

Matt Siegle

Driving across the USA is a serious thing. American motorists bully the open highway, weaving murderously in daytime pajamas. Come sundown, the asphalt is beaten and sticky, flat and dimpled. Profiling for the chemical twilight, smudged men dart aimlessly behind parked cars, only to reappear. A poorly marked ingress stokes confusion at the pumps. Beware backroads, it's the end of 2020.

Exhume beige crystals from Oklahoma mud, wrap them in local newspaper. Plan a visit to the Gateway Arch, observe from above the brown river below. Cresting slowly, the upright elevator gently capsizes and descends. Colorado is ice. From Pasadena, take the 110 to the 5 and exit at 140B. Turn left on Brunswick, where the hot cotton sky finds a curbside palm and smothers it. Relenting, the palm drops its fronds, scattering nuts like drunken billiards. Back on the Golden State and headed for the Grapevine, another kind of nut barrels north in southbound traffic.

Hours upon hours in the car, the lipstick was for Barbara. From a parade of roses, Barbara turns and waves, holding an ice cream cone. As she floats away to a distant arroyo, something new appears: specific tools. Here are the pencils, the preferred paper. A watercolor kit, brushes, a collapsible stool. Behind the back seat and under hot glass, the stool rattles against loose bamboo with every pothole and stoplight on Riverside Drive. Line quality arcs with the sun, gentle as a fern and just as graceful.

With much drama, the sky bursts open directly over the dining room. Down plops an irritable God, stomping his feet on the table. Lost in his tantrum, he'll never notice the drawing on the wall, thoughtfully framed near the kitchen door. Clockwork greetings, Mother's Day remembered, a corner just for giftwrap. The drawing, feather-light but resolute, is the only genuine article in this house. God is busy breaking dishes and licking the silver. Over his shoulder and beyond the window, wild turkeys wander up the driveway like draconian churchgoers, unimpressed. Quarantine begins.

New York shuts down. In Vermont, more drawing. Easter dinner with strangers from Boston, all lawyers, no masks. Landlady Lisa carefully backs out of her modular garage, Bernie sticker and all. She pushes a button over the windshield to close the door. The compost tumbler is hers, as are the sunny tomato plants and sweet stoner boys. Lisa gets by on her own supply. Meanwhile, elsewhere, the world throws embers as it turns and burns.

In an astonishing flash, the Pacific Ocean swells, devouring the beaches and canyons of Malibu. Not satiated, colossal waves thrust northward, drowning a reposeful Calabasas. Clapping back at this ultimate transgression, the internet ripens gloriously and presents its ample fruit: an absurdly viral nosegay of violent, moronic hell. It would seem such nonsense is the only game in town.

Fortunately, there are multiple ways to wash one's brain, and not all are sinister. With humor and curiosity, allow the eyes to follow the neck and spine of quiet castaways, the serially overlooked. Inhale through the nostrils and gaze towards the horizon with hands relaxed, muscles of the face and scalp smoothed. Now, diligently catalog all that readily emerges from the frontier – don't boss it around or tease its worth. That which is augured will surely evade, so why not see things as they are?

Nolan Hendrickson