

Occlusion

By Kristan Saefkow

The traveller pulls the comb roughly through his hair, the teeth scraping against his scalp as the hair parts before them, dandruff and greasy dirt falling into the void between his head and the stained gas station bathroom sink. He glares at his reflection in the cracked mirror, the harshly fluorescing light helping mark every scar and imperfection in his marred, thirty-three-year-old face. The red-rimmed eyes of the overtired man are watery and bloodshot. He hasn't slept since Friday afternoon, but he doesn't know how many hours ago that was. He will not be sleeping for quite some time, barring some fatal slip up. Then he would be acquainted with the unfamiliar and unsolicited sleep of the dead, rather than the familiar sleep of the restless, from which he is becoming estranged more and more each hour.

The comb slides into his pocket as he shoulders open the door and walks out into the electric hum of the station. Red, yellow, and blue packages of food stand stiffly to attention, packed densely onto blue wire shelves and displayed with supreme confidence. Stalking through the festival of consumption, his gaze shifts constantly, as though he distrusts the spaces he cannot see. The dark cavity within each bag of chips, the shadows in the drinks' cooler. Looking out through the glass door of the gas station, his gaze moves over every object, searching for something. He looks for some imperfection that would mark the start of a bad day, the beginning of what might be the end. The gloom of the mid-morning rain offers neither solace nor confirmation of his suspicion, and he shoves the door open, grabbing a package of beef jerky off a shelf as he leaves the building.

The cry of the young freckled man behind the counter is cut off by the thud of the door and the rush of water under the wheels of a

passing semi-truck. The gas station is the only point of civilization on a long, lonely stretch of asphalt. Looking out at the misty brown expanse of rain-soaked fields and rotting hay-bales, the traveller feels a sense of unease fall over him. It settles over his shoulders like the arm of an old enemy who, having met him in a bar, was making friendly conversation before later trying to strangle him in the alley. He walks swiftly to his car, a beat-up brown sedan, and gets in, the smell of dust and cigarettes surrounding him. The only thing he sees in the back seat is a ratty blanket that he hopes to use again soon. In the passenger seat is a backpack, stained and torn but still usable. The zipper is open just slightly, but no light seems to fall within, and the contents remain a mystery as his eye lingers on it. He digs the keys out of his jacket pocket and starts the car, keeping his eyes in the mirror as he backs out, the motor coughing in its ingratiating way as he pulls out onto the highway.

His lone working headlight scouts no landscape that the crepuscular light of the sky doesn't reveal, its weak beam failing to make itself seen. He looks in the rear-view mirror and back. The sound of the tires on the road and the whistling of the wind in the holes in the floorboards seem to stretch time. The sun rises through the clouds, reaches its zenith, and sets, night taking him from his seat and spinning him through the starry sky as he drives, single headlight bringing no relief to the chasm of black, rain-slicked asphalt lined with faded flaking yellow that swallows him.

As the sun rises again, the red lids of his eyes begin again to droop, heavy with the unshed weight of his days of vigilance. Looking into the passenger seat while the blast of air from an oncoming semi-truck pushes the car down onto its shocks, he thinks about how he arrived here. They had said to meet them at the crossroads. They had said one more delivery, and he'd be done, he could move on. The backpack had to reach them, they said, and he mustn't look at the contents. The shadowy gap in the zipper seems to call to him,

nonetheless. He stares at the road, its lines stretching unbidden into the grey of dawn, no crossroads in sight. What was he doing? Where was this place? Deep down he knows he should be turning the wheel, navigating, but he knows only that he has been driving for days without any sign of humanity beyond eighteen wheelers and gas-stations. His gaze snaps to the mirror, reflexively, without thought, then back at the road. He looks again, alarm in his eyes.

Something is there.

It has no light, no substance. A smudge, at the edge of the horizon. He knows it. Something following. Something wanting. Whatever's in the backpack, it's wanted. He wishes he hadn't agreed to any of this. He wishes he could remember agreeing to any of this. His decision, his consequences, but he finds he cannot remember the face of who hired him. He knows that any given road might be his last, but for the life of him he can't think of a time he wasn't travelling down one. This life of travel has sent him in a direction that he could not find on any compass, if he carried one. He's travelling on a direct route, and deviation is not a requirement or a possibility. His foot bears down on the accelerator, urging his stuttering steed to greater speeds, hoping for salvation in velocity. Some instinct tells him that if he does not reach his destination before his pursuer reaches him, he will not reach it at all. In the distance he sees the lights of another station, and glances at the empty package of beef jerky on the seat beside him. Ignoring his hunger, the lights swell before him, fill his vision, and fade behind him.

