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The Feature Writer's Speech to the Newcomer

Robert A. Zordani

Eastern Illinois University, razordani@eiu.edu

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The Feature Writer's Speech to the Newcomer

Just why our Jeannie quit the factory
to come work here is anybody's guess.
The Westside Lounge is not a happy place,
though Jeannie's laugh can rise above the din
of country hits and suicidal talk
to make a dismal patron's drink taste right

or stop two bums from starting up a fight
when they're a little drunk and ornery
and have a little rooster in the walk.
Don't fool yourself, friend. That girl's a tigress!
You get her mad, she'll kick you in the shin
or yank your beard or slap your pudgy face.

Last week, I swear to God, she broke a vase
over that man's head. It was quite a sight.
You'd think he'd never want to come back in,
but there he is for all of us to see,
a good bit humbler, now, I must confess,
and more polite, and not so prone to gawk

at Jeannie's chest or swoop down like a hawk
upon its prey. But Jeannie gives us space
for impropriety and carelessness
and merely chides us when we're impolite,
provided we don't speak too vulgarly
or beg her for a night of steamy sin

if we've been going heavy on cheap gin
and slamming shots since noon, our endless squawk
a stream of feckless incongruity
not fit to listen to. Jeannie's got grace,
real grace, and if I never come to write
her story up, may I die penniless

and alone in a place where friendliness
does not exist, my raspy voice so thin
not even dogs could hear it in the night.
I mean it, friend. Most people here will balk
at what I've said to you, but they don't trace
the tangled weave of small-town history,

distinguish fact from general mawkishness,
or paint the flight of folk like our Jeannie
who circle the tailrace of our sweet chagrin.