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Diane Glancy

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Road

by Diane Glancy

The fire of God is fallen from heaven,
and hath burned up the sheep.

Job 1:16

Behold now, I have two daughters which have
not known man; let me, I pray you, bring
them out unto you, and do ye to them as is
good in your eyes.

Genesis 19:8

She was on the road all the time. She couldn't stop traveling. She had to feel the land passing under her. She had one daughter with a sick child. Another daughter without a job. She had to keep moving between them. She could talk to her companion on the phone. How could they be close when she was always gone? He would ask. Well, she had to keep traveling and he couldn't always follow.

The road pulled against the hard things she had to pull against. The twenty-pound turkey her one daughter had bought when there were just the four of them and one was the sick child. She'd thawed the frozen bird in the bathtub in cold water all night. Her daughter's sink in the kitchen was not deep enough to cover it. She remembered her daughters' frustration and impatience. Her temper at being constrained in a small box of life. She wanted to kick against the walls of the apartment. Knock it down. Start over.

She had felt a tearing in herself as she worked in the kitchen with her daughter. She was angry because she'd worked hard to sew her life together and her daughters' problems were pulling at the stitches.

When was she coming back? He asked on the phone.

She remembered she'd watched television as she talked to her companion. Switching back and forth between the channels. There'd been a drought in Australia. Another drought in Africa. She remembered the kangaroo running. There were brush fires in the Blue Mountains in Australia near Sydney. Then she watched a baby elephant in Africa who couldn't stand.

I thought the lions were going to eat him, she said on the phone.

She remembered the mother tossing him with her foot to get him to stand. But, the little elephant couldn't stand. He had tried pathetically to follow the herd, walking on the knees of his front legs. Not even able to reach his mother to nurse.

She loved calling him her boyfriend. They were both grandparents. Their lives were established, yet there was that longing for companionship, for otherness. But their lives were separate. She was always traveling. Oklahoma to Missouri to Kansas to Oklahoma. Listening to the gospel on the radio. She went

to church while he was content to read the Sunday paper and say he'd like to go. Maybe someday he would go, but for now she went to church by herself.

There'd been another calf born. Was it Australia? Africa? He was hardly breathing in the hot sun. She remembered the drought again when she talked to her boyfriend on the road. The mother had lifted him in the air in her trunk and carried him above her head in the shade of a scraggly bush.

Then there'd been an elephant in labor. Her thin tail high in the air as she stepped backwards. She wouldn't go near her baby when it was born and another elephant removed the sack and saw it was stillborn. Still another elephant touched the dead calf with her back feet in an elephant ceremony, kicking up the ground as if searching for roots in drought.

The little elephant who couldn't stand was bigger than any calf the commentator had seen. He'd been cramped in the womb with his legs under him. He couldn't straighten his front legs. He'd rub his knees raw trying to walk that way and they'd get infected. And the little elephant still couldn't stand. He'd still fall over when he'd try to reach his mother for her milk.

But wildlife regulations and objectivism prevented the commentator or the park officials from doing anything.

She had looked away from the television. It reminded her of her daughter's child. The burning African fever she'd felt when she held her. Her daughter's father had come. Her former husband who'd left them stranded. She'd been in church when she heard a minister read about Lot who offered his daughters to the crowd instead of the men they wanted. But the men were really angels who only looked like men. They had come to tell Lot that Sodom would be destroyed. Lot gave them lodging in his house for the night and the Sodomites came asking for them. Lot offered his daughters instead. How could he? The angels could take care of themselves. But she knew a man could give his family away.

Then there'd been a fire. She said to her boyfriend on the phone when they talked again. Just like in Australia. The grass crackled. Maybe the whole continent would burn. The animal herds stampeded. A lizard climbed a branch.

She wasn't one for observation. She would have gotten in there and kicked dust. She would have gotten in there and prayed.

She passed a shed on its knees like the little elephant. A thicket of bright yellow leaves. A thin dog walking beside the highway. A flock of geese. A splatter of birds.

