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CHANGE FOR A DOLLAR

The man on the neon horse smokes
a cigar, enduring a lonely vigil above the rusted
station. *El Cheapo! El Cheapo!* The cowboy's words
flash from among his exhales, epiphanies
caught like exclamations in speech-
bubbles, like the cartoons I used to read passing
the time in the car's cramped backseat while Mom struggled
with the roadmaps and Dad ashed his pipe out
the window with tiny impatient thuds. These ceaseless
lanes of asphalt and billboards are as lonely now
as they were back in those long-ago
days of summer road-trips and family vacations.
Parked beside the old payphones with the new stickers
that say *35 cents required*, I'm searching
for change in my pockets and along the dashboard.
Across the lot, a faded red pickup and its
muttering engine beside the pump seem like
the only other things that stir. Wispy brown fields
drenched in winter's death surround the gas station
and its clientele. Inside, I have a suspicion that
the attendant is always scratching away at lottery tickets when
no one else is looking. The owner
of the pickup pays for the gas and drives toward
the towns I passed this morning. *Rayado, San Teresa,*
Ojos Caliente, Solo. Someone scratched out the mile
markers beside the list of names on the road sign long ago,
and I have no idea how many miles he'll go
before Santa Fe hits him like it hit me.
My car is a mess, and I give up the quest in my
pockets and venture inside. The attendant
is still scratching, muttering to himself that
the state lottery jackpot hasn't had
a winner in weeks. As I stand there, glancing
from his greasy black hair to the cowboy outside
on the sign and back to my own outstretched hands,
I hear thunder grumbling in the distance and
I let out a sigh. I'm just looking for change
for a dollar so I can make a phone call.

