I am sitting in a Super 8 Motel in Nampa, Idaho around eight in the morning when my husband calls. There's been an earthquake in Salt Lake City, which was my next destination. I have just re-charted a route through Pocatello into Wyoming on my MacBook when my roommate texts me screenshots of a blizzard warning predicted for eastern Wyoming and western Nebraska, along Interstate Highway 80. Exactly where I was headed. I call my husband back. I have to go south. And I have to leave. Now.

It's Wednesday, March 18, 2020, and exactly one week ago on March 11 (my younger brother's birthday), the 2019 Novel Coronavirus, COVID-19, was officially declared a global pandemic. The same day, the University of Oregon, where I have been a first-year Ph.D. student, announced that at least the first three weeks of spring term classes would be online. I was scheduled to fly home to South Carolina for a week and half to see my husband over spring break from March 17 to March 28, but by this point those airline tickets have been cancelled, and I have packed most of my things, and my dog, into my blue Honda Fit and headed east through the high desert of eastern Oregon. March 16, the day before I left, the San Francisco Bay Area was the first U.S. city to be ordered to shelter in place. I spent that day getting my car checked out for the trip home, buying last-minute groceries including four gallons of water (lest I for some reason have car problems in the desert), going to my local doctor so I could refill my Lorazepam (Ativan) prescription (if you also struggle with anxiety, you already know why), filling prescriptions for myself and for my dog, taking my dog to the vet to get her vaccines updated, saying goodbye to colleagues and friends from the University of Oregon, and packing my car, save the things I'd need the next morning before leaving.

When the word came down that all our classes would be online the first three weeks of the term, rumors flew that professors and graduate teaching assistants were also being advised to prepare for the whole spring term to be online. Many other universities had already made the same decision, public schools were closing nation-wide, and widespread panic-shopping had already begun several days ago.

At first, all I knew was that if we were going to be online for any length of time, I was going to stay home in South Carolina with my husband. I quickly realized that if there were a possibility of staying online for the entire term, I would not want to leave my car and the things I would want to bring home for the summer in Oregon. I could drive home and plan to fly back out and go without a vehicle for a few weeks in Eugene if we came back later in the spring; being without my car in Piedmont, South Carolina was essentially a non-option—or at least a major headache, as there is literally zero public transportation there. Even downtown Greenville, South Carolina's bus system, which I'd attempted to use over the winter holiday break, only came hourly and was usually fifteen minutes late to boot, and did not go all the way out to Piedmont.

But then, things started shutting down. Thursday, March 12, I had my last class (which also went online that day), my last tutoring session at the tutoring center where I work part-time in downtown Eugene, and I made a giant Trader Joe's run to buy road-trip food to get me back to South Carolina without buying anything but gas along the way—to limit potential virus exposure. I also bought bleach and rubber gloves, and packed a rag and a large empty yogurt tub so I could make bleach solution to wipe

down the hotel rooms I'd stay in along the route—there were no more sanitizing wipes to be had anywhere by that point.

Friday, March 13, I woke up with enough urgency to clean out and pack everything I wanted for the summer from the apartment I share near campus with my roommate, Becky, a fellow Ph.D. student in education, and her black and white cat, Figaro. Saturday, March 14, I woke up with a sinus infection.

Damn.

I called the University of Oregon's Health Center, and they were able to see me before closing at noon. I was instructed to get a face mask upon check-in, and I was told that I didn't have COVID-19 symptoms; it was probably a secondary sinus infection from the flu, or flu-like illness (yes, I know…) I had had the weekend before—which began four days after I visited college friends in Seattle (yes, I know…) from February 28-March 2. While I now understand that that visit was ill-advised, the proverbial feces did not start to hit the fan until February 29-March 1, at which point I had already taken the train from Eugene to Seattle, and I would need to take the train back to Eugene. By the time I got back on the train March 2, I was nervous, but still not terrified. By March 14, I was terrified.