He drives with sweat and fear in his eyes and hears something beyond the thrum of rubber and wind. A keening, like the ringing of a finger on the edge of a glass. It fills the car and his ears. It seeps between his teeth and behind his eyes. The car shudders as the resonance builds, and he looks in the rear-view mirror just as the lights of the gas station disappear. It's not a dimming, or a flash before darkness, just a sudden absence of light and the presence of

something in its place. Shaking, he turns his eyes to the road and focuses on the place where the road meets the horizon, concentrating on the destination. He ignores the sound as best he can, but a new thought has begun to press on his mind. Where is he going? The sweat trickles down past his eye, riveting on the fixed line of darkness that sutures the earth to the sky, and he wonders if he can escape the thing behind him. If whatever is following him wants the thing in the backpack, it might not be the best idea to bring it to the people who want it. What is waiting for him at his destination? Who or what knows and understands such things as that which creeps at the border of light and dark, following the razor's edge of cognizance? The horizon seems to take on a quality of imperceptibility as he stares at it. It's there, waiting for him to reach it, but only through monumental effort will he do so. The traveller's eyes begin to water as he stares, not wanting to turn his eyes from the destination. He stares, willing it to come to him. He stares, slowly becoming convinced that if he takes his eyes off it, it will flee into unbounded distances beyond his comprehension and abandon him to the darkness that hounds him. He wonders if the horizon has been so fleeting since he started this trip.

Something nags at the edge of his attention, something that he realizes he's forgetting. He wrenches his gaze away from the road, blinking to clear his vision, looking to the backpack. Of course, he thinks, this is the key to it all. The traveller wouldn't be on the road if it weren't for this . . . thing. His eyes do battle with the darkness just visible within the gap in the tattered zipper. The darkness inside the backpack is impenetrable, the contents an enigma. His brow begins to furrow at the thought of opening the backpack, of seeing the curse he bears. The consideration that the darkness in the poorly secured vessel that he transports seems to bear a resemblance to the non-thing that follows him begins to nibble at the corner of his mind. It, too, lies just beyond his perceptions. He feels the car around him seem to

expand as his senses become dulled to everything save what he thinks he sees in the shadow. One hand on the wheel, head turned, eyes streaming, the shadow reaching into him, wrenching at his mind.

Get rid of it.

The words find themselves falling soundlessly from his lips as he stares, daring not to look away, at the destination he flees to and from, never at the thing or things which threaten to catch him. He reaches for the bag, gripping the strap, the compulsion to return darkness to darkness dragging his hand through the air. The air slashes at his face and neck as he cranks the window, but as he does, something catches his eyes, something breaking away from the rim of the world. It's the crossroads, it must be. His attention now held by his rapidly approaching salvation, his hand returns to the wheel. As the highway slides past underneath him, drawing him and the crossroads closer together, his jaw sets, and his knuckles whiten. He slows the car and comes to a halt. The traveller sits for a moment, staring, before snatching up the bag and stepping out of the car, but what there is, is the horizon, wavering and still just within reach, the vastness of the division between earth and sky threatening to rend their joining.

There is also a man, in a suit, holding a backpack. They stand at a crossroads.

The man gestures with his free hand, indicating the backpack in the traveller's hand. His face is a terrible thing, difficult even to glance at, but the traveller tries for a moment. Just to see who is responsible for all of this. There is the visage of a predator and the suggestion of flame before the traveller looks away. He does not look again. The rough nylon fabric of the backpack strap pulling his arm to the ground refocuses his attention and he looks down, eye drawn to the dark gap. The ringing of the air is strong around him. The traveller's gaze moves from the backpack, past the man who stands patiently, one hand extended, to the horizon. Something is still there, same as

what pursued him, but it remains just beyond his vision. He focuses on the man, whose hands are gloved in old silk, and whose fingers seem too long. The bag is heavy.

He weighs the options in his mind. His gaze rests on the backpack once more and the darkness inside, so unknown and unseen, so similar to that which lingers in wait for him in the distance, so far away. Now the thought, to open it, to understand it, comes over him. Why not? He's done so much . . . come so far. Surely just a glimpse . . . no. Stepping forward, he lifts his arm. If he doesn't deliver the bag, what was all this for? Surely this is the end meant for him, after so, so long. As the man with the terrible face takes the bag, he lifts his other gloved hand and holds out the new backpack, unblemished, pristine. The traveller shakes his head, no, he can't. The terrible faced man drops the backpack, and the traveller's eyes follow it to the ground . . . the ground that stretches out to the horizon and at the edge of which lies only the smudge of unseen dread.

The backpack is in his hands almost before he can consider his options. Some suggestion of satisfaction flees across the awful face, and the man points at something behind the traveller. The traveller turns and walks to the brown sedan which sits parked, facing down a dark and rainy road edged with a misty brown expanse of rain-soaked fields and rotting hay bales. He gets in, the smell of dust and cigarettes surrounding him. The only thing he sees in the back seat is a ratty blanket that he hopes to use again soon. In the passenger seat is a backpack, unblemished, pristine. The zipper is open just slightly, but the contents remain a mystery as his eye lingers on it. He digs the keys out of his jacket pocket and starts the car, keeping his eyes on the horizon as he pulls out, the motor coughing in its ingratiating way as he pulls out onto the highway.