

## GENE MCCORMICK

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*1/2 empty. 1/2 full, 1/2 cream & sugar*  
fact it's not like me to be early.

God, I hate to wait for people.

2.

She isn't shilly-shallying, no shilly-shallying going on at all as she stands staring in the bathroom mirror, thighs flush against the sink ledge, moving small pastel-colored bottles and jars of creams, gels and liquids about, thoughtfully, preparing a composition as though setting up a chess board. She stares at the bottles, shakes her head almost imperceptively and shifts them about again and again, faster, and then still faster like a terrier with a toy mouse. Finally, squeezing some cream onto the tip of her index finger, she writes to him, to each and all, a message on the mirror.

*"It doesn't matter if I'm late."*

3.

He looks at the clock on the wall, then at the man sitting in the corner who looks back at him.

### Cold Coffee

1.

There is a man sitting over in the corner by himself watching as I count out thirteen dollars to myself, all I've got today. A ten, three singles. He's not a threatening presence, just there maybe verifying that all I have is thirteen dollars—as if that needs verification. Sure as hell don't need a money clip to hold thirteen dollars, four bills. Have a money clip back at the house, gold-tome-plated metal with the head of the racehorse John Henry. Don't use it because even there were a need for it, it is clamped too tight to easily slide bills in and out. It never really loosened up but probably would if it got used more. As things stand, it is like brand new, waiting for new money. Well, I have enough money to buy a cup of coffee; two cups and a decent tip. Said she'd meet me here at nine-thirty. It's just past that now and it's not like her to be late though I don't really know that for a fact and as a matter of

4.

She lays flat on her back on the cool bathroom tile floor, eyes open. It's uncomfortable.

5.

Okay, he decides she's had enough time to get here. He pats his pants pocket, feeling the dollars and heads across the street to the Super Walmart.

6.

Against all odds, she falls asleep on the bathroom floor, the tiles now warm to her body.

## Topsoil

A once steamy radiator sits flat to the wall,  
an inactive volcano beneath a dark window  
on a ground of peeling paint as  
a reminder of kindergarten days:  
comic strips, newspapers, radios;  
a time when cartoonist George Herriman's  
irascible mouse Ignatz threw bricks  
at androgynous Krazy Kat's head,  
connecting without causing  
concussions, brain damage or law suits.  
Offissa Pupp was the law, storyline ballast,  
wielding a nightstick, badge and squinty eye  
patrolling Coconino County daily and Sunday.

Look, says Joaquin ("Wah-keen, amigo, Wah-keen"),  
the damn brick is a sado-masochistic chunk of  
assent among consenting comic characters:  
rodent Ignatz needs empowerment and quirky  
Krazy Kat craves attention, getting off on pain  
while impotent Offissa Pupp holds their coats.  
It's like this, like Esther Williams, the steamy 1940s  
swim queen and movie star circa the radiator,  
pushing up from the bottom of a Hollywood pool  
in a white one-piece bathing suit,  
feet kicking, arms lunging, hands pulling, mouth shut  
only to break through the surface and snort topsoil  
instead of Moonlight Bay.

*That doesn't make any sense whatsoever, Wah-Keen.  
It does to me, amigo.*



*Steam Heat*



## Tuesday Is Trash Day

Because it has a short, strong spring, every time someone pushes through the screen door it slams twice: bam, then *bam* again, bouncing off the door jamb emphasizing a coming or going—one of the few things around the house that works well, if at all.

But her, her leaving...

Saying goodbye to her was like taking out the trash and the hell with the screen door banging twice.