I took the antibiotics. I needed to leave by Tuesday; I didn't have time for this. But I was still not so terrified that I didn't want desperately to see the Oregon coast one last time. My love affair with the Pacific began in 2007 the first time I visited Vancouver, British Columbia. Knowing now that an indefinite period of time again lay between me and the Pacific, it was the other friend/lover I just had to say goodbye to. The

antibiotics kicked in enough overnight for me to chance it with a good friend and Ph.D. cohort mate, and we packed lunch and snacks so that we would not have to stop in any restaurants. I had the willies about visiting public places for food by then, and I had a cross-country drive ahead of me.

The Oregon coast (in and around Coos, Siuslaw, and Lower Umpqua lands) embraced me in return. The gray whales migrate this time of year, and while I didn't expect to see any from the shoreline, when we stopped along highway 101 in a pull-off for a magnificent view near Yachats, Oregon, a woman in a car near us leaned out her window and asked if we saw the whales.

Whales? Where?

And sure as an untrained eye sees a leaf bug when shown what to look for among tree branches in spring, there they were—tiny puffs of white all across the ocean, out to the horizon line, going off in groups, clusters, and singles. There must have been hundreds. We watched, transfixed, by the side of the road, for an hour. We saw the glint of whale bodies next to the tiny steam puffs erupting from the sparkling water under the hallowed Pacific sun.

I had wanted to see whales my whole life, and here I was, last day on the Pacific coast for the foreseeable future, and there they were.

We had more to see, so eventually, we had to return to the car. Roshelle cranked the Subaru, but it stalled. We had been so transfixed that we left the key in the ignition the entire hour, and the battery was dead. All I could do was laugh. There were people stopped nearby; surely someone would jump us off. The first person I asked—a gray-

haired woman who looked to be nearly 70—had what looked like most of her things in the car with her (which I only noticed after approaching to ask her for a jump), and said something about having had car trouble recently, so she wasn't comfortable giving us a jump. She continued trying to explain, but I told her it was fine—I'd find someone else. And the next person I asked helped us out.

We made our way further north on Highway 101 along the coast, to the aptly-named Hobbit Trail. The Hobbit Trail leads about half a mile down through coastal scrub forest to a stretch of shell-scattered Pacific beach. Roshelle took me rock-hopping on barnacle-encrusted mounds surrounded by tides we had to jump to get onto them. There were tide pools with anemones, fuchsia and sea-foam green and brown. I had never seen them in the wild before. She poked one, and I squealed like a child as we watched its whole body contract.

We headed down to Devil's Churn, a sharp inlet in the volcanic rock coast where the surf makes massive thumping sounds. We walked down the trail a ways to view it, and were staring at the churning surf on black volcanic rock when we both looked up and to our left just in time to see a splash maybe 400-500 yards out to sea. And then, just on its heels, a gray whale breached, and we could see its color, its pale underbelly, its shape. And then, in a second splash, a second and a half later, it was gone, back into the depths. I might not have believed it if she hadn't seen it, too.

We looked at each other and screamed in awe. Roshelle said, "I know we're supposed to be social-distancing, but I have to hug you"—and we did.

After that, we hiked down to Thor's Well, watching its massive thump and swoosh, the surf pulsing past barnacles like a heartbeat, and the sun beginning to set, shimmering off the water that covers so many tidal pools in black volcanic rock. Gray ridges where the lava crumpled in sheaths become our walkway to and from the well. We leave with just enough time to skirt up the shore to Yachats proper, park, and take two of Roshelle's saris onto the beach to watch the sun slip, a brilliant bit of fire, into the lake of the sky. I count the seconds from when it becomes that last burning lick until it disappears—fourteen. Less than the recommended hand-washing time. It was the first, perhaps the only time in my life I have gotten to sit on the beach and watch a Pacific sunset. When Roshelle dropped me off that night, we took each other's hands for a moment, and just said, "okay."

That was Sunday.

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It's now Wednesday, and I look at the weather map of the snowstorm. If I go straight down eastern Nevada, I'll get into the snow. I have to backtrack west, at least a bit. U.S. Highway 95 takes me back into eastern Oregon. West, then south. Along a rise in the road through a breathless stretch of highway, a coyote approaches the road to my right, sees me coming, and turns back. I pass through McDermitt, on the Nevada border, where I stop for gas. There are tiny fern-like red-tipped plants that mat the sparse ground, and your standard fare "God has brought this virus to punish the sins of the world" on the local radio station. I continue through snow flurries down through Winnemucca, across Interstate 80 to Battle Mountain, down Nevada 305 to U.S. 50 at

Austin, Nevada, a no-stoplight mountain pass community that really does seem to cling to existence on "the loneliest road in America," as the Highway 50 sign at the only gas station in town, next to the Pony Canyon Motel, says. There is already snow on the ground in the mountain pass in Austin. I could stop here, I think, but then I might get snowed in. I let the dog pee in the dirt next to some animal tracks that jot up a steep mountainside. I keep on.

