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In the Heart of the Heart of the Heart of

A town is a kind of grief. Not the pain of childhood, but the imprint of that helplessness. How it can sneak up again if you ever let yourself stop moving.

Anna, the small North Texas town where I grew up, a blip on the map an hour south of the Choctaw Nation, was built on the commerce of truckers passing through, their spots at the torn vinyl booths of Driver's Diner filled hours later with others the same as them; everyone going and seemingly never going anywhere.

The sepia-tinted road that leads, möbius, past truck stops, vacated ditches, subdivisions made of the same gray brick, the same cherry-stained plywood; the town's one stoplight near the train tracks and the convenience store costing teeth on teeth for a pack of Twizzlers, the nearest market another thirty miles; a rain-rusted, drive-in malt shop owned by the family of a friend of a friend whose neighbor hung his wife in one of the crumbling houses out back; the

equipment trailer repurposed as a catfish restaurant repurposed—I swear—as City Hall; the single ancient elementary, middle, and high school of the city limits, jeweled with portable trailers where the football coach fumbles math equations; field pocked with the impact of boys' bones, where semi-yearly the circus stumbles through, elephants kicking up dried maggots from the barren soil and bringing police out to observe the decades-long burn ban; town named for the pale daughter of a rail-conductor, like the next town over, and the next town over.

I left my homeland quickly, my footprints marking the front yard with ashes on the way out, but Anna still lurks in my blood, breathing heavy as cornstalks. A story I can never outrun, its shining eyes follow me across the sinew of highways.

Being gone was never a choice for me. It was a lust for disappearing, a flame tangled into my DNA. My bedroom window had a view of the highway, a thin string stretched above a valley of gray shingles replicated across angled roofs. I'd sit awake and count the cars whose headlights flashed across the sky, the roar of engines like faint lullabies in the distance. As soon as one appeared, it was gone, and the bright call of another replaced it. My thoughts followed them to wherever they came from, wherever they would go. I longed to join the spectral fleet of anonymous travelers who left without realizing that where they had been was Somewhere. That someone briefly saw their fractals of light and wished to know them, wished to be them.

Looking back, I've spent my life dreaming desperately of escape, without knowing why, or to where, or from what. These are the things I do know: I worked at a call center one summer in college, and the only thing I remember about those two months of dial-tones and sanitized headsets is the map above the gray cubicle where I sat. The year I was twenty, I fantasized extensively about faking my own death, Sherlock Holmes style. Even when I walk down the street with a friend, it is always a few strides ahead, as if my body is itching to break away.

I know now what it's like to follow isolated, winding roads through forsaken-looking small towns with names like Post and Tucumcari, a chorus of hollow historic buildings left in their wake, echoes of a time when the road sang out and the towns vibrated with life. I want to tell you how it felt, driving through the desert at ninety miles an hour, flat endless nothing to all sides; head blazing with the ghost of Jack Kerouac, utterly free and accountable to no one except the yellow divider leading onward, the pink sand from the mesas that sweeps over the asphalt. The sense that if there is a God, it most certainly resides in West Texas, in the winking light of the orange sun flickering through the trees as it saunters out of view like a celestial headlight, in the iron orchards of abandoned cars and rusted drive-in signs.

When I travel, it is rare that I do not travel alone, and if I am with someone else, even someone I love, it is rare that I don't wish I were alone at some point during the journey. It's certainly more convenient to have a traveling companion: there is the strict comfort of company, and someone to take pictures of you doing silly, touristy things at opportune moments. Waiters don't look at you strangely when you have another person at the table to share dinner with. But when you're experiencing the world alongside someone, you bounce your perceptions off of one another, and the person you're with becomes as much part of the place as the place itself. Traveling alone, observing this planet fresh and foreign, is one of the only ways we might connect with who we are, what we think, and how we move through the world when we are contextless.

But no one truly moves through the world without context, or without a daisy-chain of ghosts trailing behind them. First, the context through which you have the option to travel depends on, among other factors, the body you are born into, and the cultural system that defines how you are freed or limited to move through the world inside of it. When I visited my family between trips or moves, my mother would tell friends and neighbors where I'd gone or was planning to go, and the women in the room would inevitably reply with some cocktail of fear, pity, and amazement, "Oh, wow, I could *never* do that alone."

