

## *Shyam Oberoi*

### 48 SPRINGFIELDS

1. Blue blows the cigarette smoke, bluely billowing out and scattering against the windshield. The windshield streaked with water and smudged with kamikaze bugs. The air around you colored wet and gray and blue where the smoke hangs in slow-motion haze. Sluicing a careful 55 MPH through another puddled interstate, both hands on the wheel, like you were taught. It's getting dark. 95.5 Springfield KTOZ is playing meditative music, lonesome-slow, sparse and abstract sounding. The smoke billows and then disperses and then just sits and swirls and smells of ashes and stale coffee and clammy rain water. You can smell a storm brewing, and you can smell a storm fading, trailing leaden clouds and dragging lightning across the mountains, but in the midst of the storm the only thing you can smell is smoke.
2. According to Lewis Carroll, the perfect map would be the exact same size as the country it was meant to represent.
3. The strange thing about *déjà vu* is not that you might actually be reliving an experience that you know you could not have possibly ever had before; the strange thing is that in the instant when that shuddering, enigmatic memory slides into its proper place and you suddenly realize that, yes, this has already happened, and you freeze, for that instant, frantically ransacking the bag of your memory for the moment in the past when you could have possibly ever found yourself in this exact place, at this exact time, the strange thing is that even though a part of you knows that this is just another one of those moments, you remain powerless to stop it, powerless to alter it, and find yourself, mechanically, maybe even against your will, repeating the motions and the accompanying words to a memory you can never remember.
4. Springfield, Massachusetts. The town you were born in and lived in until you left. Will you die in a Springfield? Will the bed you lie in look the same as the bed you rose from in the morning? Your house was half

a mile from Exit 4 off the interstate. To you that sign had only ever meant one thing: home. You know better, now. Exit 4 is a number before 5 and after 3. Just that. You would pull off the interstate at Exit 4 and onto the intersecting RT 77. Home was always left, half a mile and down the hill. But could it not have just as easily been right? And could it not have just as easily been another number along a different interstate, in another Springfield, the same as it is for everyone else who has passed this Exit 4 every day, or once in a while, or twice in their entire lives, or never?

5. Even-numbered roads run east-to-west; odd numbered roads run north-to-south.
6. Summer's done. Station wagons and trailers and speed boats pulled in for the winter. Kids back in school. Vacations taken. Spent. You've been on the road for more than four months. You glance at a newspaper once or twice a week, if only to be reminded that someone is still adding up the days.
7. Through Nevada into Utah, out of the gasp of desert and into the red rocks. The mountains fissured and creased with long dynamite lines running straight up from the road towards the top of the summits. For the past half hour you've been watching dendritic lightning strobe soundlessly, pounding itself into the desert. It's hard to tell how close, or how far. Out here, distance is immeasurable; space is everywhere, is all around. Nothing to measure against the emptiness. Up ahead, a thin funnel of charcoal smoke arcs down from the clouds, almost reaching the ground, crescent bent and pulsing every other second as another bolt of lightning silently speeds its way down. And getting closer.
8. The highways are littered with the shreds of black-rubber blown-out tires and the black-blood of animal carcasses pulverized into pavement. A long, gray bus glides up along side you; it's half-empty, and you can see the flicker of televisions through the smoked windows, and heads turning to stare at you, as if drawn by magnets. There were people waiting at the bus stop in Springfield, Kentucky. You walked past, on

the way back to your room. Sidewalks in Springfield seem unnecessary; the streets are all empty. Bus-people carry their lives on their backs, in army-surplus duffel bags and suitcases with yellow twine handles. The ground outside the depot was polka-dotted with black gum; the paste on the axis that keeps the wheel spinning. Bus arrived, doors opened with a sharp hydraulic hiss, like the crack of a whip.