*Doorway To The Garden Of Trash*

## Up In Smoke

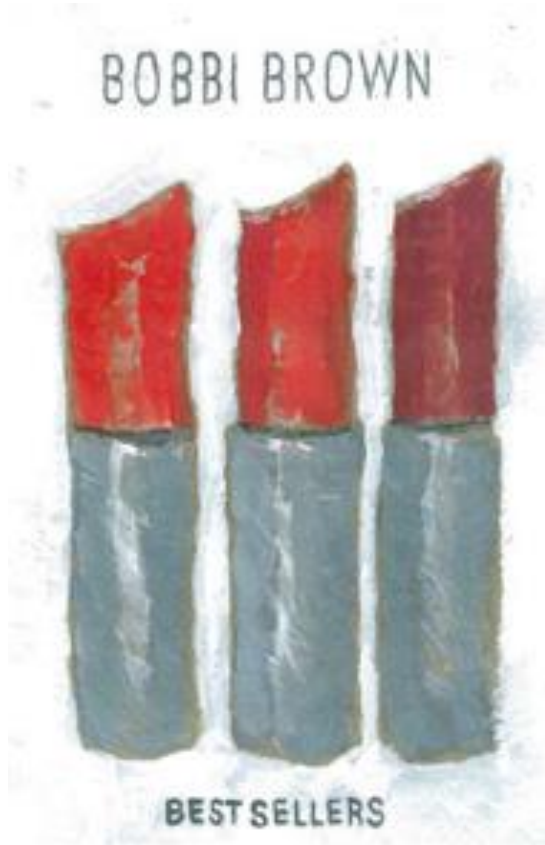
First thing he does after the service  
is deadhead home to the refrigerator,  
not bothering to put the car in the garage,  
squirting the remnants of a can of Reddi Whip  
down his throat until it runs  
out the corners of his mouth,  
up his nose and down his chin.  
Swiping the excess with the back of his hand,  
it smears across his smile like Barbasol.  
He licks it with his tongue in a circular motion,  
wiping his hand on polyester suit pants.

Lighting up a double corona cigar,  
Ed looks around: the house sounds hollow  
against his racing thoughts.  
She hated smoking which was why  
he didn't have the body cremated:  
she would have bitched like a banshee  
knowing she was going to end up as a  
pile of ashes even though it would have  
saved him a shitload of money, and the  
handful of visitors would have been spared  
a final look at the chemically bloated face.

Taps a half-inch ash from the corona,  
questioning why people still use the term  
coffin nails. Haven't nailed shut wood-slat  
type coffins for the better part of a century,  
most of 'em now being metal or plastic.  
Just use latches, he supposes, but at any rate  
she can't get at him now.



*Cigar*



### **Macy's Cosmetic Counter**

It's silliness, beauty counter sales clerks applying lipstick and other make-ups to consenting adult shoppers then seriously checking their handiwork from all angles, putting a mirror in front of the makeover patron who always smiles.

The department manager is unsmiling, shuffling paperwork, opening, shutting drawers, brushing makeup dust off the counter, retrieving soiled tissues dropped to the floor as sales associates joke with one another while applying colors to anyone willing.

Have a great day the manager says to customers leaving with purchases and red lips.

The manager is the only one whose face is not decorated like a geisha, and is the only one wearing a wedding ring. A passing shopper asks for the time and as she squints at her wristwatch two clerks pull out smart phones and flash the time.

*Facial Moderators*

## The Beauty Behind The Donut Shop Counter

An attractive thirty-ish émigré from Cambodia sits on a corner stool behind the shops counter watching her husband use stainless steel tongs to pluck donuts from wire shelving as Sunday morning after-church customers select sugar-coated preferences. Cell phone flat against her ear, she smiles large, revealing small, even teeth while speaking in her native language.

During the week she works the donut shop alone, showing off a new lipstick color, deep red, almost purple, and bright red platform shoes with yellow straps complementing toenails painted green. This is the woman she is when her husband is not around to serve up confections.



*Bait*

**Gene McCormick** refuses, absolutely, to capitalize the first word of a stanza unless it is the start of a new sentence or a proper name. Unite with him in this battle against pomp and pretension! If you agree with him, he lives in Wayne, Illinois. If you don't, he lives in Washington, D.C. Author of fourteen published books including seven poetry/short story collections, his narrative poems regularly appear in select small press journals.