

# Roads and Rivers and Skies

March 2021

Planes fill me with sadness. I always take the window seat and stare out the multilayered portal to the outside world. The blue lights blink, the strobes blind, the flaps make whirring noises as they extend and retract, extend and retract. Below are striped lines and grooved concrete, and we are off, pressed into our seats, the stripes blurring, the metal squealing; six thousand, five thousand, four thousand, and I am momentarily weightless, my heart pounding away at the receding scenery. The lights are but pinpricks; motionless fireworks of streetlamps and whizzing cars, flashing and fading into the early morning cloud cover.

This spring they closed a runway at Syracuse-Hancock, and the planes rerouted over our neighborhood. They fly so low that I could see their metallic glint in the midday heat and feel their massive rumble deep in my abdomen. In the twisted sense of perspective that one gets while looking at the clouds, I felt as if I could reach up and brush my fingertips against the serpentine underbelly. Against the peach-and-orange sunset, the eight o'clock UPS freighter flashed this way and that, now a silhouette, now a comet, slick paint and shivering body raging against the dying light.

So the thought came to me. I somehow always ended up sitting, captive with my legs dangling out the front of the shopping cart, watching someone bludgeon a fish to death. Chinatowns were everywhere, and oriental supermarkets boomed and busted along the commercial avenue of my hometown. I saw my first fish kill in a mom-and-pop shop. A round man in a stained white jacket slammed the side of a meat cleaver into a tilapia's contorting body until it finally lay still in a pile of its own scales. Of the twenty-some days of my life that I've spent in China, I only remember vividly the afternoon we went to the wet market to get a catfish. The galoshed and rubber-panted lady twirled the laden net in front of a group of shoppers before bringing it down hard on the concrete floor, and the men had chuckled. She asked if they wanted to see that again. We brought the body home in a black plastic bag, and halfway there, the catfish had convulsed in its dying throes and ripped the bag with its sharp fins. It splatted on the sidewalk, and all I remember was the look on its bloody face, the confused gulping that a fish makes when it realizes that it lost its gills on a small chopping block in a slippery corner of a crowded market.

The next time we ended up in Chinatown, I sneak away from the cart and start reading the chemical preservatives on a can of instant coffee. Sodium metabisulfate. Caramel coloring. Glycerol ester of rosin. Still the sound comes, wet bone on metal bat.

When I was on the swim team in high school, I sat alone in the front of the bus that took us to a local college pool. My knees dig into my chest and I read labels and do competitive math problems. Ferric orthophosphate. Oligofructose. A plane traces the inscribed circle. Find that path. The boys in the back smell like damp chlorine and fading deodorant and whiteness. The thin bus walls fascinate me, and I wonder with morbid glee what would happen if I loosened the large rusty screws drilled into the polycrystalline sheets. Would the bus come apart, tearing into two, sparks cascading and diesel burning? I turn around and I see myself, three years younger, back there with the boys, comparing abdominal muscles, rapping along to Reese's Puffs. I turn back and all I see is the ghost of a gush of vomit that I witnessed walking down the aisle in first grade and the sheepish look on the kid's face as he splattered the gray-white marbled floor with rivers and stars of green liquid.

Tammy the driver had sprinkled Pine-Sol on the offending pile. The peppery, earthy smell reaches deep inside me, and for once, my memories have no flagmen, no fat dates and no cinched ends. The rapping of the heat register, the thick sap and branches dripping with snowmelt. I lean on the railing outside my bedroom, diving into the shrapnel of glowing glass. I am airborne, as if the tree were the rushing ground below and I am a giant jet, waving goodbye to a village of light. The same trick of depth invades me, and while I am orders of magnitude closer, my greedy fingers grasp only the 2am peppermint air.

It is this melancholy beauty that I find in the smoky sharpness of moon-flooded nights. My neighbor learned this long before me, and he sits in a lawn chair out in the woods, the snowlight glinting, listening for the sonorous roar of the Amtrak. He points out its sad whistle as my loud boots approach him, and we make small talk. I stand, arms akimbo, and he sits, a dull, moonlit silhouette. Soon, we stop talking. The train rushes on and I hear its click-click-click over uneven rail welds. The monster making the sounds is invisible, tucked some ten or twenty miles to the north from where my moonlit neighbor sits. All I can see are the pristine, sparkling soccer fields, curbed by a salt-eroded private road and a winding berm of soil, topped by evergreens. I learned tai-chi and swordsmanship from my mom up on these berms; I launched fireworks and played soccer with my dad down in those fields. They were patches of wild raspberry some odd years ago, before the school decided to bulldoze the whole lot. We stole junk logs from the school then, rolling them home on a squeaky little wagon and turning them into patio seats. Last summer the three of us sat down around a campfire and I learned that both of my parents had shot real guns with real bullets back in China. The clicking roar and these endless fields blend into one, and I leave him in his chair, gazing up at the cloudless night.

One time, when I was in fourth grade and we were flying back from Paris, I remember chasing the sunset. Outside the panes of glass lay a fiery globe, sinking into a lake of vapor. The dreadful hum, the braying of upset babies; none could take me away from this portrait of domed beauty. For hours I watch this globe rise and fall, its opalescence soaking into the cotton below, modulated by the swaying of this monstrous, metal beast. To be trapped, suspended in a bubble of iridescent nothingness. Floating, bouncing. Soaring.