I wind through hairpin turns in snow flurries that are already sticking to the brown desert scrub, down the other side of the mountain pass. The landscape's maw yawns as I turn right onto Nevada 376. What seems like eons of austere mountains stretch out to my right. I seem to be riding a tan sea past the enormous spine of a monstrous blue whale rising out of oceans of dust. The road stretches as far as the horizon, what must be 50 miles or more. A scrub valley, then more mountains to the left. My fear is matched only by my awe, and it keeps me moving. The desert is every bit as remote as one could imagine eastern Nevada to be. Whose land was this? How did the Indigenous people survive here? They must have known the plants and animals that hang onto life here so well—and I am such a lost, fragile stranger here. There are no FM radio stations left on the dial. I wind slowly past the blue spine as the road swings left after miles. The town of Carvers has a couple of buildings and a "motel" that is a series of connected wooden shacks—maybe ten of them. I could stop—the sun is starting to sink—but this place is so small and remote I have the sense that anything that could happen here could easily stay here. I press on.

An enormous strip gold-mine looms in front of me as the road curves further eastward into the darkening. Layers of earth scraped into dust pyramids. Any lizard or fox that might have lived here has had to find elsewheres. The road bends south. My original goal was Alamo, Nevada, but it is looking more and more unreachable today. Tonopah, 47 miles. Let's try Tonopah? In the twilight, I pass an RV parked in a pull-out, behind a pyramidal pile of dirt that shields it from the road. There are no stops, no cross-roads, no exits, no buildings--no people. One or two other vehicles pass in the deepening purple of the desert. It is me, my dog, my car, mountains, desert, and very occasional headlights. By the time I reach the junction of U.S. 6 and Nevada 376, I feel thoroughly lost in the desert dark, and have to use the highbeams just to see the crossroad. Luckily, someone must have anticipated this astounding darkness and put a series of rumble strips before the stop sign at the intersection. Tonopah is seven miles west; I am trying to get east. I turn east for a moment only to see a sign that says the next town that direction is 122 miles. I turn back for the night.

As I pull into Tonopah, the first hotel name I recognize is a Best Western. At this point, I don't care what it costs.

When I wake up in the morning, I take my time until I open the curtain to see snow on the cars parked outside. Shit. I snap a picture and text my brother in Phoenix. For the third morning in a row, I am faced with a decision: stay or go? Where to next? My brother texts back: "Leave right fucking now." The front desk confirms that the roads are still clear. I pack and leave.

It's still flurrying, and though driving in the snow has never been a forte of mine, having grown up in Georgia and South Carolina even though I was born in Ohio, the sagebrush covered in snow incites a delicate, fascinating beauty. Desert snow is not something I ever expected to see, much less drive though. Within an hour, though, the skies clear, and within two hours, I am in desert sun. Damn right, I think. I'm getting south of this storm. Thank God—or the Universe, or whomever.

Snow on sage turns to sage on dust turns to palm trees on red down U.S. 95. Somewhere near Amargosa Valley I stop at a pull-off to snap a few photos because the mountains are orange and black and brown and sensuous behind an empty plywood storefront with a red awning against sparse green scrub on ashen ground. Save the echo off the mountains that surround us of one other car that passes, there is no sound. The desert is as silent as it is huge, and it surrounds me and my 20-pound brindle terrier on all sides. We are so far from home, so far from everything, it seems, and it is perhaps even more stunningly gorgeous than it is terrifying.