9. Santa Claus, Arizona. Merlin, Oregon. Jerkwater, Pennsylvania. Paradise, California. California is full of saints and angels. Hell, Michigan. Wahoo, Nebraska, home of **FIVE FAMOUS MEN**. Uncertain, Texas. Halcyon, Alabama. Love, Virginia. Fickle, Indiana. There are no family towns: no Mothers, no Fathers, no Brothers, but at least there's a Friend in Nebraska, and Oregon, and New York. Manhattan, Kansas. You close your eyes and imagine skyscrapers sprouting up across the flattened plains.
10. Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. You can't ever remember wanting to go to a place simply because of its name. Does anyone ever want to go to Springfield? Does everyone want to go to Springfield? Truth or Consequences has its name, and a hot-spring bend of the Rio Grande, and a single traffic light that blinks a cyclops yellow during most of the night, and that's about it. It has a Pizza Hut done up in the hacienda style, all earthen adobe and silver/turquoise colors. It has a Top-40 radio station where a woman comes on at the top of the hour and forecasts the day's horoscope. Ed tells you that the town used to be called something else, but then changed its name after a popular 50's TV quiz show. There are eight Bonanzas. There are four Munsters. There is, presumably, only one Truth, but plenty of Consequences. No one remembers what the town used to be called. Ed gave you the address of an old hippie who runs a trailer park on the edge of town. Ed tells you about the time he had a brain aneurysm in Vegas, and collapsed onto the arabesque carpet of the Sahara Casino, convulsing and spouting blood from his nostrils, his ears and his eyes. Ed tells you about the time he made a hundred grand one year from panhandling, only to drink it and smoke it and shoot it away. Easy come, easy go, says Ed, sprawled naked on his back in his bed like a beached sea-lion, like the

ones down off the piers in San Francisco, bronzed dun and tawny, that loll in the sun and regard the gathering crowds of tourists with a game and careful eye. Ed rubs his eyes a little redder, shot full of blood and no alcohol until next Thursday when the check comes in. It all depends on what you want and what you're willing to put up with, says Ed. Springfield, Missouri; you're in another hostel; you and Ed have the room to yourselves, and Ed is one of the chatty bastards, but you find that you don't really mind. Maybe because he's old; older than you, anyway, and not getting any younger, or so he says. A lot. He looks like he could be anywhere between 45 to 70; face tanned, but not healthy, but a kind of weather-beaten brown, lines from the counters of all-night diners, back alleys, city sidewalk cracks. The dusky color of occasional homelessness. The older you get, says Ed, the less you can rely on the old body and more you have to rely on the mind, which wouldn't be too bad if he wasn't such an idiot, he says. It can get oubliette dark in here, at night. Ed bums countless cigarettes, which you've stopped minding. Ed has an air of fragile, boastful wisdom about him. Like all old rummies, he's made a million and lost it and has a million schemes on how to get it back again. You don't feel sorry for him and he doesn't want you to anyway, which is probably another reason why you like him. You're not supposed to smoke in these rooms, but Ed has a silver metal ashtray that he places on the floor between your two beds. The glowing tips of your cigarettes swing back and forth, from two mouths to one ashtray, inscribing mismatched and erratic arcs in the darkness, with a rhythm like a bus's windshield wipers.

11. There's something menacing about the open emptiness: almost anthropomorphic. A raven darkness. A jackal desert. A sentient menace. It wants you. It makes cities and shopping malls and highway fast-food gas stations seem safe and sane.
12. Another Springfield. Louisiana, this time. Have you seen this road before? People live here. They don't live where you live. Where you lived. They live in a Springfield that might be any Springfield but not the Springfield where you were born, or the Springfield that you came from yesterday, or the Springfield that you'll drive through a week from

now. So. Have you seen this road before?

13. Perhaps the reason why people leave the place they're from is that every place they go to looks more or less like the place they've just left.
14. Truth or Consequences. In 1956, archeologists found the remains of human skeletons in a cave in Peru, says the man in New Mexico; there were 24 pairs of ribs in the ribcage and the femurs themselves were over 5 feet long. Naturally, *they* don't want you to know about this, says the man in New Mexico. He spits out of the corner of his mouth, out a nearby open window, without turning his head. He's wearing a once-white painter's cap that barely ensnares a ferocious amount of fiery red hair. He has a red beard that starts beneath his ears, runs along the line of his jaw and comes to a knotted point in the center of his chin. It's thick and neatly clipped, this beard; it almost looks detachable. He has no moustache or any other facial hair, which only adds to this impression. Around the circumference of his painter's cap is printed **BELIEVE ANYTHING – DOUBT EVERYTHING**. The words enclose a clasp around his head and it is only after he turns and walks out of the trailer, pausing to pluck a few out-of-tune strings on the up-right bass standing near the door, that you think to wonder which one of them is meant to come first, the belief and then the doubt, or the doubt and then the belief.
15. It is no coincidence that, in general, people who travel like to talk. That people who can't shut up like to travel. Both means of seeking completion through external experience. That which is lacking will be satiated: the road will feed you; words will feed you. On the road, you can't escape the chatty bastards. It's what you've come to know them as, those assonant chatty bastards, who all want to know where you're headed and what your story is. They've been everywhere, the chatty bastards, all the places you've ever been and most of the ones you haven't. And they need to tell you about the time they drove their pickup north through the Northern Territories until the road ran out, then up onto the ice until the tires fell off, then lay out on the hood and drank bottles of wine and watched the Aurora Borealis. They need to tell you about the time they were in the Navy and their ship docked for

