

In the wee small hours

by Gita M. Smith

An airport sign reads “Watch Your Valuables,” but someone crossed out the “abl” and now it faces the Homeland Security checkpoint, warning, “Watch Your Valu es.”

I am here at 2 a.m, on an immovable orange plastic seat of such ungiving hardness that it will never break down in a landfill. Ever.

A janitor pushes a floor-polisher down a walkway the same anonymous color as his uniform. I am so weary, here in this Pacific Rim puddle-jumper terminal, that my eyes pull sleights-of-hand on my brain, and I see embers in the glossy linoleum.

The air at this hour is devoid of jet exhaust, but in a few hours it will reek, proving what a cop once told me: “There's no such thing as a hermetically sealed public building. Fallout shelters are bullshit.”

If you're in an airport in the predawn hours, you are by definition a failure. You failed to make your flight; nobody cared enough to pick you up; the airline gave you motel money but you are hoarding it; you're spending the night in a space the visual and spiritual equivalent of tinny instrumental Muzak.

I walk outside the terminal to smoke, and the Seattle chill tries to get inside my coat. The city twinkles distantly. Floor polisher guy comes outside, too, and begs a light. He smells like lemons and Pine-Sol and something else, both animal and mineral. He says, “I got fresh coffee in the locker room, if you like.”

Indoors, I walk two steps behind him, like a good Saudi Arabian wife, grateful for the offer, for real, brewed coffee, not instant, and for the small, surprising comfort of a human voice.