…

Las Vegas during a pandemic. The highway still has cars, but as the cookie-cutter stucco houses climb out of the sand, I have to imagine that this is far less traffic than usual for Vegas, though I have actually never been here before. It seems wildly appropriate for my fist (and possibly only) visit to the City of Sin to be during a pandemic. I decide to take a quick meander down the strip—just to see it—but as I get off the highway, my GPS decides that I am just to the right of where I actually am—a problem that would continue intermittently throughout the rest of the trip home--and

misdirects me. I'm sitting at a stoplight in front of Caesar's palace, entertaining myself by playing the song "Turn Down for What?" on Spotify, and I drive a few blocks south. There are people who are clearly houseless on the streets. To be homeless in Vegas during a pandemic might be my actual vision of hell. Very suddenly and clearly, I have the sense that I need to go. This is not fun, and there is nothing here that is a game. Corporate capitalism gambles with all our lives--some much more starkly than others.

At a stoplight, a Black man in a green Taurus honks and pulls up beside me. I feel hesitant--anything can happen in Vegas, right?--but I crack the window half-way to hear him.

"You stocked up on T.P. too, eh?!" I smile, and he points at the four-pack of toilet paper in my passenger seat, piled on top of snacks and cleaning supplies and supplements and prescriptions and a water jug.

"Yeah. I'm trying to get back to South Carolina from Oregon."

"Oh, Oregon? That's where I'm headed--headed home."

"The snow's getting bad that way, be careful."

"All right now, stay safe."

"You too! Good luck!" I roll up the window.

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Back on the highway, I stop at Boulder City for gas. I have a pair of neon yellow-green rubber gloves I have been using every time I pump gas, and by now I have established a routine of using rubbing alcohol (I'd bought a bottle before all this began, sometime back in January, and I keep it with me now like it's liquid gold) and paper

towels to sanitize all touch surfaces in my car's cockpit every time I exit, pump gas, let the dog out, and use the restroom. Steering wheel. Gear shift. Parking break. Radio dial, fan, temperature knob, door handle, door lock, automatic locks, lights, wiper controls, mirror adjustors. Back passenger door lock because it no longer works automatically and I have to lock it by hand. Door to the dog's crate. Seatbelt buckle. It becomes a routine. Some may say it is extreme, but there are too many people depending on me to get myself home safe. My family, my husband, my friends, my colleagues. My dog. I can't let them down by letting my guard down.

At Boulder City a Latinx woman around 50 approaches me and tells me she needs gas. I tell her to let me pump mine and then I'll come pump hers. I already have my rubber glove on my right hand, so I walk over to her white SUV and run the pump; she tells me she has just visited her kids to make sure they have enough food and needs to get back to Phoenix. I tell her I understand. She tells me she didn't think this is how the end times would start, but Jesus is clearly coming back now. I start to smile and nod, but realize I'm 35 and a bit too old to feel completely deferential. Though I am not impolite, I tell her I was raised Catholic, so I know what she's talking about, but although I don't know what the future holds, I do know I want to be home with my husband for however long this lasts. She tells me it's true, that Jesus is coming back, and it will get really bad after the rapture. I wish her good luck.

It's still a few hours to Phoenix. Lake Mead shines like a blue pearl across red desert, but A.M. radio says the Hoover Dam is closed. I don't want to stop anymore at this point. I need to go. Somewhere south of Vegas, though, I find that I am compelled

to stop one more time for a photo—the blue mountain peaks with white snow caps under low-hanging clouds with a burst of late-day sunshine over a green, blooming desert on red sand is, for perhaps the fifth or eighth time in five days, the most beautiful sight I've ever seen. I feel the intensity of everyone around me, all the people just trying to get home, or get to family, or get somewhere safe—and the desperation of all those who can't, or have no place to shelter, and the mountains are so beautiful in the midst of all this. And the late afternoon sun shines across the highway and lights up a brilliant chunk of rainbow just above the peaks to the east.

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I get to Phoenix after dark, around 8:30. I call my brother, and he tells me to meet him at his school, Legacy Laveen. I pull in, and he is coming out of the school building—his school is preparing to go online, too, and he's been running photocopies and performing standard music teacher fare. We don't hug. I'm coming from a relative "hot zone;" I don't want to risk exposing him and he doesn't want to be exposed. But he strikes up a conversation and welcomes me to Phoenix and asks me if I want to walk around the outside of his school just as if I'd come to visit him on purpose. I've perhaps never felt so relieved to see my little brother.

