recounts, once again, the time he met Burroughs and Ginsburg in Tangiers,
And for the rest of the night, Patsy Cline sweetens the sorrow of solitary life,
Scraggly beards join in grizzled communion,
Epilated thighs poke through the slits of leather skirts,
Sequins catch on denim belt loops and fall to the beer-soaked floor.
Then, at bar time, men pull hunting jackets over foam cleavage,
Step out into the icy parking lot, and in well-rehearsed tones,
Discuss fluctuating gas prices and the cost of propane heaters,
Complain about the old lady and the in-laws,
Place small bets on the Detroit Lions game,
And you know, then, that there is camaraderie only cold can produce.