I'd tell them that yeah, they could, if they had a bit of money and a car and childcare, they could take

a weekend trip for themselves. There were websites where you could find places nearby, things to see along the way, plan it all out. I recognize the privileges of childcare and money to spend are not accessible to everyone, but for these women, they were. Still, they insisted: they couldn't go alone, they wouldn't know how, they wouldn't enjoy the silence, it wasn't safe, they just hadn't ever done that sort of thing, *women* just didn't do that sort of thing.

Reflecting on these conversations, I'm reminded of a passage from Sylvia Plath's diary:

"My consuming desire to mingle with road crews, sailors and soldiers, barroom regulars—to be a part of a scene, anonymous, listening, recording—all this is spoiled by the fact that I am a girl, a female always supposedly in danger of assault and battery."

Though I was not able to escape so many of the burdens and scrutinies imposed during girlhood, somehow, I didn't internalize its limits of mobility. Or perhaps I was so motivated to leave Anna and live some kind of elsewhere-life that I blindly burned past them.

Yes, there was the drunk man who harassed me in a coffee shop and followed me outside to the parking lot on a transient night in Pocatello, Idaho; and there was the tow truck driver who found me gasless in the middle of the night, twenty miles outside of Roswell, New Mexico, who could have easily knifed me out of existence in his truck cab; yes, girls and women disappeared, in body or in mind, after what was done to them on the road. But when I began traveling alone, I was either too young to understand what there was

to protect myself from, or to understand myself as something worth protecting. In a sense, I was looking to disappear, anyway—to lose myself in order to become myself, to escape the body and life I was told must be mine, but could not be fully mine.

In Ancient Greece, *hysterical* was the word for how the uterus was believed to wander around the body, aimless. All women's rage, sorrow, fear, mania, was said to be caused by this wandering. If only she'd stay put. If only there were a way to chain her to her body.

I have seen snow piled on cows' backs like lumps of sugar. I have seen sulfur smoke rise up from pastures under a ghostly lavender sky. I have seen the ground beneath me cracking like unloved taxidermy. I have seen gutted neon motels, and a snakebird perched on the nose of an alligator underneath a crumbling bayou bridge. I have seen phosphorescents skitter across the Puget Sound, and slept in a driftwood fort by the water's edge. I have touched castle walls in Ireland and felt the echo of pasts reaching back. I have traced shorelines from memory, from the front bow of a ferry, as if in a childhood dream. I have seen delirious sunsets over four different coastlines and understood them to be eternal, have watched the landscape bleed from desert to mountain to bright green, mossy grave. I have reached through a broken window in Memphis and pulled out a lipstick-kissed card with a disconnected number for the Greyhound. I have foraged for a skeleton key by the Barren River in Kentucky and

thrown it into Wisconsin's Fox River three years later, fireworks blurring the sky to gunpowder. Summer rain filling the Hudson Valley as I paced half-naked in the hallways of a haunted wooden mansion. The bleached bone of the Mojave at 110 miles an hour, January cracking my windshield. We move through the world as the imprint of everyone and everywhere that has entered us. We put down grief for the last time, only years later to pull it from between our teeth.

At twenty-five, staring out from a rooftop pool at a sherbet-orange sunset spreading across Tampa Bay, I realize every mile behind me, every box of clothes I've hoisted across the country, every city I ran from or burned through or tried to love until it broke me, has been an attempt to honor and destroy the ten-year-old child I was—following the headlights across the sky, dreaming of a someday when I was anywhere, anyone, else. The lie and the beautiful ecstasy of the gone that whispers: *Orphan yourself.*

I'm trying to say, I think, that the women I know write with fire under their skin because there is a fire under their skin. Maybe their words were ignited by some man—father or lover—who made them feel the lightness of grief, or tried to drown them in remembering. Or maybe women are born of fire and spend their lives clawing their way back from burning, creating new stories and lives to tend the shame of singeing everything they touch. How telling it is that we describe creation as a kind of obliteration. Here, I am