Sleight

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they come here
he said
to learn how to make
goddamn washing machines

georgians
mexicans
even arabs
so their backward slum countries
feeding off our government loans
can finally clean
the shit off their clothes

we get ‘em every month
he said

guests on a year or two position
ambassador of their country’s dirty clothes

we teach ‘em how to do it right
he said

and that amber breath
choking him on its way to his mouth
spilled out raw and sewaged
stumbling over
goddamn sheiks
pinkos
greasers
to mix with an ozone of
greased fingerprinted mugs
stains on the bar
sapping on hands
lulled gurgles of beer in throats
at midnight
a jap
he said

a jap in newton, iowa

visiting friends
   friendly midwestern friends

hell, we got a jap here, too
he said
learning how to make
goddamn washing machines

   a real sweetheart
       got the longest goddamn hair
           i ever did see

hey, let me call her
he said
i'll tell her come on over
   and you two can talk
       maybe speak some japanese

   stuttering over words
       lips unable to fully meet

it'll be fun
he said
two japs in newton, iowa

and he called
   while i sat and tapped my foot
       in amber puddles on the floor
   wondering where my
       friendly midwestern friends
           had gone

we'll just see if she comes
he said
another goddamn person
   trying to learn how to make
       washing machines
yelling over waylon jennings
  randy travis
  tracing each breath that bar took
i didn't know how to tell him
  if that other jap ever arrived
that my grandparents
  never taught me how to speak
  their second language