a weekend of fun in the Ecuadorian whorehouses. They need to tell you about the secret meaning in the Book of Revelations. They need to tell you all about it. They need to point out the scars and lick the wounds. They need to show you their backpacks crammed with junk: postcards never sent, empty matchbooks, folded maps, ticket stubs from ghost towns, nature walks. The evidence of experience. A foraged collage of recollections, printed on colored paper and pasted together with tall tales and exaggeration, which travels with them from rest stop to rest stop. Smiling faces in Polaroids tacked next to dollar bills on motel cash registers and the back walls of highway diners. The chatty bastards have no choice but to chew your ear off, if you let them; the story is the only thing worth sharing, the only thing worth preserving. Stories, like staring at the photographs of smiling strangers, dull and useless.

16. In the end, what they really want most to believe is that they aren't alone.
  
17. Now take this girl, for example. She came down the stairs an hour ago and has been sitting in the corner of the couch, staring quietly into the flickering, fading fire. Sitting side-saddle with her knees pressed tight together and her feet tucked beneath her body. You're sitting in an easy chair in the far corner of the room, beneath a reading lamp you turned off just as the girl came downstairs. Springfield, Colorado is a mile below the Continental Divide; the air up here is no joke. No air. You draw your air in short, experimental breaths, and your lungs still feel the way your lungs usually feel the morning after a night of heavy drinking and smoking four or five cigarettes for every drink you put away. Your room is on the third floor and by the time you reach the second you're already winded and light-headed, slick with a cold sweat. You've smoked maybe two cigarettes since you've arrived in Colorado and still your heart thumps like an out-of-whack jackhammer. You wonder if it has something to do with the coffee you've started drinking. The girl came into the room trailing a pale-blue sheet behind her. Her wrists are oddly thick and matted with fine, blond hair, the musculature even more pronounced by the fist she's making around one corner of the sheet, redoubling the veins in her forearm in a way you find vaguely erotic. One end of the sheet is tucked under her chin, the other pinned down

beneath her knees, forming one side of a tent that covers the far side of her body, so that her seated outline is thrown against a pale-blue screen, a shadowy daguerreotype. She's been sitting like this for about an hour when she suddenly begins to speak. She's been having this recurring dream, says the girl with the sheet. Each night she wakes up bolt-upright in her bed, clutching her sheet in the talons her dream has twisted her hands into. She's staring straight ahead; she might not be talking to you; there's no one else in the room. You're picking at a loose thread in your old cable-knit sweater; you were thinking about how to avoid the hike back up the stairs. The lights are all off; the fire is winding down. In the dream, there is someone else lying in the bed with her, only she can't tell who since the other body is completely covered by the pale-blue sheet. She can only discern its outline, but when she tries to uncover any part of it by pulling back the covers, the body disappears and swells up someplace else, still hidden beneath the sheet. Like a waterbed, says the girl with the sheet, press down in one place and a rolling bulge distends on the opposite side of the bed. Something disturbing about enshrouded body parts, disjointed, disconnected, sprouting and writhing in the odd folds and pockets of your bedding, as your hands flutter and fly about, trying to pin them down. Trying to uncover them. Trying to release them. Every night. But what bothers her, says the girl with the sheet, what really bothers her most of all is that when she finally wakes up, she's sitting bolt-upright in the bed and clutching the sheet in her hands. Bad dreams are bad dreams are nothing new, she knows, she says. No one expects to be able to control them, or to be in control in them. But her own body...is the reason she's sitting down here. There are no chairs in any of the rooms, you see, and she wants to try to sleep sitting up, hoping that it might break the recurring spell.