He asks me if I want to go see the city lights from a mountaintop—there's a place only a ten-minute drive from where we are. I assent, because what the hell—I'm here, and with him—and we drive up the mountain. There are a couple of other cars there—lovers, tourists—but not many, and the sign says we can't park and stay. Phoenix's fiery wings glitter flat across the span of the horizon line in the dark.

On this strange visit, I do not enter my brother's workplace, or his apartment, though he shows me both from the outside. I follow him back to his apartment complex near I-10, and he points me in the direction of the hotels. I try a Budget Inn, but they don't take pets. The inn under the same management next door, I am informed, doesn't either. I have a flash of the Mary-and-Joseph looking for a spot at an inn story, and it would be funny, if only…

I try the Red Roof Inn. They want $116. I try the Motel 6. $80 including pet fee, and they're doing extra cleaning, they assure me. I assent. There's no microfridge, so I'll just have to keep the cooler closed for the night, and I make my bleach solution and wipe down every touch surface in the room, down to the headboard of the bed that is built into the wall, before I settle my things and shower. As I bring my things inside, a woman of color and who I assume is her husband and two children in the room next to mine asks me if I have an extra USB charger. I think for a minute, back through what I packed and what I left in Oregon for the fall, and I say, "Maaaaybe. Hang on just a minute and let me check." Sure enough, I had tucked one into my "tech bag," and I know there's one in South Carolina with my husband—I must have left the other in Oregon—and I give it to her. She says she'll return it when she's done. I tell her, "Or tomorrow morning, or whatever…" I don't ask for it back and she doesn't return it in the morning. I didn't expect her to, not because I thought she would "steal" it, but because I could hear in her tone when she asked that she wasn't just asking to borrow it. In my reply, I hoped she heard that I didn't need it back and that it was so completely okay during this crisis to ask for what you need.

…

I sleep, thanks to the Ativan, and wake a little around 9:30a.m. Almost immediately, an electric cold slice of fear runs through me vertically. I sit up, and my bowels are upset. I am afraid. Really afraid. I've had a cough the whole time I've been driving, but it's worsened a bit last night and this morning. I know rationally I've had a sinus infection, and that coughs can last up to three weeks. I know, rationally, that it's also spring allergy season and I'm in a new climate zone. I know, rationally, that the stress of the trip might also be wearing down my immune system a bit and making it harder to fight the end of my cold off, despite the antibiotics. I know all these things rationally, but the electric fear that now sits coiled in my belly is powered not at all by reason.

I call my husband. I know he can hear the tension in my voice. He tells me to rest and relax for the day, see my brother, which had been my plan as of last night. I've been on the road three days, take a break if I need to. What if I do get really sick, though? What if I get stuck in Phoenix? I can't stay with my brother. What about my dog and my car? What is the backup plan here? My husband tells me I'm better off in Phoenix where my brother is than anywhere else I've been on this trip so far if I get stuck, but he thinks I'm probably okay. But there's not much other comfort he can offer. He says we'll figure it out, but to rest. I'll know more about how I feel in 24 hours. We hang up the phone. I don't feel any better.

I call my friend Jimmy, from my Ph.D. program. I explain the situation. Jimmy tells me that if he were my husband, he'd probably say the same thing, tell me to rest,

try to get me to calm down. But he's my friend. He asks me if I am really going to be able to rest today, or if I am just going to sit there with anxiety building. Clearly it's the latter. He tells me maybe I can re-think my relationship to anxiety during all this, maybe use it to push my limits. He tells me if it were him, he would just get home as fast as he possibly could, safely. He tells me he has family and friends along I-40 in Albuquerque and Oklahoma City who could help me out in a pinch because they understand how things are right now. That last bit of information makes the difference I need. I decide I'm not going I-10 through El Paso; I'm going I-40 from Arizona to Memphis, then home. It feels good to finally have a path charted for the rest of the trip. He tells me the world is asking me to pay attention. We hang up the phone.

I can do this. I can drive home. I made it all the way to Oregon in the fall with my mother; now I can make it home by myself. All this, from the girl who didn't want to drive, was scared to drive, didn't get her license till she was nearly 18 only for shame of the thought of having to be driven to graduation parties. The girl who became the woman who drives cross-country solo during a pandemic.

