

# Cardboard

Alan Mills

Driving on this highway, I fight  
my vision's blur  
and rein my Jeep to keep it  
from the edge.  
There'll be an exit

soon and it bothers  
me by chanting omens  
of what's coming up:  
an old man, or even worse,  
a young one or a girl,  
a girl with a child  
and a cardboard sign,  
a girl and her dirt-stained child  
playing with a toy  
and a scrap  
of someone's flat  
tire. Fatigue

keeps the wheels drifting,  
keeps the dividers humming  
that familiar bumpity bump.  
It's too early and I haven't  
slept. Following traffic like a drone  
takes too much  
and I'm not prepared  
for this earthquaked highway:  
uneven and disproportioned  
masses  
of concrete fallen in jagged steps. I feel

shots of pain in my ass and regret  
getting fucked last night; each bump  
and pothole reminds me  
like it's happening again. I think

about a student's poem  
I read in class. Replaying itself  
again and again, it makes me see  
the arrows. The poem had little graphic  
arrows marching across the page  
like Freudian ants in a straight line,

attacking a word without saying why,  
and all I can remember  
are those tiny arrows, but there is

the exit to deal with still  
and the cardboard sign and the girl  
holding it. I see her standing  
on the corner, placid like road kill,  
waiting to be shoved  
off the street,  
but no one comes to do the job  
because she is someone  
else's  
problem.  
I don't think about her  
either. I just conjure up new visions  
of the cardboard sign and the miles  
before I see it and sleep.  
You know, "miles to go before..."

I sleep, but it's only a moment  
before I jerk awake and right  
my Jeep, jumping another three inch step,  
my ass hurling its pain  
up my angry spine.  
It's like that thing's still  
in there,  
like it was never removed  
and it hurts like one of those

arrows in the poem, pointing  
at "us" and not saying why.  
Why

do I have to get off at that damn exit anyway? Why  
can't I just keep driving my Jeep  
into the country where I could write  
a poem about my tires  
digging into soft mud and the cold,  
wet feeling of it sliding  
between my tread,  
Instead

of these fucking cardboard signs  
with their pleas and apologies?  
They piss me off and they make  
me afraid: I'm afraid the vet

is really crazy and the baby girl  
is gonna' starve. I'm afraid  
that I might be an idiot and a sucker  
and that maybe this time,  
this one single, isolated time, the sign  
might really be funny,  
or maybe not. Maybe it will point

at me like those arrows  
pointed at "us". It was a mistake  
to ask myself why: why do they point  
at "us"? It's because they're  
pointing at me. But why  
are they pointing at me?  
What is the poem trying to say  
about me and why must

that fucking arrow point  
at the exit right now? If I could just fall

asleep and leave the cardboard signs  
locked outside, but of course I can't,  
so I hate it instead  
and I hold it in. It's that thing  
bunched up in my stomach,  
bloating inside  
my bowels. I hate it,  
I hate it  
and I just want to shit it out,  
but I can't, I can't  
and I hate that too.