18. Stars are said to twinkle; eyes are likened to limpid pools. Purple mountains. Amber waves. This is fiction. In the desert, the stars don't twinkle so much as pulse. Throbbing, the stars spread all across the sky like great handfuls of ash thrown from the fists of giants.
19. But you can understand the restless vigor. It's pushed you across 48

Springfields, ocean to ocean, tundra to desert. The chatty bastards poke at it with a stick through the bars of a cage, trying to keep it away, or at least averted so as not to have to face it. No amount of landscape can obscure the essential sameness. No one wants to know that nowhere is the only place they might belong. No one wants to hear about anywhere but here.

20. Less than a hundred years ago, none of these roads was here. You're not sure how that makes you feel.
21. You've been chasing the storm, for the past five-six-seven days. Or the storm has been chasing you. Either way, you can't seem to get out from under the clouds. It seemed to start right after you left New Mexico via RT 52, the high-winding road to Flagstaff. The two-lane macadam road into the Grand Canyon has signs along it that say things like: **NICE INDIANS AHEAD** and **CHIEF YELLOWHORSE LOVES YOU**. You pattered around the desert for a few days, and then turned around, heading back east. You can see the storm, now, mulling it over in the distance, and the road you thought might skirt around now winding slowly and inevitably down beneath the scuds. Out here, you can see a storm from a hundred miles out. Out here, there are no alternate routes, no shelter. Drive. Prepare yourself. Turn the radio off and pull in the antenna. Hunker down and push on. Push on.
22. According to the Indian Jains, says the man in New Mexico, the history of the world is divided into 12 ages, one for each of the 12 spokes on the endless wheel of time. There are six descending ages and six ascending ages. The men and women in the first age were directly descended from the gods, were born in wedded twins, each other's perfect complement. Man in woman in woman in man. They stood eight miles high and had 264 ribs and, during those paradisiac days, strode about an earth as sweet as sugar and swam in oceans as sweet as wine. They lived for a period of countless happy years, and when they died they were succeeded by men and women who were only four miles high, and had half as many ribs, and lived only half as many happy years on an earth that was now only half as happy as it once had been. You see where this is

going, says the man in New Mexico. Through each successive, descending age, the men and women grew closer to an ever-worsening earth that had long since ceased to provide their every need, fulfill their every wish. Their lives became shortened, as did their stature in comparison to the gods. No longer born together, they now roamed the earth in search for their other, perfect half. And now, says the man in New Mexico, we've arrived at the end of the fifth descending age, and look how we've fucked and befouled the world, and we haven't even seen the worst of it. He spits out of the corner of his mouth, again, without turning his head. Only 6 feet tall and 12 pairs of ribs and 21 thousand years of this. You think the times are bad, just wait until the last days. The sixth and final descending age, shortest and most miserable, when the earth, incapable of sustaining life and awash with pestilence and filth, will drive these once-edenic men and women cowering and crawling on all-fours into caves. Shuddering and cowering and praying to gods they no longer believe in. But—you don't have a conversation with the man in New Mexico; you sit and listen; another indefatigable chatty bastard; the west is full of talkers. He runs a trailer park stumped down in the warm, silty muck of the Rio Grande, and seems to spend most of the day blarneying his holistic olla podrida at anyone who will listen. A Three-Musketeers mysticism: all for one and one for all. If everything is relative, and everything is connected, then must everything be everything, and all of it the same thing? The place is mostly empty, this time of year; there are only a couple of sad, stringy hippies in your trailer and they come and go at odd-hours and mostly leave you alone. You showed up late two nights ago; a young skinny kid was up in the office lounge, bare-chested and sprawled back in a ratty rattan chair, watching a 70's blaxploitation movie on a television whose red, green and blue colors had long-ago melted into a warbling, oatmeal mud. He introduced himself as Potato, and when you said What? leaned forward a little in the chair to show you the tattoo on his upper back that read: POTATO. Potato seems to be second-in-command to the red-haired who runs the joint, because all the other hippies tend to go quiet when Potato enters the room. There's an old cracked upright bass leaning up against the trailer door and whenever anyone comes in or out they give the bass an absentminded open-stringed *thwack*. Every single time. They seem to fill a lot of time with these strange, totemic

gestures. In the early morning, they sit cross-legged down near the river, discussing astrology, numerology, ufology, whatnot; in the evening huddled on the floor in the main trailer's lounge watching bootlegged movies on one of those gray-ancient VCRs that eject tapes from a trap-door on top of the machine. What *Foxy Brown* and *Bachelor Party* have to do with enlightenment you'd like to ask, but are afraid of the kind of answer you might get.