I get my things out of the hotel room at exactly 11a.m. At the checkout, the woman behind the desk is allowing a white couple to check in early because they are also just coming into town, for whatever necessity brings them out in a pandemic. She tells them she's not the type to stick to all the rules, or to call the cops when people are using drugs in the hotel. She sits and talks to people. She says to the couple who are checking in that she understands these people because she's been there, and she knows they're just trying to get that high—they're not out to hurt anyone. She answers the

phone, asks me simultaneously if I'm checking out, and I nod, give her my room key, and a thumbs up.

I text my brother and tell him I can't stay for the day, but I would like to walk the dog. I meet him at his apartment complex shortly after our mother texts us to tell us our grandfather is in the hospital with congestive heart failure at age 93. I'm so hyper-focused on getting home at this point that I fail to mention it until my brother brings it up, and I feel badly. I look into his pleasant stucco apartment from a ten-foot distance (we're still playing sibling show-and-tell in the midst of all this; it's my first "visit" to Phoenix since he's moved there), and I see a painting on the wall of a large pine overshadowing a lustrous mountain lake. Where did he get that? Our grandmother painted it. I know all too well that she painted; I have several of her paintings myself—but I've never seen one that good, really. Incredible yet again, in the midst of things.

We go to El Sueño park in the midst of what feels somewhere between a lucid dream and a nightmare I can't wake from. We walk the dog, and it's warm, and there are palm trees. I have clearly made it to the southwest. A school bus pulls up behind my car, and a few scattered children run to it to retrieve the lunches being provided off-campus while the schools are closed. Apartments made from shipping containers border the park—their navy and gray sleekness looks modern, humble, quite decent. A few cups and napkins dot the grass, and a few people still run for exercise. My brother tells me the park is usually filled with children—but not today. I wonder how many people who live near here had even more harrowing journeys to get this far north, and what some of them had to go through to do so, and I recognize that, in the midst of my

fear, there have been so many much more fearful journeys—border crossings, refugee flights, Holocaust train rides, trails of tears, great migrations to escape Jim Crow, middle passages—and I feel a profound weight of everyone in human history who has ever found themselves running—or being run—terrified out of their minds to get to some final destination, known or unknown, safe, unsafe, or malign. My journey pales in comparison. Pay attention.

We walk back to our vehicles; my brother gets in his truck, but before he leaves, he hands me a plastic water bottle filled with pale tea he has been brewing all morning: Osha root, goldenseal, astragalus, garcinia cambogia, pine needle. He has given me medicine for my cough—the only kind of medicine humanity has for a virus, still, at this point in human history. Was I supposed to come south to see him?

He tries to hide that he's tearing up a bit as I tell him to keep his spirits up. He tells me simply, "Godspeed," and drives away. I am his older sister, and I know he has never seen me so afraid. And our grandfather is in a hospital, possibly dying, with no visitors allowed on account of this virus.

People walk the streets carrying their possessions in Phoenix, too. As I leave the city, there is another white couple walking with backpacks and reusable grocery bags along the highway. The woman looks out of shape, ill-equipped for whatever journey they must take right now. I see a white man with a scraggly brown beard sitting by the highway entrance with a cardboard sign that says "Homeless Vet." I offer him an apple, but too late—the traffic is already moving in the lane between us, I have to move the car

forward, and I feel awful that I offered something I couldn't actually give—too little too late. I get on the highway.

The desert cactus are blooming in late March, and I have never seen Arizona so green. Mountains rise beneath me as I move on to Peyson, then to Holbrook where Arizona 77, 377, and I-40 conjoin. As the desert stretches from saguaro to Ponderosa pine and snow to high plateau, I pass a dead deer being eaten by a crow. To the left, a fire has swept through the scrub, which is charred for miles. The highway must have acted as a fire break; there is green scrub to my right. But then a dead coyote, hit by a car and bloody and mangled, appears on the right shoulder of the road. I have the unshakable sense that I am amost literally driving a thin line between life and death.

