Not There Yet

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Green, purple, orange, yellow, pink: I count five colors in the map of the United States I have studied for many years, five colors splashed across its festive surface. Each of these colors, when extended over a bounded, unbroken area, constitutes a state; together—the chunks and patches of color jumbled chock-a-block against one another—the several pieces comprise a puzzle or conundrum that some call a country.

I was born in the upper-yellow corner of the western coast of this country.

I can remember taking tentative trips at an early age with my family—yellow to blue, yellow to green and back again—but it was only when I set off on my own that I began to learn what it truly means to travel.

It is 1969, and a pleasant but distractible woman named "Anne" is driving down a city street, her green Ford just beginning its slow curved swing into an intersection. Because she is thinking about something (perhaps a child is sick, or a bill past due, or dinner undetermined) she does not yet see the teenager who has wandered into the crosswalk; a moment later (or, in the lexicon of accidents, a tad "too late") she does see the girl and knows then that the Ford will hit her. And she will feel her heavy foot advance toward the brake, to no avail, as the car continues along its lethal arc. And she will see, from her privileged vantage point, the now gawky girl fly through the air and land, insensible, some yards away.

The girl, for her part, will survive the incident with bruises, contusions, and concussion, and in her youthful way will have quite a story to tell at school. (For weeks to follow, friends and strangers alike will rush up to her in the halls and whisper *You could have been killed* in genuine, urgent wonder.) She will not blame "Anne" for the accident. She will remember the shocked woman bending over her, then turning to bystanders, as though translating from a little known dialect for the benefit of the curious crowd: *She wants to "go home." She says she wants to "go home."* And the girl will recall sinking with relief into intermittent unconsciousness, for it is deeply embarrassing to lie, limbs akimbo, on the street. It is disconcerting to find oneself confounded by the absurdly simple queries the police in the ambulance pose: *What's your name? Where were you going? Can you remember your telephone number?* It is frightening to sense one's true self slipping away as a dopey, endless blankness arises in its place.

In years to come she will only be certain that she was once lofted into air, like a thing, without will or self-awareness.

It is a winter afternoon some years later, and a young woman is riding along the western coast of the country on a passenger train, making a "short hop" between two small cities that lie three hundred miles apart. During this brief trip the train is to take the young woman and others (on trains there are always others) through a series of twisting mountain passes before it levels out into a river valley and edges up to the sea. Each of the passengers has freely chosen this anachronistic conveyance, forgoing the blur of the expressway for a more languid unraveling of landscape.

As the eye is lulled, so too is the ear, the rails clicking off time and space in cadence.

The young woman, having boarded last, finds herself seated beside a gruff stranger who seems averse to such soothing ministrations. He sits resolutely upright, as though to resist the gentle swaying; he speaks in monosyllables, as if to forestall the very possibility of too much talk. In truth, such pointed disengagement sits well with the woman, for she is not much of a "talker" herself. Her bristly companion seems at length to understand this; he offers her the window seat she has secretly coveted from the outset and the two trade places, regarding each other with a feeling that is less than warm but now far greater than begrudging.

All the while the train journeys on. Some read or sit quietly, as if in school, some speak in hushed voices, while others simply drowse off. After some time, even the most animated exchanges begin to ebb, in the desultory rhythms of disconnection, until at length all human sound subsides and only the metallic shift and ring of the rails remains in the air.

Time passes.

From the haze of her half-sleep the young woman hears a strange rumbling, as if rock is being crushed and ground into dust under the car. (She's one of the first to sense that something is amiss; the others seem to take a very long time to wonder whether something is wrong, and longer still to begin to worry.) She looks out the window but can now see nothing, as the thin panes are peppered with tiny particles that collect in opaque clouds. The train remains in motion, its effortless glide forward now a slow, groaning slide sideways. A moment later, in a howl of mechanical agony, a single rail rips up through the floor and spears the car so that it comes to a halt. It appears that she and the others are perched on what seems to be a mountain precipice.

Once the dust has settled, she notices the bloodied face of the man beside her. *It came out of nowhere,* someone says of the suitcase that hit him. He's the only one who's been injured. She watches as railroad personnel place him on an old-fashioned handcar and scoot him around the bend and away.

