

From *Slant Six* by Erin Belieu, 2014. The kind of book you can purchase with the confidence that you'll enjoy and ponder most of the poems it contains.

## SOMEONE ASKS, WHAT MAKES THIS POEM AMERICAN?

And I answer by driving around, which seems to me the most American of activities, up there with waving the incendiary dandelion of sparklers or eating potato salad with green specks of relish, the German kind, salad of immigrants, of all the strange, pickled things we carry over from other places, like we did on Easter mornings in Nebraska, stuffing our Sunday shoes full of straw so that either Jesus or the Easter Bunny could leave us small, bullet-shaped candies in honor of what, I was never quite sure. Where do such customs come from? Everywhere!

Americanness is everywhere, wedged into everything, is best when driving around a frowsy Gulf Coast city with its terrific mini-marts like Bill's, the very best of all marts! UN of toasted boat rats and boys from the projects revving their hoopties; of biscuit-shaped ladies who penny their scratch cards and hold up the line; where Panama (from Panama) commands the counter, and Mr. Bud, the camel-faced man, offers every kid a sweetie, producing a jar of petrified lollies from a shelf also

displaying an array of swirly glassed pipes  
and Arthurian bongos, where Raul the Enforcer  
idles at the back, packing since the incident  
in the parking lot last summer.

Of course, people  
here have their discontents: the artists save  
what tips they don't snort and always mean  
to leave for New York or Seattle, though I tell  
them both drizzle like November half the time.  
So I say, No! That's un-American. We need  
our artists everywhere, not scrunched up  
in one or two rarefied spots,  
which makes their parties anxious. And Miłosz  
says artists come from everywhere, from everyplace,  
the capital *and* the provinces, to keep  
the body healthy or else end up like 17th-  
century Hapsburgs or German shepherds  
listing with hip dysplasia. So I'm circling  
the swampy taint of this Southern city, choosing  
art, choosing to be American, actively pursuing  
that fabled happiness when the alternatives  
present themselves, which is my obligation,  
both legislator and witness to Bill's  
Mini-Mart and Mike's Chinese Grocery,  
and the hungry citizens queuing up  
in front of Jenny's Lunchbox, waiting  
on line for a pile of cheese grits to start  
this day, placing them firmly for the moment

in the happiness column. Because what's more  
American than a full stomach on a sunny morning?  
What more than this fat-assed acceleration,  
driving with the windows cranked down?