Yes, on the road she was in the outback. She was in the jungle. She was on a safari of fast moving cars. She was driving around the world. Crossing oceans. Switching between daughters as if they were television programs. She loved the migration over the land. It gave her a chance to think. To get away. To get perspective. To see where she was going. Cars were the parade of the highway.

She remembered the intelligent look in her daughters' eyes, but they hadn't developed their intelligence. Or their faith. It was there. It was just something they weren't using. Was it something she hadn't done?

For now her one daughter seemed remote and in one place. Not yet loose. Maybe it was the dullness of her marriage and the no-way-out life she lived. The demands of the sick child. An uncaring husband and father.

Her own father had also traveled. How often had he been gone? How he had wanted to fly. Then she'd had a husband who was the same. Did everyone want to be away from her. She'd had a relationship since her divorce many years ago. She'd had several relationships. But she felt that final life with someone wouldn't happen. That final man would not come into her life.

She had an aging aunt who'd been together with her husband over fifty years. It was strange how some people came into the world in pairs. They only had to spend a few years of childhood on their own and then they were with their mate all their lives. They only had to meet one another. They were so much like one person you knew when one died the other wouldn't be far behind. Following into the beyond.

In her aunt and uncle's house there was order. The last time she was there, the glasses for company had been unwrapped and boxed again with the cardboard sections. Everything was in its place.

They could wait all day to read their paper because they had such generous amounts of time. She had to grab what would be hers.

She felt their little vacuum she carried with her in the car. The ticking clock in their house. The quietness. The turning of a page. The cathedral cookies and divinity her aunt made, her cane hanging over the chair.

The morning sun was brilliant on the clouds. The geese and the sprinkle of birds in the clouded sky. The usual autumn when the cold mornings caused the sap to rise. Isn't that what made some leaves turn yellow, and others a shiny brown as if they were made of iron and rusted in the damp autumn mornings?

What would Africa be like in a frost?

She heard a pebble thrown up on the windshield. A truck passed on the interstate and she picked up speed to follow. A Batesville Casket Company truck. She passed some farmhouses, a flash of cattle, the lovely air.

There was a band of sky through the clouds. Sometimes she'd be thinking and the time would travel. Other times it took forever. A mile was a long way. And she traveled hundreds. She put her blinker on and passed another car.

There was a harvester in a field with a long nose. She remembered the lizard crawling up a branch to get away from the fire. Her legs felt hot and she turned down the heat.

The spitting fire of the African grasses. She was that lizard clinging to a branch. She was the elephant on her knees. Isn't that what living did? With its tongue of fire. Its cramped situations. She had gotten singed. She had gotten burned. Her daughter was in line for the same.

Her former husband had come to her daughter's apartment looking like he'd been to the Australian outback. How much had his jacket cost? How much had he withheld from them? The lawyer she got once cost her more than the court had awarded her. Then her daughters had turned eighteen and his meager payments were over.

He'd hardly looked at his sick grandchild. His daughter made him a turkey sandwich and he ate in the other room. Away from her, his former wife. Why had he even come? He only stirred up old ground. She could take him between her hands. Tell him she was more of a man. She could rip off his jacket and wear it herself. She could ask him with her words.

But it was in church she had dumped her anger. It was in prayer she had spoken her hostility. The unfairness of it all.

In their prayer meetings at church, there had been other women who cried, still in love with their husbands. At least she was over that. Yes, she could crawl up his arm like a lizard. She could eat his eyes.

Faith was a companion more than her husband had been. Faith was more than her boyfriend. It was faith that held her like the sun coming up on another field. The cornstalks in the field with their arms lifted as if asking the sky to pick them up.

She heard the men talk about their anger also. Sometimes it worked both ways. They didn't always get off either.

They were all like the little elephant with his tendons not stretched, walking on their knees. But the elephant had finally stood and nudged his mother for milk. She had thought, watching television, he'd probably die from the lions. She had felt every effort he made. Probably her son-in-law had noticed how intensely she watched the program. But, she had struggled like the elephant. Holding the pillow to her chest in her daughter's small apartment. It was what she had found out. She would have to bow her knees before God to get anywhere. That's why she had knees so they'd bend. That's why she liked driving. It kept her knees bent.