She and her fellow passengers will then wait for hours in place as the sheepish authorities decide what to do. (*Don't sign a thing,* they will whisper to one another whenever a uniformed figure appears.) As night falls, the temperature will drop and the moon will rise until it hangs still in the sky, a bright disk visible through the large gash in the train's metallic skin. A small fire will break out in the back and dark smoke will drift slowly through the air, whereupon a man in command will finally appear and order the passengers to stand, link arms and walk forward in a single file. *Leave your belongings behind. Do not attempt to take anything with you,* he will bark out, again and again. The group will make its careful way through the darkened car, the procession swaying as the angle of the car's tilt steepens. When they set foot on the ground, they will see only black on either side and will hear the rocks they dislodge fall until even the echo is swallowed up in silence. They will finally reach a waiting rescue train, and after a moment their separate journeys will begin once again.

For some time afterwards the young woman will see before her, upon reflection, the gruff stranger with bandaged head clinging to the comical little handcar, like a character in a silent film, his face blank save for the merest suggestion of surprise.

Begin with yellow: is it possible, in a country of five colors, to drive west to east in such a way as to cross through pink only once and end up at purple? (Hint: the pink swath in the east known as "Pennsylvania" will only seem to be a barrier.) How long would such a trip take, if one rests at night and rides in a blue car that breaks down at the continental divide? (Hint: add two hours' time for a stranger in "Montana" to rig up a radiator.) Can alternate itineraries be devised, one route switched at will for another, or must the course, once plotted, play out as if predetermined? (Hint: all roads, whether busy or abandoned, will come in time to converge.) Can one infer a relation, remote or immediate, between the shifting surface configurations of these five colors and the four cardinal points of the compass? (Hint: experienced travelers sooner or later abandon the very idea of direction.) How quickly must one travel to arrive at a destination that hovers just beyond reach? Can one never be entirely at rest? Is one always to remain "on the road"?

I have to admit that most of these questions still stump me.

It is the first day of the kind of journey one undertakes only once in a lifetime, and a young woman in a car is sailing eastward on a long, smooth concrete strip that seems to have no end. She's traveling to a school on the other side of the country, leaving behind the only place she's ever known. It's a temporary relocation; once she gets her degree she plans to come back.

Her companion has nodded off beside her, but she remains alert, fixed upon a point in space that lies "dead ahead." For the young woman, though she cannot know this now, that point holds the promise of life itself moving forward, of time passing to some purpose, and so she has willingly taken the wheel on this trip though driving fills her with mild dread. If she were to ask herself at this moment just what makes her anxious, she would probably answer *trucks* or *too much traffic,* and only after years had passed would she realize that this hasty formulation was at best half the truth. She would sense, by then, that there is a dark side to all setting out, an unease that even the most thorough preparations can scarcely mask.

For now, she and her companion have vowed to "make" 600 miles a day and so they are pushing the little car to its limits, with hardly a moment given to idle musing. She's dutifully studied the traveler's exhortations in their Road Atlas; he scoffs at the very idea of seeking advice. (*When you enter an Interstate don't dawdle—accelerate as quickly*

as you safely can to travel along with the traffic you've just joined.) Their goal—or "guesstimate," as he terms it—has been calculated according to casual reckonings of just how long the car can travel in the August heat before its engine seizes up. *(Be alert to situations ahead on the highway; be aware of traffic behind you.)* If the two were a bit older, they might worry about just how settled over time one can seem to become, how easily a loose term like "temporary" can be tailored to one's life, acquiring its true meaning by accretion, one "just for now" layered onto another until there's no turning back. *(If you must stop, raise the hood of the car and tie a white cloth to your radio aerial. Do not walk along the highway looking for help.)* But for now they drive on, marking off the miles on their map.

At the time of their trip, according to the atlas, some 694,409 people reside in the state of Montana, but very few of them can be found in the vicinity of Miles City. It's hard not to notice the ten routes to somewhere else that radiate from the tiny black dot marking the little town on the mileage map, the cluster of straight red lines shooting out to Helena, Great Falls, Havre, Regina, Willston, Bismarck, Aberdeen, Rapid City, Sheridan or Billings. It appears as if the map itself is urging visitors to move on. But for those driving into town for the first time, Miles City seems special enough to stop at.

