

THE NEXT TIME

poem by Byron Hoot



Image: “Truck Stop Shell” by Greg Clary. “The Next Time” was written by Byron Hoot for *Rattle*’s Ekphrastic Challenge, April 2022, and selected as the Artist’s Choice.

They gather when they hear LaRue’s horn on 80 sound. Rose smiles, starts thinking of what she’s going to say when he says, “What’s new with you?” The ghosts come one by one, two by two. They know that horn, they know the whine of that truck, they know what’s left behind. Enter the Iron Kettle Restaurant at The American Plaza truck stop. They take their places at the counter; Cokes and coffee and cigarettes and the smell of the grill and soft conversation and sudden laughter and softer sighs mix with all of them looking for LaRue’s truck to pull in. They talk as if they’re living, as though yesterday was yesterday and tomorrow is tomorrow. Jim says, “It was real.” Steve replies, “It was a dream.” An old argument to which Reverend Smith decides— “It was both.” They all look outside: the empty pumps, the wind-damaged signs, the cracked concrete, no trucks, no cars, no people. Rose says, “He’s not coming.” like saying the Rosary. First light is breaking, they get up slowly and leave, mumbling, “Maybe next time.”