

LOVE

Smoking outside the store
with the trucker, who's used
to being right, Stanley, **the shy**
clerk on break, agrees with him
that his doctors don't know
a damn thing, then moves
toward him, almost touching
his back, while the trucker,
his ragged beard shaking
with the effort, tries to reach
a tightness in his lungs
with his shallow cough.

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"Love" is not the sort of word you'd expect
from a man wearing **a camo jacket and boots**
who keeps his hunting dogs in a pen outdoors
so they won't get spoiled, and an outdoors
man himself. But tonight under the lamplight,
he's one week into a fishing trip with nothing
to do but tell the others about the house-dog
his wife at home talked him into, and how else
to explain without that word, why the dog can't
stop whining whenever she's away, and follows
her all over the house like a damn fool?

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Just after Francis, age 90, asks
the customer at his apple orchard
in his loud voice what to do now
that his watchdog has gone
deaf, too, the dog shows up
in the driveway with his matted fur
and one gray eye, delighted to find
his master there and lick his hand.

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The substitute minister, far off
at the pulpit, asks who's new today
in church, then raises his own hand.
Nobody laughs. It's his voice
that dazes them, a breezy, lighthearted
tone for a joke, a caring tone
for sympathizing with their needs,
a helpless tone for asking Christ,
in his everlasting love, to assist them.
Up close after the service,
as they shake his hand and look into
his evasive eye, they see the voice
is how he protects himself from them.

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All through this November day
of troubles, when I reach unthinking
into my pants pocket and touch

the damp bills, I remember her,
the quiet one with the bruised skin
under her eyes from no sleep,
dumping out my wet empties
in the town redemption center
with her young, gloveless hands,
as downcast in that dim room as I was.
Still she went on counting one
by one, in a rhythm that grew like
a faithful, intimate song between us
until, pausing to wipe her palms
and press the bills into my hand,
she smiled a big smile, the shock of it
seeming to lift me, lift us both, up
over the broken-down boxes and plastic
bags of used-up bottles and cans.