Years later, all the woman will remember of Miles City is the diner they stopped at for milkshakes—its pink Formica counters, the older waitress wearing a stiff white cap, the oddly slanted parking spaces skewing the street outside at angles. The rest of the town will have vanished from view. This will seem, at first, a disturbing failure of recollective faculties, but the woman will realize in time that the little she remembers of Miles City and one other town along the way is more than she can imagine of the rest of the trip in its entirety. And she will hold fast to those few details, as if together they constitute not tiny pieces of a fading picture but the whole of a panoramic vision that stretches, like a brightly colored strip, across the far emptier expanse of time and space itself.

It is Saturday night in Richardton, North Dakota, a flat, settled patch of several thousand square feet surrounded by limitless prairie. The tiny town—a couple of buildings and cars—would drift away (the girl thinks) were it not for the single grain silo that stands on the town's edge, just off the road, holding the insubstantial settlement in place. The sheer verticality of the structure surprises her, for up to now the country they've driven through has consisted only of squares and rectangles, pressed fast against the earth; this upward sweep strikes her now as unnatural. But the eye adjusts to anomalies, and soon enough these travelers from the city move past the rural vista as though they've looked at it all their lives.

Once in town, the two discover that the narrow road they've ridden along for miles has shed its unassuming character and suddenly become "Main Street," a three-block long boulevard that seems the locus of public life. (*Welcome to Richardton,* the sign declares, as if to invite intrusion.) They slow down and pass shops that seem picturesque but oddly impermanent, as though only facades on a film set. For a time the entire town appears devoid of life. But as they survey the street human forms begin to rise up against the backdrop; some lean out doors, others watch from behind windows, but all follow the path of the blue car with out-of-state plates that has suddenly driven into and become part of the picture.

Neither of the two can shake the disconcerting sense of being under observation. They park as inconspicuously as possible and head for the only diner in town. As they walk two kids in hot rods begin to race back and forth, making the most of the shortest main drag imaginable, as if to say that Saturday night in this small town belongs to those who really live there.

Finally, the two—feeling like foreigners—retreat with some relief to a motel room, where they stay out of sight until ready to move on the next morning.

At the time, the young woman thinks these residents of Richardton oddly unforthcoming, but later she will come to acknowledge the rarity of lasting connections. For she herself lay next to someone she cared for and knew well that whole night; yet, years later, long after they've gone their separate ways, she will find that she cannot summon up the slightest remembrance of what he was thinking about or saying or feeling on that occasion. In truth, she cannot even retrospectively place him in the room. It's as if she had made the entire trip alone. And so, while she refers to conversations and experiences and such they shared, she is merely imagining, sketching in the image of one more stranger she met along the way.

The maps we study in childhood are large and cheerful, their colors, angles and curves jauntily strewn across the whole of an unsullied surface. The maps we glance at as adults, however, bear another aspect altogether. The oversized expanses that once delighted us become, one day, unwieldy, and so are compressed into tiny rectangles that can be folded and hidden away. These narrow panels—drained of color, suffused instead with information—possess undeniable utility. But some lament this grown-up vision of the world, for who can look without dismay at something one does not wish to see?

It is a December afternoon in 1989, and a woman who lives in the eastern part of the country stands expectantly at an Amtrak station in West Oakland, California, where she is to meet family before traveling across the bay. The area is bleak and edgy; she would never choose to linger here if she weren't on her way to someplace else.

Once assembled the group sets out for the car. Suddenly the woman halts. (*What's the problem?* the others proclaim.) This station, she explains, must be within blocks of the place where the big earthquake hit just two months earlier, the one they all watched on television, and now they have the chance to see it for themselves. She breaks off. Each member of the group reflects. They decide to risk the detour and move with renewed purpose to the car.

They drive slowly through the area—full of "junkers" and grime-ridden buildings fenced off by razor wire —looking for telltale signs of devastation. Each of several side streets they turn into is cut off by a slash of freeway, a dead end of man's doing that forces them back. Strangely, the surroundings suggest not sudden disaster but decay; the rubble that surrounds them seems to have collected, in a ponderously slow process, over years rather than weeks. And the landscape is oddly monochromatic.