23. The empty space wants to swallow you. Why not? There are roads that lead to nowhere, you know. You choose not to take them, but you could, you could. The dark-whispered seduction. You can hear it when you shut the radio off at night. One has to court the unimaginable; you have to stalk it, assiduously. It won't come to you until you are still and quiet and still you have to draw it in with both hands straining, only you release it at the last moment, and leave it to spin off back into the darkness, far, far from billboards and sodium-lit highways, back out behind the mountains, underneath the desert, flitting through the thick of forests.
24. A long-suffered, long-endured engineering flaw of your car: the pop-out beverage holder is located directly above the ashtray, so that when the holder is out and occupied, the ashtray beneath it can only be opened an inch or so, and is therefore almost all but useless since to ash in it requires you to maneuver around whichever beverage (usually coffee) is currently in the holder and slide the cigarette into the ashtray's narrow aperture, which leaks a pale-green sulphurous light at night. A dicey bit of business at 3AM. The accordion rubber shield of the stick shift is congested with bits of ash glued into place by Rorschach splotches of spilled coffee. For a while, you tried wedging the coffee between your legs, gave up. Most smokers you know also drink a prodigious amount of coffee, though the reverse is not always true. Before you left Springfield, MA you never really were a coffee-drinker. The speed limit in Montana is posted as **REASONABLE AND PRUDENT**. You like that. You crack the window now, stick the cigarette out and let the wind do the work. At 3AM, on I-90 through the black big-sky lacuna, it is the only other light on the road, your cigarette, ruddy wind-blown red, trailing sparks like a comet.

25. Ed's rig finally broke down on the side of I-44, here in Springfield, Missouri, and that was that. He's been working construction here for the past month; nothing heavy. He stands in front of a highway repair crew and directs traffic. All day, he says, he holds a sign and twists it this way or that, depending on the traffic. One side of the sign says **SLOW** and the other side of the sign says **STOP**. The days, he says, you can imagine, are pretty slow-going. Ed has a twine-handled suitcase that he keeps in a locker down at the bus depot. He has a rag-tag collection of shampoo bottles and colognes arranged on the floor at the foot of his bed. He has a silver metal ashtray. He has a blinding fluorescent orange hardhat and vest, courtesy of the Springfield DMV, and the sign that he brings back to the room on the weekends. You don't know why he brings it back, but on Sunday, before he goes out, he props the sign up against the wall with the **SLOW** side facing out. That night, before turning in, he turns it around and then shuts off the light.
26. The fire has gone out. There's moonlight behind the clouds and streetlights, somewhere. Not here. Your eyes have adjusted. The girl with the sheet is sleeping, or at least she's quiet, now. You know all about the sounds people make at night: coughing, grunting, mewling, muttering, gnashing teeth, and toss-turning trying to make themselves comfortable; the whole rhythmic compendium of sighs and snores and sleep's inhale-exhalations. You sometimes wonder what you sound like when you sleep. The girl with the sheet is probably asleep, but it's too quiet to tell, and she's not making any noise; she's one of these people who sleep so lightly, so quietly, that you sometimes wonder if they're still alive. There's no such thing as a complete silence, the absence of all sound. There's no such thing as a complete darkness, the absence of all light. There's always something to give shape and voice to the void. The Continental Divide is a watershed formed from the Rockies that separates rivers and sends them flowing in opposite directions all across the country. You imagine that you can hear that water flowing; maybe it's just the first spurts of rain outside. You can hear the electric hum of something, refrigerator, traffic light. In Vegas, you heard the sound of crickets on the Strip and wondered if they were real or just another part of the desert's manufactured reality, music from hidden speakers, exploding waterfalls, smoothly rolling sidewalks that ferried you and ev-

everyone else off the street and into the casinos. You don't remember your dreams; they hurtle you out of sleep, some nights, sweating and blank-minded, your heart pounding so heavily you can feel it in the back of your throat. You want to move over to where the girl is sitting, sleeping, but the room is full of darkened obstacles: a coffee table, a magazine rack. You can see her neck resting right at the top of the back of the couch, allowing her head to fall back ever-so-slightly, her long blonde hair bunched up between her shoulders and the back of her head. Her face is slack with sleep, her mouth parted and her chin pointing up and over her left shoulder, like St. Theresa in her ecstasy.