But she knew her own. Didn't the elephants know their own bones and when they found them they had a ceremony? She thought about her daughter who had a daughter who'd have a daughter who'd have. Weren't they bound together?

She was full of bitter memories and expectations at the same time. She'd had a husband who had let her down. A boyfriend who wasn't as adventurous as she was. Two daughters who were locked in frustration. An aunt and uncle facing old age and death. A television which could jump all over the world. A minister who said God's love rested on them all. A God who understood their ambiguity and hurt. The contradictions and complexities of their humanness.

She'd thought about her boyfriend that night she'd slept on her daughter's couch. After her son-in-law had gone to bed. Wakened at times by the child.

She felt brittle as leaves about to fall. Maybe she'd walk only a short time in the history of the upright, then return to her bed like an old aunt or sick child. And her spirit would separate to her maker like the interchanges on the highway. The forks in the road. The bypasses.

She drove on the highway and saw the cattails along the ditches. The thickets along the fences. The farmhouses. The crowd of cows in the harvested cornrows. Fields. The spattering of geese. The sky.

It wasn't that her boyfriend didn't want to go with her, but there was something missing in their relationship that she thought about and he didn't when their brittle bones embraced.

She wondered what she'd do with her aging aunt. They had no children. After her parents' death, they thought she was their child. She was glad the road was between them. She felt choppy as the surface of a lake she passed.

Was she becoming a man as she aged? She could keep up with them on the highway. She could drive with them after dark and keep going, rise early, move on. She could be part of the momentum of migration over the land. Not some wiggler over the road.

But why did she define that independent part of herself as a man? Her ability to drive. Her willfulness. Her self-centeredness. It was what she'd seen in men. She wasn't going to move over and make room for someone. She didn't have the patience to start over. To do all that again. Maybe she was becoming like the former husband she didn't like.

Maybe she could see her anger and strength as part of her womanliness. She had not discarded her caring for others. She felt her gentleness. Religion.

Where the divided highway was separated by some distance, the oncoming traffic moved like farmhouses along the road.

But it was a man's voice that emerged from her now as she traveled. She was her own friend. Women were women for awhile, then the man in them took the wheel.

Soon she'd stop for gas and call her boyfriend again from the road and they'd talk and there'd be that closeness she longed for. But when it came down to it, he would stay in his house and she would stay in hers. She'd still be on the road alone. The oneness of her aunt and uncle would not be hers. When she put her hand in a glove on a cold morning, it was her own glove she put her hand into. It was herself she fit into.

She would have to be satisfied. Otherwise. If she asked for a chair, she'd be asking for a table.

A room.

A house.

A country.

A name.

A story with meaning.

An afterlife.

She'd be asking for a God who heard and answered. Who wouldn't rage fire across the African and Australian plain. Who would show the world more clearly he was there.

Yes. Now the trucks were teepees moving on the hill. She could identify with Burlington and other names of migration. Tarps flopping like the lumpy run of a young elephant. His penis nearly reaching the ground. Ribbons of clouds over the fields. The little white pebbles of the cows. It was like switching television channels.

Every time the man ahead of her got on his car phone he slowed down. Why couldn't he talk and drive at the same speed? She took the mantle of father who had been a driver and put it on her shoulders. Now she imagined her father as a pilot over the humps of air. Those mounds in space the mound builders left when they traveled to the beyond. Those humps in the air a plane passed over.

For awhile she followed a man in a pickup with a sense of order. She felt the leaves. The shiny road. The precision of his driving.

While God was in his aloneness above the clouds, hoarding unanswered prayers in his lap, his wholeness sat on the road. The farm pond and fields. God of Lot who offered his daughters to the mob. Who made people full of flaws. Or let them get that way on their own. Who filled the earth with the autumn trees soaking in the light.

Sometimes a little elephant pulled through. She remembered his first wobbly reach to drink from his mother. The tears in her eyes. Her thought that her daughters and granddaughter and aunt would pull through. She would also.

Because somewhere over the fields she traveled, there was a God of the highway. A God of the road.

She felt as if she'd turned into the universe criss-crossing the stars. Yes, if there was one road left, she'd take it herself.