Most surprisingly, nothing the group views through the car windows evokes the distinctive images they saw on television. Buildings, streets, blocks that were easily encompassed within that small screen now rise up to dwarf them; twist as they might, they see only parts rather than wholes, pieces rather than pictures. (The view through the back window, upside-down diagonal, is especially disorienting.) They seem to be lost, unable to get their bearings. They resolve, reluctantly, to abandon the search.

Just as they begin to turn back toward the station the woman sees a wisp of green in the distance, behind the freeway, and the whole picture falls into place. *Those are the trees,* she shouts, *those are the cypress trees. We must be near the place where Dan Rather stood.* And the others also remember the news reports and see the trees that served as their backdrop, and a modest thrill of recognition runs through them. The group is once again galvanized. *Follow the freeway. All we have to do is follow the freeway.*

And so they move on, trailing after a stretch of concrete and steel known as "The Cypress Structure."

No one is prepared for the awesome sight when it finally veers into view, the trail abruptly come to an end: the double-decker freeway has been sheared off with such precision that it stands in imperious suspension. The massive slabs might be mistaken for some kind of ancient monument. On the ground a few half-crushed cars have been pushed against the fence, colorful tangles of metal now begun to corrode like everything else in the area. (How odd, she thinks, to see a Porsche in this place.) No one speaks. The roadway beneath this now vanished section of freeway seems as spacious and open as a European boulevard. They drive half a mile farther until the other end of the structure comes into view. Unlike its cleanly amputated counterpart this piece has been left in its natural state, its deck twisted and snapped so that it comes to a pained rest on the ground. Though the site has been fenced off, they can walk to within twenty-five feet of the gray rubble adorned by orange flags.

So this is "it," she muses. *This is the place where the earth convulsed for seventeen seconds and the freeway fell.* And she tries to imagine what it would have been like to have been caught unaware on this road, on that day, in the middle of a crosstown trip you had made a thousand times without thinking, knowing the way so well you could almost have closed your eyes. What would it be like? To find yourself first in one state, then in another, like a body in motion that moves unburdened by memory?

A hazy thought begins to form, a distant recollection.

But it is difficult to sustain such ruminations in an area where extremity has taken on an everyday coloration and seems itself so ordinary. She stops posing fanciful questions of herself and turns away from the spectacle, ready for the trip back.

Only then does she notice the tiny matchbox building not fifty feet away. It seems a startling sign of life on a block

so long abandoned. On the second story level an elderly woman sits at a table and looks out at the street below, her steady gaze taking in these gawkers. The younger woman gazes back. And she seems to hear the woman speak, as if to say *I saw it happen. Right there. It happened right there.*

And she imagines that the old woman continues to speak so that only she may hear.

You don't have to go out searching for anything. Just sit still and keep your eyes open and one day, whether you like it or not, it will all come to you.

It's the summer of 2007, on a warm night in northern California, and a fairly seasoned traveler has just completed the first leg of another trip out west. She's soon to leave on a secondary trip to Alaska, a place she's always hoped to visit.

She and her companions are looking forward to "flightseeing" in a floatplane. They've arranged for a thirty-minute ride to their island destination, a trip that would otherwise take three hours on the ferry. She's never been nervous about small planes, though a pilot once told her, almost casually, that the aerodynamics of such craft were problematic (*it's a crap shoot*); she thinks it would be fun to take off and land on the water, and the pontoons make the little planes look almost friendly. It's something to have done at least once in your life, and she isn't getting any younger.

They're set to leave in two days.

At 4:32 a.m., more or less, she's jerked awake by sudden movement, something not quite normal. It takes her a moment to recognize the telltale effects of an earthquake (it's been some years since she experienced one). For several extended seconds the room sways, the floor heaves, and a mild nausea threatens to take hold.

But the quake exhausts itself in fitful shudders. Maybe she dreamt it, after all, it wouldn't be the first time.

She turns on the radio.

