

## Tough Luck

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*Russell E. Shipp*

Seated in my direction  
at a mall foodmart table,  
was a nondescript whitehaired  
gentleman gazing in reverie  
while sipping a slow soup,  
oblivious to my helpless stare.  
Here, generally, indifference  
gratefully rules—strangers  
mill with strangers  
in easy restful numbness . . .  
as with me, had not chance  
dumped me where I was.

After sipping, his lips seemed  
to set in a serious thought.  
Now and then—and here's my problem--  
he'd squint and wipe his eyes  
with the back of his hand.  
Old eyes tend to water sometimes,  
I thought. With that I exerted  
my attention elsewhere  
for a small charming something.  
I watched for several moments  
several pockets of possible humanity--  
a shallow ruse, which didn't fool  
my compelling morose curiosity,  
so my eyes riveted back on the old gent.

And, good Lord, nobody else  
seemed to be taking it in,  
and had they been sitting  
where I was, for sure they'd  
not likely be such a sap.  
Maybe his wife was dying  
or he just sent his son to jail  
or who knows what, but  
it was none of my damn business.

I should have gotten up  
and walked away  
instead of invading his privacy,  
of walking by him and stopping.  
I didn't say anything, at least--  
thank God for that--  
but I looked at him,  
and he could see how his grief  
had affected me.

And, as though I opened  
some horrible door he had  
been trying to keep closed,  
he began to sob quietly.  
Nor did I have the courage--  
and maybe, who knows, good sense--  
to finish what I started  
but only patted him on the shoulder  
and walked on straight into  
this gnawing memory.

