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Driving By Night

by Mark Henkes

Driving during the night, a drive-by-night, can be a silent cow, furrowed dirt in the dark, squawking blackbird experience. You don't see roadrunners scurrying in the dark, and what you don't see one imagines as you travel through the countryside at 60 miles per hour. You look to the left of the state highway and compare this to what is seen when one looks to the right and you think each side of the highway must be the same—a barn, a barn animal, a silo, a grain elevator, grains spilled on the ground, a wheelbarrow, a shovel, so silent, nocturnally humble, plants punching quietly through the soil under the maternal light of a conscientious moon that oversees the growth of the silently thriving countryside while you curiously drive the road that divides the flatland.

A smell, stronger than the salty popcorn you recently ate, more pungent, deep, from the plants growing in that rich soil, allows your mind to reach many miles into the night and guess how many flora and fauna contribute to the mysterious odor that has interrupted your nose. It is not the stench of oil and its wells. The oilfields are well behind you. No, this smell is of earth, of grain, of dung, grass chewed by cattle, hay and oats, dry soil overturned by machines and revitalized, pushing beetles and ants from their comfortable burrows, uprooting weeds and forcing them to dry and shrivel, fresh weeds and fresh soil over here and fresh grass and hay and oats for the cows and horses, something fresh and moist and warm that cools in the cool night air, heated clouds that rise in every stall and every barn and in every field and every clump of overturned weeds where warm and cool air mix gently.

Where there was once blackness now peek two orange lights many lengths behind you, creeping up slowly, now four lights, eight, yellow lights, red-orange, bouncing, bumping, beaming toward you as they speed their way closer and they are

catching you, they will catch you. Yet there is no concern because the truck drivers have been gentle all night. They have not been reckless, they have not driven you off the road, they don't honk, blind you with their brights, drive in the left half of your lane as they pass. They have been quite the gentlemen tonight or maybe some of them wear a dirty dress and torn pantyhose.

A lonely sign with an arrow points—"cemetery."

Who could be buried here? Someone born before 1900. A Civil War soldier. Slave. Slave owner. Plantation owner. A mayor of some town no longer on the map. A man who slapped his wife. A baby that died only three weeks old. A man who suffered from lumbago. A man who died before the car was invented. A child who was burned by a wildfire. A deaf and dumb man. A wife who could not cook pancakes. A man who robbed a bank, whose left leg was longer than the right, who did not own a suit and tie. Flesh long ago rotted, bones brittle. Have to go in and find the bones. Bring in the coroner. Match dental records. DNA tests will tell everything. Could be a famous gunslinger. Did the man drink? The bones will show. Rotgut whiskey. Farmwork stretches and strains backs. Hoeing into hard, dry soil, backs bent, shoes filled with dirt, they wipe their sweaty brows with grimy hands. Like your great-grandfather, the old farmer, deep crevasses in his face, sad eyes, fractured skull, weathered hair and back bent with years of backbending sunbleached labor. He never knew you because you were a child, ignorant and the child of his grandchildren, too young to teach, clean and spoiled and running through his wheatfield like a playful little dog, playing hide and seek behind his broken wooden plow.

It's a skull, it IS a skull, not in the cemetery, it's the lights, the trucklights, coming faster, shaped like a skull, coming faster, wants to pass, the skull



staring at your small car, making you submit to its 18 wheels, the roar, the heavy bounce, probably has a full load of lumber with shafts of loose rebar crammed into the upper corners, the fuselage rumbling into the left lane, the skull creeping and lurching, jumping and munching at the trunk of your vehicle in ominous red-orange and yellow skullights. Like a snake devouring a helpless mouse, the skull reaches your backdoor, the frontdoor, the rearview mirror, your headlights. The skull-lights haunt the blackness, surge ahead into a black vastness as small insects fly by lights and disappear, perhaps crashing to the ground, perhaps escaping the cyclonic wave of air.

Winds, not the blowing and sucking of the truck that has already passed you but rather, winds from the depth of the midnight countryside, buffet your vehicle. Dirty air, a duststorm, flies across the shoulder and into the highway. No roadrunner could cross this flying dirt and you see no birds in the roadway. Here comes the tumbleweed, thick and fast, ripped and fragmented, bouncing and rolling as it approaches the asphalt, traveling in waves like a deep vast sea or a herd of marching insects, reflecting brilliantly to your headlights. This is no small wind because small winds do not unlock so many weeds from their moorings. Weedballs dare you to crush them. Large balls aim for the hood of your car which smashes them, exploding almost happily in defiance of your machine. The weed remnants hang on your car, they attach to your wheels and along the chassis, groaning with the tires and scratching the asphalt, refusing to surrender. You hear the broken weeds clinging to the bottom of your car, making noises that vex you because they screech—your aching car has been attacked and needs repair. The skulllight truck is far ahead of you now, it has survived the rumbling tumbleweed, but you are not sure, and the weeds continue to roll and cross the road, roll and cross, the small ones are crushed like waves of seawater and explode the larger like torpedoes aimed at your hood. No raindrops drip from your windshield and

the wind subsides, the weeds attack no longer. Hundreds of tumbleweeds line the shoulder of the road like soldiers waiting anxiously for an attack signal from their commanding officer. You ride the berm, crushing a layer of suspended lifeless thistles, stopping your car alongside a wounded armadillo.