Night owls are already calling into newsrooms, confirming the event. *It was only 4.2, the Hayward Fault again, nothing to worry about.* It's the kind of intermittent disruption that people in these parts have learned to take in stride (like the Zodiac, every few years, breaking his silence to send another letter). Storekeepers are already sweeping up the mess; it looks like the local donut shop won't be serving the goods on display in the window, now covered with glassy sprinkles. But another batch can be made tomorrow.

As an afterthought, the newscaster reports that a small plane with four tourists on board has just gone down in Alaska.

It seems the anxieties, like the aftershocks, have already moved farther north.

There isn't enough time to do preemptive research on floatplane fatalities before they depart. Not enough time to learn that the FAA logs three such accidents a year, give or take, most traced back to pilot error or the hazards of changeable weather.

Certainly no time to dwell upon the myriad ways in which something up there can go wrong.

A wing can fall off if a plane climbs too steeply, or a sudden downdraft can blow it straight into trees scattered like spikes over land. Or a plane can plunge into the ocean, if it loses power, at which point it might suffer what the experts call a *structural failure of the floats.* It's even conceivable that a pilot could refuse to turn back as the weather worsens, a twofer of sorts, almost ensuring a bad end.

Still, she wants to take the trip, though they're booked on the same local airline that suffered the crash. As one of her companions notes, *the drive to the airport is more dangerous.*

And news bulletins always seem to be written about somebody else.

Once in Alaska, they leave their 737 and haul their stuff to the floatplane area of the airport, not much more than a cardboard sign attached to a makeshift counter. The clerk weighs their bags and asks for the weight of each passenger (strictly the honor system, but everyone knows it would be foolish to fudge the numbers). They're sent down to the dock where their little plane awaits them.

It's a DeHavilland, a 6-seater with a bright strip of blue on its side. (It looks even more like a toy than she'd imagined.) The cramped cabin is bare except for some metal seats and straps. Before they take off, it seems only prudent to check the pilot out—is he the kind who might make an error? Something more serious than a mistake? He doesn't say much, but he settles into his seat as if he belongs there (the way some settle onto bar stools) and she finds that reassuring.

She's seated right behind him, she's close enough to throw some of the switches herself—the adjustable flaps (*Takeoff—Climb—Cruise*) or even the throttle (*Idle—Full*).

But most of the gauges are mystifying. She can only make sense of one dial, a picture of sorts, with two yellow bars balanced above a blue line. That must be some kind of gyro, a simulated horizon, she's seen them in computer games; they should be fine as long as the little wings stay level.

They're ready for takeoff. No turning back now. The plane skims along the surface, straining to gain speed, the water whipped to a froth as they rise. Once airborne they begin to bounce as they battle the currents (in all her years of traveling in jets, she's rarely had the chance to experience the physical sensation of flying.) A plane this small can't impose itself on its surroundings; it has to negotiate its way forward.

They level off at 500 feet.

She hadn't expected the noise. Of course they're right next to the engine. The roar precludes any possibility of conversation, so the passengers are freed to look out at the landscape. She can count the rivets on the wing above her window.

She notices that the aluminum shell of the plane seems to mirror the silver-grey sky. She doesn't notice that the worry has slipped away, like an encumbrance left back on land.

Below them is a stunning expanse of green and blue, thousands of trees encircled by the most pristine body of water she's ever seen. There's a snow-tipped glacier farther ahead; it seems almost delicate from this distance. The only hint of wildness is in the sky itself, where low hanging banks of darkened clouds drift above them.

For thirty minutes she just looks.

Later, when she's back in cities and traffic, caught up in the intricacies of life on the ground again, she'll attempt to recapture the experience. She'll feel she's on to something, some kind of larger perception, some inchoate epiphany, but it's no use. It's gone. Whatever she learned there she left there, thousands of miles away.

Maybe just knowing that is enough.

The map I study at present pulses with colors that run, swirl and drip from edge to edge so that place names and borders are obscured, claims pressed with no conviction. Its reds and yellows flare up like flames, muted only slightly by scattered pools of blue. At its center an ashen slash of black draws the eye inward, colors and shapes converging, as though land mass and ocean alike were pitched in lasting transmutation. It is an image of radiant energy, an image that burns to nothing and leaves no trace of places or travels past. Because this map is a representation and not a reality, it depicts a pure immediacy I can only imagine, and a state of grace to which I can only aspire.