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A Full shelf Also Hides Its Shame

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Joshua Gottlieb-Miller

A Full Shelf Also Hides Its Shame

Boss calls me Zen master.
I'm not paying attention.
I'm having trouble turning off
the part of my brain that never got
a reward. Be Pavlovian, Boss says,
not the scientist. There's a clock
on the wall if I look to my left.
Don't turn my head. Kyle speaks
softly, thinks *the managers*
are the experiment.
We're just the wheel they spin.
I try to know myself
by not thinking anything, self-
conscious as a fiction.

*

In the back room
flatten boxes
for the baler.
On the floor
face over
ghost stock, empty
shelves hiding
their shame.

*

Proud and lonely cashiers,
interchangeable as in a line
of smiles. *Awareness is the opposite*

of thinking, Marty insists.
Boredom is only beautiful
when it's a form of pain.
I wince. Are you a feature
or a cause?
Can you shift from scenery
to moral self-instruction?
Before each check-out
a clip strip of waterfall
greeting cards hangs
the same figure
at bottom looking up
at a stream of
water and gravity
obscured
by every higher card.
Understanding comes from looking
at the single representation
we can see all of.
For a moment it takes
to realize this I'm blissing out,
completely present.
It takes an hour
to write these lines
beneath my grocery list
in seconds stolen as shoppers
re-route from Marty or Kyle
helping the people before them.
What are you not striving for today?

*

I look inside myself: It's me
all the way down. Branchings
lead to a single destination.
Then through.
It was as if discovering this
made it true.