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On Fire

As it streaks I wish it was on fire with a certain part of my mind. It's the part of my imagination that wishes for everything to be ultimately epic, majestic, soaring across the sky with an infinite grace of timely artistic endeavor—the sort of swelling of symphonic brass and strings that carries a piece of film into more than the perception of motion brought by the rapid acceleration of light through the tinted layers to screen, the fingers of the gradients tracing hot music on the pure white wall, making a crashing aircraft into sculpture for the audience.

Yes, I wish that car was on fire, smoke trailing in the thin black veils of clothing, flying off of it as it readies itself for the sexual abandon of the asphalt beneath it, gripping the oily flesh of roadway beneath nails under tension, clawing its way forward, rubbing against that cushion of air forming underneath it. And I know the driver wishes it was as well. I can hear it now in how he presses the pedals, pushing gears into each other at those spinning high speeds, letting the turns of the grade be felt in the shifting shoulders of the suspension, perhaps a bit looser than they should be, as if plied by intoxicants into a willingly bent roll in the sheets of this humid night.

And the flames would lap up the paint, towards the windows full open, heating the driver and his passenger with the temperature that doesn't cause sweat, at least not yet, because that sort of heat is the one they are running from, and this sort of heat is the one they take with them, chasing up their legs towards their stomachs, pinching them in their muscles, as they hold the interior like they will hold each other.

They've been driving for an hour now, across the city first, before breaking away and into the bottoms of the hills, the grid lines beginning to twist suggestively, mentioning it, before lashing out with the steeply rising cliff faces, to which the road adheres, running up the sides of the inset valleys, under the complacently attractive physics of control. Nothing more than it's capable of, and this is its attraction, the fantasy of driving, exactly what we expect.

And this is why the driver headed towards these hills, out from the city, though he did not know the way. He knew what he would find, and his passenger did too, it was why she suggested it, and why he said yes with nothing more than the steering wheel, no signal, no speech, but just a turn from the boulevard out along a thin double lane. A roar of the engine, and towards the sky they went, lighting sparks on the rear fender, and fanning the flame.

They've been on the road for hours now, as I watch from above. First it's business, as it is every evening. I ride above them in the wake of their airstream, as they head out from their apartment building, spinning tires against the concrete as they leave the garage, this sugar-blocked bedding place for vehicles, keeping them close at hand, pins drawn across gears to keep them still in a twisting square of perpendicular ramps. All the trapped energy takes them out and down, into the street. Their music thumps, quick beat of the early twilight, as the pitch of the light shifts. They stop at the lights, they take the turns. They accelerate and they break. They are making something with these motions, something that most will never see, without my vantage point. They spin around the blocks, and make the phone calls, and meet the people. The computer on the dashboard tracks the journey as I do, but they pay more attention to the radio. They pay attention to what matters.

They meet a customer, a young man, no older than they. At a corner the car screeches to a halt, and he gets in the

back seat. He doesn't fasten his seat belt, but they have theirs clicked securely. It is the law, after all. A quick conversation, and a simple exchange. They've driven once around the block, and they are back again. The passenger is dropped off, and the car drives away. The exhaust is a smell complacent with the city, an element of it, like water over the rocks. The headlights start to come on around the city, and the cars talk to each other in the beams.

And it's a quick dodge onto the highway, a shuffle of the suspension, and faster now to meet the flow of traffic. The small red car races across the city, underneath the streets, with the rest. I watch their dot move in the reddening sun. And off again, up the avenue, and around the block. One way streets are a spiral, a dance move, a quick trip and flare of the wheel, and we're back again, picking up a new customer.

I don't know where they come from. I don't see them being made. I have tried to watch, tracking the newer cars from the lots, back to the well-lit zones where they all seem to have driven from originally. And I see them off-loaded off of trucks, arranged in the lot like vegetables on a cart. They are driven away and replaced, driven away and replaced. I have followed the large trucks back to the freeway, back out of the city, and away. Where they come from, I don't know. Even I have my limits—the finite extension of my interest, and where I'm willing to go.

They've left the customer and continued, spinning up the avenue, navigating the lanes like ladders, back and forth, across the scaffold, swinging around other cars, and pedestrians. Through the traffic lights, and their headlamps shining back—I feel that the all the lights communicate, they work together, keeping the vehicles buoyant and alight. They are a giant network of spider's web, spanning the intersections, the lights of the buildings and the parking lots, neon powering, the sodium-vapor defusing, and the little gaps between the white headlights and red taillights spinning together in machiniac concert like the thousand grooved wheels on a train.

But they flip, and exchange, like an automobile conversation in the dancing street riot of the traffic. They switch, and they turn, and they pass, and they follow. Acrobats on the wire, always an inch away from collision. They move in slow motion, passing cars at incredible speed, crawling past them now, as they both pass others. They travel in the same direction, they pass each other going opposite ways, they accelerate into stillness and reverse into the slots between other cars on the road, disgorging people and swallowing them up, moving and standing fixed in space. I grow dizzy, and take up my observing position far up in the sky, where I can hopefully take it all in.

