



Chris Waters

Upgrade

I

Just redone rest area. Completely.
Air soothes my skin, removes
the sense of grime. The information room's
carpeted, fireplaced, with high-class
austral hospitality. Guilty, I besmirch
the guest book, whisper questions and
two comments. If I called in one of the hall's
stately inset phone cabins, I'd be sure
to keep it down. Guilty again, I sully
the sparkling urinal neighboring the cloister
for disableds. Flower beds garland
the exterior, intaglios of marigolds in
smart-new wood chips where weeds would be fools
to dare. Catering dispensers have their own
brick outhouse. To the back and left,
the replacement zoos so new the animals
are still elsewhere. Are the hefty calla lilies
in a holding pattern somewhere for a while?
Or were they too gross for the new way of things?

Beyond signed pet walks, shaded picnic tables wander
toward the zoo-to-be. How, with gentility, is it told
this Eden's for tourists, not for residents?

The front parking lot, separated from the highway
by a patch of putting grass and russet flowers,
has drive-through phones, wheelchair-high.

II

In past times toilets, tourist desk, machines for
chips and Cokes were slapdashed together under
fans scarcely relieving salt and heat, even wafting,
from one place to another, the smells. The staff,
clothed to match its down-home tones and phrases,
made smiles blossom.

III

My two comments in the new information wing had been:
“How lovely all this is!” and “But I loved the old place too!”
How couldn't I have? Seven years ago, rushing North
after the midnight awakening, I stopped here, halfway.
Then, tables and phone booths abutted Route 13.
I and a black man eating an apple exchanged greetings.
The last moment in time, the last place on Earth that,
before dialing, I could believe she was still alive.

Chris Waters lives in Rhode Island.

Image: Public Rest Areas in Minnesota (website).