27. You've come to trust the taillights up ahead. Off through the narcotic, panhandle night of Oklahoma. Where the wind comes sweeping . . . Two steady, small red lights a couple miles up the road. They've been in front of you for over an hour now, heading west. You passed a motel an hour back; a red neon sign in the office window said: NO. That was it. There were no cars in the parking lot and the lights were all off. In the house adjacent to the motel, a bare-chested man stood at a window, talking on the phone. Out here, at night, you might be driving through anything, you wouldn't know. It might be the Grand Canyon, it might be the craters of the moon. Shadows against shadows, there and then gone at 85 MPH. You've never known them. You sometimes imagine that you are standing on the side of the road, watching yourself take the wheel of this car, fly by, dwindle into the horizon, leaving you on a now-quiet highway, bathed in a red taillight seeping slowly back into darkness. You're wondering who will be the first to give it up, you or your friend there up ahead. Impossible not to feel a kind of kinship, at 3AM on the all-but deserted Broken Arrow Expressway. The road is so monotonously straight you could lash the steering wheel in place and go to sleep. The white dotted highway line ticks off metronomically. Even easier to drive at night when there's someone up ahead to guide you. Someone you can trust. Someone who knows the way.
28. This is home: a makeshift bed in back of the driver's seat, a dashboard full of misfolded maps and the crushed cellophane from cigarette packs; a microwave oven to reheat coffee and yesterday's take-out in styrofoam boxes; a sidedoor crammed with cassettes whose songs you've heard a

hundred times and still don't know all the words to. Empty-stomach rumblings of a too-early morning, coffee without food, smoke without substance, night without much sleep. Home is where the wheel stops at the end of the day, or the beginning of the day. Home is an interstate off-ramp, where the slumbering semis idle through the night, lined up like a waiting funeral procession. Home is an RV park, where nicotine light blinks over a darkened caravan, the transient village at nightfall that disappears in the dawn.

29. You never found out the name of the man in New Mexico, the man Ed told you about. You never found out Ed's last name; on the road, no one is much interested in last names. And the only reason why you know his first is because **ED** is what was printed on the plastic milk carton he kept by his side during breakfast, when he told you about his last woman who was a trucker and was psychic and could tell what was wrong with an engine just by laying her hands over the hood of a car.
30. The ever-present ache in your body stopped bothering you weeks ago. The then-unfamiliar position of sitting in a car for eight-ten-twelve hours a day, every day. Sitting down, most people can see eye to eye. Back curved, spine curved, legs collapsed, your shoulders bent and turning inward, both hands on the wheel. You wonder if you might be shrinking. Springfield, MA is the home of the Basketball Hall of Fame. Your legs only ache now when you have to get out of the car; a thrumming lost-at-sea feeling, unfolding like an old arthritic ache that flares up on the advent of a storm.
31. Every mile away from somewhere is another mile closer to home. Every mile away from Springfield is another mile closer to Springfield.
32. Michigan. Five miles south of the Canadian border. The sign outside reads **THE KING'S CROWN HOTEL** but it's just one step up from a flophouse. The King's Crown is filled with rickety old men who don't look like they're going anywhere anytime soon. They wear heavy flannel shirts and two-tone baseball caps that look two-sizes too big for their heads; the caps have white faces and are imprinted with peeling escutcheons the same color as the caps: Machinist Unions Local 48,

