

On La Cienega

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

John Tranter

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.