They are the insects of mass communication, mass transportation, and mass integration. They are the weapons of war, passing each other in the sky, mindless of all but the thin wisps of vapor they leave in their wake, a displacement of air, a change in pressure only I can feel. They are so numerous that it cannot be any other way—these are the spinning gears of a massive machine, and without the others there would be none. Each car is a piece, and they look to the others for the rule. They look to the commercial, to the billboard, to the newest models roaring out into the street. They dance the cultural dance, which is not as much learned as it is ongoing, never to stop and probably never having had a definitive start, and least as nothing I have seen, waking as I did one day in my cloud and looking below me to see these insects alive and digging across the face of this earth.

But they are all so different, each and every one. They have little spirits whirring beneath their hoods, and I love them each for their own reasons, as they stay still and drive on, as they whiz past each other and everything else, leaving their spinning columns of air to suck dust and throw it up into my breath, and as they collide with each other, as they do from time to time, crumpling plastic bumper and steel frame alike, sending their contents pitching and flipping through the air, and into all kinds of deadly places. The fast spinning pieces touch and break apart, sending their fragments exploding outward through casing and hood, their attractive auto glass turns opaque in a nest of impending shards, letting the wind flow through as they fall end over end, into pavement and light post, into plate glass and into person. Only when they have come to a stop, and the smoke or flame begins within the hulks, the others come to a stop and surround to watch—only then to the thin streams of red flow out of the cracks, from those fragile little inhabitants, who ride in these cars with such abandon to all they know of nature, of the world,

and of their own flesh.

And yet, I can't help but love them, and some more than others. Like my little red car, depositing a last passenger by the side of a street covered in houses, as the sun begins to set. It is the time now, when things start to happen inside these vehicles that I don't understand. She mentions the destination to him, and he agrees wordlessly. Now they are flying out of the city, up into the hills, and I see them below, and that part of me wishes its sacred, secret wishes. I wish it looked the way my mind imagines it as it speeds, hurdling, reckless within its own control, through the darkening sky. I wish it would stand out with destructive glow against the background of the street and the trees, now fading indistinguishable with the night. I wish it sounded like a terrible army, galloping through the night, translating the music coming from the interior speakers into the timeless terror we all can hear, that resounding wish for the acceleration towards death, the pleasure of pedals bent deep into their arc, to the point of pain, the universal pain, on fire within its chambers, the thermodynamics of matter releasing energy, never to transform back again.

As they circle upward, towards the ridge on the edge of the cliffs, the feeling inside the car only grows. I sense this well enough, as the sound and the warmth of the interior continued to billow out of the windows, open even in the cool of the mountain evening so as to partake in the air free of those city inhibitions, and those daily business issues, to expell nothing more than the mundane repetition of routine as the car circled round those endless streets, tracing gridlines again and again as if they might one day be marked permanently into the earth, as if such a thing was possible, and as if this meant they would not need to travel them again. And now they reach the top, following the course of the road along the top of the ridge, and finally dipping over into the plateau beyond, stretching endlessly into the night that had fallen over them, a night that no doubt blankets the city within its warm shawl of closed awareness somewhere behind them, and meanwhile hides the shape of the land in front of them. They continued onward, their tank filled with gas, driving ever faster on the now straight road, following the only light available in their headlights, reflected in the moon. They accelerate—always accelerate.

Perhaps they are holding hands within the small red car. Perhaps they stop looking forward to glance at each other in the dark, the soft glow of the instrument panels illuminating their wet eyes just enough to see. Perhaps they shut off the music and listen only to the sound of the engine and the tires on the road. The tires on the road hum with the vibration, and the spinning of endless circles in orbit around the axle. It is a song without melody. And it simply plays, sung by no one, and listened to by few. It is a song that I can hear. I listen to it now.

Perhaps in the morning they will stop somewhere, pulling the car over to the side of the road, engage the brake, and turn off the ignition. The motor will click and hum with the heat that has built within it, now allowed to dissipate. They will open their doors and step out into the chill air, feeling the strange warmth of the land beneath their feet, heated by the frantic pace of their passage. They will walk, testing their legs again, to see if they remember how it works. They will look at each other, and look at the car, and perhaps think about how far they have traveled. Perhaps they will think about how far they have to return to the city.

But no—this will not happen. I do not wish for it to be this way, and this is a wish that does not require my imagination. My mind is not unlimited, and yet, certain things must happen. As they speed down the road, heading straight along the asphalt, spinning tires towards infinity, the suspension gets a bit lighter. The headlights, now raised to a higher height, shine a bit further down the darkness of the lane in front of them. Now the tires lift off the ground. First free of the friction and weight of the vehicle, the engine races, but then drops its revolutions, and is quiet: hot, but quiet. No longer on the earth, the steering and the brakes are useless. The red car is hydroplaning—not on liquid, but on my wish alone.

They continue to look ahead now, staring into the moon, as they rise from the road. As they pick up speed, driving as fast as they can, the curvature of the earth begins to fall away beneath them. Finally they reach a rate of progress

fast enough, and the color of the paint begins to blur, left in the air behind them like rubber on the pavement. They peel away, and the vehicle grows dim. Rocketing away from the earth, the man and woman in the car become invisible, fading with that repeating hum of the rubber, out into the night. They will leave it all behind, taking nothing, the last tread of their tires a streak of flame across the night sky.

They write songs about imaginations like this. About cars, and boys, and girls, and tires, and roads, and trees, and cliffs, and the air, and the light, and the moon. That is not what I want. I just want them to drive. I want them to drive their car together. I want them to drive on fire.