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21L.007 World Literatures: Travel Writing
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“Lifting salad plates: the work of an ‘imagineer’”;

Mary Fuller

"At Shelbyville I stopped for supper and the night" (*Blue Highways* 1:5, pp. 10-11).

Comment [MF1]: This line identifies the passage by quoting from the first line, then giving chapter and section number, followed by page numbers.

Early in his journey, Heat-Moon stops to eat dinner at the Claudia Sanders dinner house near Shelbyville, Kentucky. While he waits for a table, a married couple invites him to join them, and they get into conversation.

Comment [MF2]: This very short paragraph summarizes what happens in this section.

The first thing the husband asks Heat-Moon is "the question," one he is already, at this early stage of the journey, "waiting for": "what do you do?" Heat-Moon's response suggests that he doesn't yet have a good answer, either one that will satisfy the person asking or one that actually satisfies him. We don't find out what Heat-Moon actually said in response, but he describes that response in terms that suggest both that it's inadequate and that he is painfully self-conscious of its inadequacy (a lie, a joke, "too long"). Why is this question so hard to answer, given that it is exactly the kind of general, not-too-intimate inquiry that people throughout the book find perfectly appropriate to ask as the first stage of conversation with a stranger?

It's worth noticing that Cal, the husband, phrases his question not as "what are you doing?" -- but more generally, as "what do you do?" He is asking what Heat-Moon *does* (generally, characteristically, presumably as his regular work), not about Heat-Moon's journey, or what has brought him to Shelbyville, Kentucky. (Compare the waitress's question a few pages later: "So whata you doin' in the mountains?"; p.27). This broader version of the question, with all it implies about identity and nature, seems to precipitate a minor crisis in which Heat-Moon is in fact unable to say what it is that he does.

Even while Heat-Moon flounders for an answer, it becomes evident that Cal is not centrally interested in what he will say (or be unable to say) in reply; he doesn't really seem to care what, exactly, Heat-Moon does do for work. Instead, he responds by questioning the way Heat-Moon uses words to *talk* about what he does. What is work? What is a job? What do these words really mean? The distinctions he draws between "job" and "work," things you have to force yourself to care about and things you care about for their own sake, suggests that instead of thinking too much about this kind of question, Heat-Moon has not thought about it enough, or has not yet thought about it in the right way.

At this point, the wife interjects to say that "Cal works at General Electric in Louisville. He's a metallurgical engineer." This comment reminds us of how we might *expect* a conversation like this to go:

what do you do?
I'm an English instructor, but I'm between jobs right now. How about you?
I'm a metallurgical engineer at GE.
How do you like that?... etc.

Cal resists this nudge aimed at putting the conversation back onto a more usual track, as a verbal exchange of business cards and mutual evaluation of status; he corrects his wife as well on the idea that what he does for GE is "work". His cynicism about corporate language tells us something about why he might be so interested in the real and precise meanings of words.

"Imagineering" suggest that Cal's job might involve imagining something new and getting it made, but in fact (he claims) "it's a matter of making it *look like* we're getting something made." The culture of his workplace substitutes language about interesting work for the reality of interesting work. More than that, Cal feels his actual work is "pretending"; he is expected to be actively complicit in maintaining the collective, corporate illusion that something new is getting made. We can only get at his idea of what *real* work might look like by reversing

Comment [MF3]: Here, you see the format for quotations longer than, roughly, 10 words: single-spaced, and indented ½ at right and left margins.

the negatives with which he describes his job: real work would matter, would have a future, would have continuity, and would bring together what he did with what he knew and what he wanted to know (11).

At the beginning of the scene, Cal in his "suit of sharp creases" and the wife in "her jacket lying as straight as an accountant's left margin" appear to be two of a kind: proper, crisp, linear folks. The wife voices an impression about Heat-Moon that reflects a collective evaluation: "you can't be as dismal as you look... Just hunger, *we* decided" (italics added). Heat-Moon's response to her ("hunger's the word") is actually the last thing we hear him say directly. After his fumbled answer to Cal's question -- an answer that is not transcribed -- the conversation develops into a dialogue between Cal and his wife, and indeed into a kind of disagreement. The wife's first interjection is one of several attempts she makes to persuade him towards a more optimistic or normative account of his work. "It isn't that bad... you've learned lots." Indeed, in her insistence that he express a satisfaction he doesn't feel, we can see a parallel to GE's expectation that he believe (or pretend to believe) in "Imagineering."

We might suppose that Cal's wife doesn't want Cal to recognize and give voice to his dissatisfaction because she views that dissatisfaction as a potential threat; if he becomes able to recognize how unhappy he is, perhaps he will do something about it. Evidently, the wife has a stake in what Cal "does," however happy or unhappy it makes him -- she is proud of his title and his status in a large American corporation, and we can suppose that she feels these confer an identity on her as well as on him. (In fact, she is only ever named as "the wife.") So far, Cal is not unhappy, angry, or desperate enough to match his actions to his words, but it is not clear what (if anything) he gains from the situation he insists on describing. Both his restlessness and his frustrated creativity may be expressed by the tinkering he does throughout the scene to make

"forks, a spoon, and a knife into a lever system" with which he lifts his and his wife's salad

plates.

This scene invokes a number of larger topics, and here are some of them: engineering; work in general, as a source of pleasure, identity, or unhappiness; prosperity and its costs; marriage; restaurants and cafés; the textual presence or absence of the narrator; how to evaluate a person's failure or success in life; and there may be others. I would pick up at least one of those threads to talk about where this scene fits in the larger context of the book. One way would be by setting it next to another scene or section which makes for an illuminating contrast. Here, the connection I made immediately was between this section and section 11 in the same chapter (pp. 19-22), where the Hammonds are another married couple talking to Heat-Moon about their work. Another might be the scene with the mestizo hitchhiker, Porfirio Sanchez (4:7, pp. 145-48).

Comment [MF4]: The big thing I have left out so far is the setting: "Claudia Sanders dinner house". We don't hear anything at all about the actual meal they eat. But there are connections to make between conversation and setting. The invocation of Colonel Harlan Sanders and the "great buckets-in-the-sky" invite us to contrast this small, old, out of the way roadhouse serving regional food with the global franchising operation that Colonel Sanders' fried chicken has become. (The only figurative language in this section occurs when Heat-Moon is alluding to KFC -- which he never names directly, but I think we all know what "extra crispy" means here). More alienated work? This conversation with a stranger seems like something that could happen in a little local restaurant, but would never happen in KFC or Mickey D.'s. And yet apparently Cal and his wife need the presence of a third person, even a stranger who doesn't say anything, in order really to talk to each other.