

SCOTT RUESCHER

## **AT A TWO-STAR MOTEL IN MORRISTOWN, TENNESSEE**

At a two-star motel in Morristown, Tennessee,  
on the divided highway west to Knoxville and east  
to Johnson City, wondering how I'd ever find  
a living symbol of the complex social changes  
wrought by the arrival of telecommunications,  
hydroelectricity, and the interstate highway system  
in the decades following the establishment  
of FDR's Tennessee Valley Authority  
and the postwar boom in the national economy  
for an Appalachian poem I was thinking of writing,  
I stood at the faux-porcelain sink of the Formica vanity  
on the northern end of my sterilized room  
imagining that I saw, in the wall-to-wall mirror,  
instead of myself in jeans, glasses, hat, and blue sweater  
against the hazy skyline of the Smoky Mountains  
like a jagged wall under a sky of boiling wool  
through the room's picture window behind me to  
the south, a character in a costume consisting  
of horn-rimmed glasses and a beige corduroy sports jacket  
with dark brown elbow patches, as if I were going  
to go undercover as a U.S. federal census taker  
in the mountains north of there, across the Kentucky border,  
and somehow gain entry to the home of a woman  
who could tell me about her life, starting in the sixties  
when she was just a nature child and ending in the eighties  
when the culture of her people had been completely defiled—

how she'd been taken from the comfort of a log cabin  
at the dead end of a lane in a clearing backed by a glade  
of tulip poplar, ash, maple, pine, and shagbark hickory,  
in a picturesque holler that softened her family's poverty,  
along a stream that flowed down to meet a wide river,  
to the soulless filth and degradation of a beat-up trailer  
at the entrance to a mine for mountaintop removal  
protected by a radar dish that resembled the tipped-up flying saucer  
of invading Martians, foreigners, or city-slicker liberals  
on a stretch of road populated by junk yards and box stores;  
how she'd gone from rocking to the heartbeat  
of the baby on her breast in a homemade rocker  
of willow cane with the pebbled family Bible open  
to the Sermon on the Mount, the parable of the fishes,  
or the letter the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians  
on the knotty pine table by the potbelly stove  
to drinking a cup of Nescafé at the chipped Formica table  
of her prefab kitchenette, chain-smoking an entire pack  
of unfiltered cigarettes in her house dress and slippers,  
and reading, in view of the black E-Z-Boy recliners  
and the melodramatic episode of *General Hospital*  
on the television set, about the most crucial and moving  
issue of the day, the death and resurrection of Elvis  
Presley, in the latest edition of a tabloid gazette.