Circle K, K of C, Ancient Hibernians, Freemasons, whatnot. The King's Crown rents rooms by the day or the week or the month; the rooms smell like diesel and someone else's smoke and are lit by 40 watt bulbs. Your bed is mostly springs, and the middle of the thin mattress sags down in a permanent pit so that your head and heels are an even 6 inches above your stomach. You've slept in better and you've slept in worse. Last night you slept in a white-washed clapboard chapel set up on the side of the road; the chapel was about 10 feet wide and 15 feet long, but at least you could stretch your legs in it. A jumbled up box of Bibles, a magazine rack stuffed with humorless born-again literature. Three Calvary crosses planted on the hill outside, which you didn't even notice until the next morning. You woke up with the sun, like you always do when you sleep outside, with that aching emptiness in your gut, like someone down there folding and refolding a heavy sheet of aluminum foil. In Colorado they have mass in an open-air amphitheater; people wear jogging sweats and sandals and bring their dogs. The only woman in the King's Crown is Coffee Jo. Coffee Jo works the front desk and smokes and deflects all kinds of comments from the residents with a stare that could bore holes in your skull. She looks like a sepulchral nun in lumberjack flannel. The old men call her Coffee Jo, or Jo Coffee, or Cup of Jo, or JoJo, or HoJo, depending on what kind of mood they're in, or what kind of mood they think she's in. Coffee Jo doesn't drink coffee, as far as you can tell, but she smokes a hell of a lot. One of the residents tells you that her original sobriquet was Coughin' Jo, because of the cigarettes. Later, you'll wonder if he meant *coffin*. Every Thursday, you watch from your King's Crown window as the procession of old men teeters down to the bank to cash their government checks, then across the street to the free clinic for their medications, then over to the liquor store, and then back again, and it occurs to you that these men are not much different from the legions of senior-citizen-manned RVs you see cruising all about the country, racing and retracing the same steps, week in, month out, only moving in slower and smaller circles.

33. Truckers, like RV people, keep to their own. Tortoise-like, they crawl across the country in their shells. RT 80 through Pennsylvania hums ceaselessly deep into the night, east and west, semi after semi, your eyes

held by the constant stream of headlights, highlights, sidelights, carrying the things that people need to the places where they don't belong.

34. The sign at the border reads: **SOUTH DAKOTA REJECTS VEGETARIANS**; The Jains, said the man in New Mexico, are vegetarian. Jainism was founded by a succession of 24 saints; Jains reject the idea of a supreme being and believe in the transmigration of souls. Only later does it even occur to you to wonder whether the carton of milk was really Ed's or just someone else named Ed who had been staying in Springfield, Missouri and had since moved on.
35. And Springfield, always Springfield. There are two Springfields in both Ohio and Pennsylvania; they look more or less the same. There are no Springfields in either Alaska or Hawaii, as far as you know.
36. It took a while for you to get used to living in your car. That most cars west of the Mississippi and south of the Mason-Dixon will not be from Massachusetts. That most towns have drive-thru banks, drive-thru restaurants, drive-thru liquor stores. That there are phones two feet off the ground at gas stations so that you can roll down your car window and make a call. That the drive-in movie theater has followed the dinosaur, though in Springfield, California, you did find a drive-in playhouse; something by Chekov; the parking lot was full, and at the end of the first act the audience honked their horns, instead of clapping.
37. And why do drivers always turn and stare at you as you pass them?
38. If you stare at anything long enough in the darkness, it will eventually melt and reshape itself into that which you least want to see. The face you thought you knew turns into something else in the night; it slides out of focus like a kaleidoscope into nightmares, death's heads. In Springfield, Colorado the girl with the pale-blue sheet is still sleeping. You don't know her face. Outside, the storm sounds like it's growing stronger. You have trouble sleeping sitting up, only succumbing on the edge of exhaustion. Your body feels heavy, your head light. But comfortable. As if you were needed, here, the way some people need each other. As

if the girl with the sheet needed you to watch over her as she slept. You lean back in your chair and feel your eyes close and an inky-blackness flood behind the lids. It will be difficult to open up your eyes. You can hear the rain outside dripping from the trees, spattering the roof of your car. You can hear the sleeping girl's hands begin to twist and claw beneath the sheet, searching.

39. Up ahead a lone cloud sits in the sky, funnel-shaped and smeared at the edges as if it were splattered and then wiped across your windshield. It looks like a flattened tornado, that might at any minute drop down and suck you up into the sky. In a trucker bar off of I-91 outside Springfield, Maine, the guy seated next to you tells you this joke: A man walks into a bar. Hey buddy, says the bartender, haven't seen you in here in a while. Where have you been hiding yourself? Well, I'll tell you, says the man, I just lost my wife. Ah geez, I'm sorry to hear that, says the bartender. It's tough to lose a wife. I know, says the man, it's almost impossible.
40. A few weeks later, you'll pull your sweater out from the bottom of your duffel bag, and find a few long blonde hairs knotted through the cable-knit. You'll wonder how they got there.
41. When you were younger you would return from a trip with your parents and each time, as the car pulled off Exit 4, turned left, and then made its way down the hill, you would be gripped with an unnamable, unshakable feeling that something had happened to your house while you were gone. Children sometimes think that when they walk out of a room, everything in that room ceases to exist. That the world reforms from and relapses into nothingness whenever they open and close their eyes. You would imagine paint peeling and blackened by now-extinguished flames, windows shattered and valuables missing, one wall collapsed, exposing a gutted living-room, bathroom, bedroom. It seemed you always returned from these trips at night, and half-asleep in the back seat. You have trouble remembering all the places you've been. At night, the car creeps down the hill, and you press your face against the glass, in expectation of disaster. You can see the slice of your profile in

