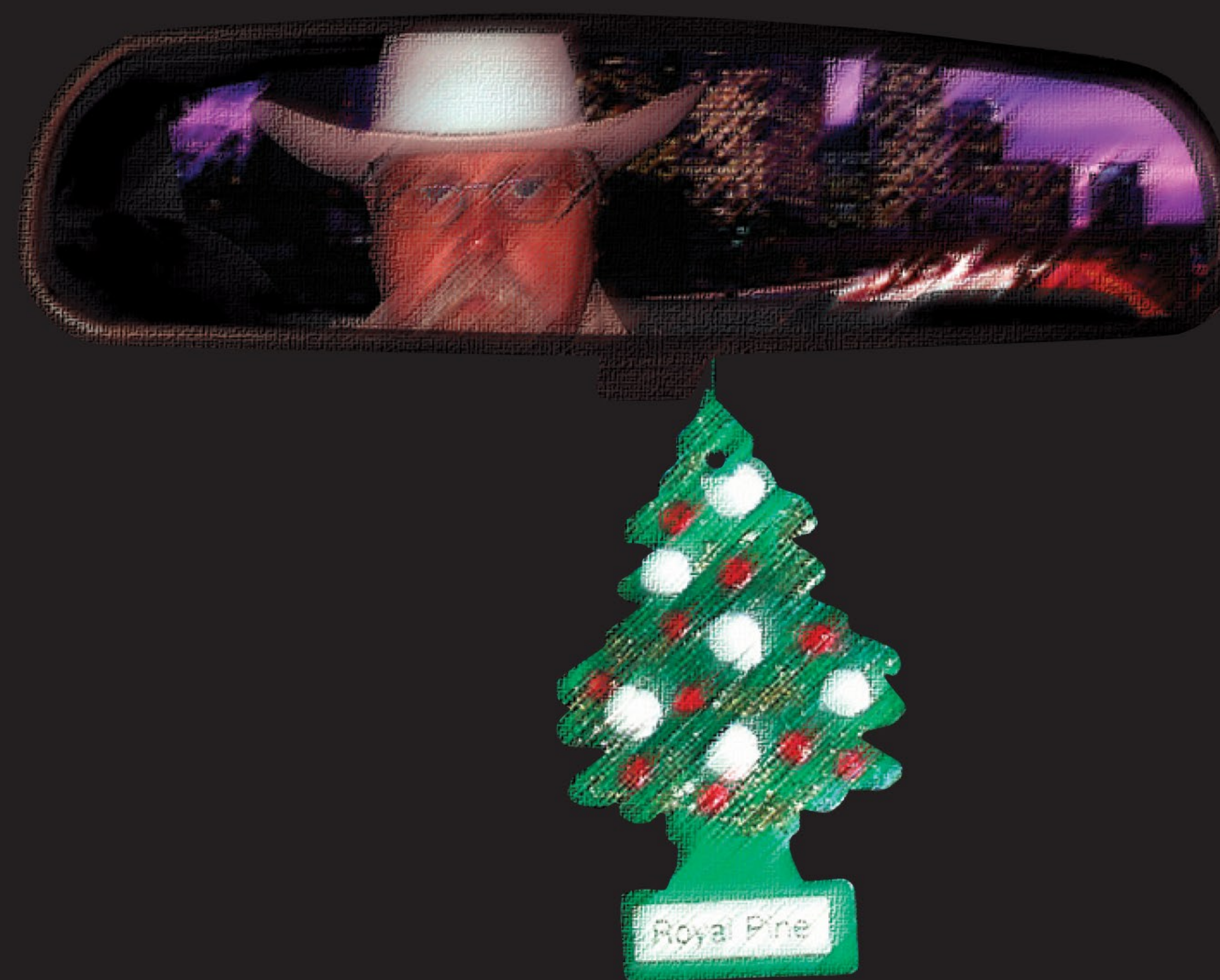


# The Zone of Hospitality

Pieces on Earth from Year 2000

**At the Safeway** down the street, it's dawning five  
and Scott, the produce manager, and I've  
been talking Red Wings, Sharks and other things hockey  
when he mentions to me that it's getting rocky  
between Corp and Labor, and he gives me some history  
about how he gets graded and that it's a mystery,  
as in Mystery Shoppers working the aisles,  
looking for eye contact, voice contact and smiles,  
testing whether clerks will walk them to the freezer  
or just tell 'em in passing that "It's over on three, sir."  
So Scott's not sure how long he'll remain  
in his apple and carrot and romaine domain—  
in this Retail Kingdom of Kraft and Nabisco,  
and speculates a future with Intel or Cisco.  
But I'm leaving now with my beer and my ice,  
knowing at least why they're all so damned nice.

**At the Biltmore**, strolling hand in hand one night,  
the conversation drifted in and out of sight  
of the end of the story at the end of the walk,  
as if we'd decided to just run out the clock.  
And we found ourselves in the Biltmore's bowels,  
with lawn chair stacks, hampers full of towels—  
where boys with breakfasts on bikes with bells  
travel out to the guestrooms, with wonderful smells  
trailing behind their effortless peddling.  
The talk was turning unsure and unsettling,  
when we stopped at a memo posted on a door.  
Headlined "The Zone of Hospitality," at its core  
it detailed the distance, 15 feet the dimension,  
where employees give guests all their attention.  
So the two of us stood by the door all alone  
and decided to test the Truth of the Zone  
when a two-wheeling chap rang rang rang into view,  
hit the Zone, hit the brake, and then we knew,  
without knowing exactly what he would say,  
that some hospitality was coming our way.  
"Can I help get you back to where you were?"  
"I'm afraid not," I said, without looking at her.



**At the airport**, in the cab, I am finally alone  
until I realize that I'm in The Taxi Zone—  
the target of my cabby's ebullient streams  
of biography and his American Dreams.  
He is Somali, a Muslim, of 17 kids the first son.  
"How about that election? Who do you think won?"  
"You know who you remind me of?" and I thought:  
here comes that Kenny Rogers rot.  
"My father!" And he laughed and looked away.  
"How so?" I asked. "Very distinguished. And very gray!"  
Dad is a general back home, I am told. A very big man.  
A very, very strong and honest leader of his clan.  
Not like Adid, he said—but more like a judge,  
with a private army, 'cause Somalis hold a grudge.  
A Royal Pine freshener swung from his mirror,  
a little green tree that he had made dearer,  
decorating it with glitter, nail polish, bits of cotton,  
to maybe tell the rider he had not forgotten  
to give his yellow cab a Christmas skew,  
and kill not one holiday bird, but two—  
by freshening the spirit of each weary fare  
and softening the edge of the taxi-dermic air.

**So what's the big message?** Is it Peace on Earth?  
Or a ho ho ho from some black-belted girth?  
Maybe it's just pieces, not Peace, in the end—  
pieces on earth that we receive or we send.  
Not a sudden, seasonal, Platonic fusion  
for some greater common good—that's illusion.  
I'll cast my ballot for a Freudian fission—  
small victories, fractured acts, heroic division.  
Be it skin-tight, non-stop, wildly-tattooed,  
confusing, corrupting, bright, ballyhooded.  
Be it a corner of warm and soft-lit nostalgia,  
or a pellet or so to fight World Neuralgia.  
In the end, it's the talk, the smile, the short story,  
at the Safeway, the Biltmore, in the back of a lorry.  
In the end, the motive of the moment doesn't matter.  
Self interest, frightened or enlightened, is a tatter.  
In the end, it's only the moment that is known—  
So seize that moment now, while you're still in the Zone.

—Ernie Brower