The armadillo squirms and twitches, it has been smashed on one side. The truck with the skullights might have injured the mammal. But you don't have time for the injured, so you examine the car where dozens of weeds cling to the vulnerable underbelly. You pull them out, one by one, weeds scratching the asphalt as you grab and rip them. Thistles stick to the hood, the windshield, the wheels, the tires, the chassis, and tear them apart and crush them with your shoes. The wind is nowhere, the tumbleweeds are silent and inert. They anticipate along the berm for a gust to push them, for the colonel to give them instructions.

The armadillo grunts and chokes, it's slowly dying, so you jump in the car to escape, to drive many healthy miles away from this. But the car will not start. You turn the key again and the engine rumbles and rolls. Again, it does not move. You hear the animal whining from inside the car. There is only one method of escape—walking to the animal, its grunting and whining and bleeding, you kick it toward the brush. It spirals in the air and carves a path into the grass. You hear no sound and hope it is dead. You put the key in the ignition again and detect a vomit-inducing smell.

Putrescence and rot—what if it's an oil worker sneaking behind you with a rope ready to strangle? What about a hungry, tired hitchhiker who wants to steal your cash? A woman who escaped a state prison and dripped birthblood on the front of her prison garb? A convicted murderer who has two claycaked shoes and a broken jaw? Sure, it could be a murderer carrying an ax, one with dried urine on his pantlegs. Or possibly a prostitute who hasn't bathed or showered in six months. What about a pedophile—your grandfather, an oil worker, forced you to drive his oilsmearred stickshift truck when



you were ten years old.

You failed. He screamed and accused you of ruining his transmission. He didn't know you had never driven a truck. He didn't know your father never taught you. Your grandfather used to be a lumberjack and he said he trimmed his toenails with an ax. He was stronger than your father, defeating everyone at armwrestling on a tree stump or at the kitchen table. You try the ignition once more.

It works! It works! The car is running, and you want to run as fast as you can from whatever is causing this stench. You open the driver's side window, but the smell is even stronger on the outside. The window, shut it. You've wasted time, too much thinking, get the car going. God, what a stink! You press the accelerator and begin to crush dormant weedballs. 5 miles per hour.

What about your grandfather? Back there, a few miles back. Maybe. Sure. You exposed him. You mocked him and his father. Right? Made them feel—not guilty, but angry. Stupid. Old. Ignorant. Buried in cheap coffins. You insinuated that the past, the previous decades, were not worth living. Worthless and sad. Crushed skulls, rotten teeth. It's your ancestors. They're after you. Gotta get goin'. Gotta get outta here. 10 miles per hour. Go car, go. Go! Get outta here. Faster! This is embarrassing. You're thinking too much. Your car crushes the layer of tumbleweed and moves onto the highway.

You can certainly imagine the farmer whose legs were crushed when his horse buckled and fell 150 years ago; and the woman who died a dreadful death on these low plains of some incurable disease; or the boy whose rotten teeth reeked so badly he couldn't smell his food when he ate dinner; your family probably froze during a snowstorm and their fingers and knuckles were numb forever. You can imagine the life they wanted and the life they never received—they want your gym shoes, your refrigerator, apartment, car, clothes, job, highway map, clean transmission fluid, the solid oak coffin with the crushed velvet lining which you put on layaway last year.

Please! 20 miles per hour. Hurry, press the pedal, God's pedal, please, 30, 35. The year is 1855 and the ancestors remember their pain, their pine coffins are rotted and nothing stops them from searching for you. Don't want to look back. Ghosts, the ancients trudge behind you, don't look back. 1855, 1860, so very patient, they want to flash dusty spider webs in your face and hand you clocks that broke and stopped before Abraham Lincoln was assassinated and mice that were eaten by cats who were owned by farmers who lived on potatoes and radishes. Their poisoned blood and broken skulls want to possess your mind and repossess your vehicle with age and dank places and horrid smells and fatal diseases of the heart and blood.

Then you gain confidence—the stars shine above and ahead of you, you push the pedal—45 miles per hour, 50. You seek the present and an optimistic future, the sounds of buzzing insects—yes, they are alive and buzzing a song, and you believe you heard a blackbird squawking in the darkness. Yes, your life may be salvaged, just keep going, don't jerk your head, life is ahead and above the horizon and what is below the ground should not be investigated or even criticized. The dead gave you life but they cannot take away the future. They never knew you and therefore only want the sweetness and beauty they knew during their lifetimes. They can anticipate nothing, therefore they do not want your life.

You smile when you recognize the Big Dipper in the black sky and then Little Dipper. Yes, there's a barn to your left and behind it probably—yes, it must be—cows, you hear, it must be cows chewing on grass, they're chewing and the chewing has saved you, and isn't that dung steaming in the night air? Steam means life and you are alive like the crickets and the grasshoppers and the beetles digging in the dung and the cows chewing, chewing. You are far away from the past now, the dirty, ignorant past, and everything will be fine now, everything will be fine.