the darkened glass, superimposed on the face of the moon. And each time the house was standing there just as you left it, mute and dark, damp and shut-in musty. You haven't been back to that house in years; it was the last place that you might have called a home, but suddenly tonight, with the rain pounding on the hood, the roof of the car like shovelfulls of pebbles, you're having that déjà vu feeling: that not only will the house in Springfield be gone, but that Springfield itself will be gone. Or worse, that you won't even recognize it as the Springfield you once knew. As home. That you'll crest over the last hill and speed down into a deserted ghost town. That the sodium lights on the edge of the darkened horizon are not street lights and store lights, but the illumination of lightning and fire, razing the plain.

42. And a great torrent will lash the barren earth for seven days and seven nights and on the eighth day the stunted people will emerge from their caves to find the first new shoots of green struggling up towards the sun. And so, say the Jains, the cosmogonic wheel will turn again, back and up through the six ascending ages, as the men and women of the earth stand and straighten and grow tall again against the sky, standing eight miles high over an earth renewed.
43. The music is over; there is one of those awkward, half minutes of radio silence. The KTOZ DJ comes on; he sounds like he's been interrupted, as if he were in the middle of something else. – listening to selections, he says, from *As Wichita Falls, So Falls Wichita Falls*.
44. The storm that you've been chasing has turned and thrown itself upon you. Through the deluge; rain roars down, blown by the winds into stiletto sharp angles; car shimmys and skids across the road. All around, other cars are pulling off into breakdown lanes, hazards blinking. Your windshield-wipers are going like mad and still you can barely see. Too much; streaming headlights in the rearview, lightning wriggling across the sky, the wheel shuddering in your hands. There's a sign for an exit up ahead; which one? it doesn't matter; you have to get off the road. Slowly, down the ramp, and then underneath the highway overpass. You stop. You turn off the wipers and slump down in the seat; your

whole body hurts. Up above, through the dark parallel slats of highway, you can see the occasional shadows of trucks rumbling overhead, sending dark waves of water over the side of the highway rails. You feel hidden, but you don't feel safe. Furtive. Maybe you can sleep, and wait out the storm. You light another cigarette; your hands are damp and clammy; your fingernails are filthy.

45. And you won't even have to stare at your own face in the rearview mirror, lit from below by dashboard fluorescence, ghoulish chiaroscuro, to be startled by what you see.
46. And for the first time you realize that this America is full of spaces, and that there are people who live in these spaces, who were born there, or buried there, or passed through there once and decided to linger on, who fashioned a place out of the spaces and settled in there for a while, who woke up each morning in a place they recognized and at the end of the day sat down and looked around at what they had created for themselves and called it good, or good enough, or not much likely to get any better. And for the time being decided to stay.
47. Perhaps the reason why people stay in the place where they are is that every place they go to looks more or less like the place they've just left.
48. It's dark. The rain has stopped. The girl from Springfield is sitting there beside you, wrapped in the shroud of her pale-blue sheet. The wheels of the car are spinning a spray of rainwater back up into the sky, spinning to swallow up the road, spinning, and now slowing, and now coming to a stop, as you and the girl start to rise and grow and push your heads through the metal roof of the car, peeling back like the lid of an old tin can. She takes the corner of her sheet and throws it around your bodies, binding them together. You're light and empty; headlights shine through your skin as you feel your bones stretching, rising upwards, growing, legs lengthening, spreading and shaking the aches out, and still growing; the two of you now towering up over the empty road, into the star-pulsed sky, hand in hand, eye to eye, standing eight miles high, now leaping over the shadows of the mountain horizon, and running westward to the wine-dark sea.