When I finally get to Holbrook and the I-40 intersection, I find an ATM at a gas station. By now my credit card has stopped working at the pump because I haven't given the company a travel notice—I've been running scared, and too busy driving, and in too poor cell reception through Nevada and Arizona to do anything about it. So I pull out $100 just for good measure. Maybe if I see another homeless vet I can hand the next one a $20. Maybe I'll need it to bribe someone to let me across a state border if the state borders start to close. I glance at my dashboard and am grateful for the six or so mini-bottles of hand sanitizer my roommate gave me—extras from her teaching years—half-jokingly she said I could barter with them on the road if I needed to. I'm grateful also for the bear spray she gave me, which I've kept in my purse and next to me on the nightstand of every hotel room I've stayed in by myself, and grateful for the cheap switchblade knife I bought in September before I drove all the way out to Oregon.

I-40 is a mass-exodus from California. It seems every fourth or fifth license plate—sometimes every third—is a California plate. People are leaving the golden state en masse. Many, I assume, had gig economy jobs—restaurant workers, Uber drivers, and the like, and cannot pay their rent now. Their California Dreams will have to wait for a better season—for now, it's back to family or wherever they can go to weather this. Doubtless, some will never return. Some likely just don't want to shelter in place—the order would come down for the entire state of California just days afterward. And the fact that so many are leaving is also terrifying. The virus will spread.

Drive.

I get to Albuquerque just after dark, and pull off on the first exit that has several hotels. LaQuinta looks full. Quality Inn *is* full. Days Inn takes no pets. Travelodge does, and takes my credit card behind a glassed-in counter, like at the movies. They tell me I have fifteen minutes to inspect the room and decide if I am satisfied with it, if I want to stay. I have never heard of a fifteen-minute "takesies-backsies" policy at a hotel before. There are signs in the room that instruct occupants to inspect door locks and inside window locks to ensure their functionality before accepting the room. There is a woman yelling profanity on the upper balcony above me, and people wandering the courtyard. I set about with my bleach cleaning routine. The phone is sticky, and has no dial tone anyway, but I clean it regardless. The controls of the heating/AC system are grimy. I'm glad I came prepared with cleaning supplies, regardless of what cleaning policies may be formally in place during all this. I think back to Nampa, Idaho, where the white man around my age at the counter told me that yes, they were cleaning, but he thought that

"the media was just making a big deal out of all this" and that "more people die each year of the flu, anyway." The only two news channels in Nampa were Fox and One America News Network--both pro-right-wing channels. I bring all my valuables inside, as Jimmy had suggested I do, and use my cooler and hiking backpack to barricade the door in addition to bolting the locks, set my bear spray and knife by the bed as I do every night, eat cold Indian food out of a packet from Trader Joe's, take a shower, take an Ativan, and sleep next to the dog, who also sleeps facing the door.

I check out in the morning, get gas with my gas gloves, sanitize my car's cockpit again, and head out. New Mexico beyond Albuquerque is flat, and beige. Beige against pale blue sky. Everything looks faded, like the earth and sky had been run through the wash too many times. The world has changed around us all, and I will never be the same after this trip. I know that by now. I won't be permanently damaged, but I will be changed. And I won't have processed it all by the time I get home. There will be nightmares, I already know. And there are, starting three nights after I get home. But they won't last forever. I know now I'll make it. I see two more dead coyotes along the highway.

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After the Osha root, I honestly do feel a little better, a little clearer. There's less post-nasal, and I'm coughing less. Maybe also because I feel like I'm going to get home. Who knows. Whatever combination of things is doing it, it's working. I drive across the Texas border with my back windows cracked, at the suggestion of Roshelle. Maybe also not enough fresh air in the car all day, she said. I think she was right, too.

But somewhere near the middle of the Texas Panhandle—Shamrock, Texas, to be exact—I have to close the windows that were barely cracked. Dear god--my *god*--the smell. If you've never passed a CAFO (Confined Animal Feeding Operation), the smell alone could make a vegetarian out of a Southern white man. Cows for acres lying and standing on nothing but manure. The smell seems to have a three-mile (or more?) radius every direction. Even when I stop after a few miles for gas, the smell still permeates everything. The local elementary school behind the gas station is closed. Does it smell like this when the children play outside? The local Spanish-language Christian radio station plays prayers asking for God's mercy and protection.

I text my roommate, Becky, Roshelle, my husband, my parents, and my brother my location along the way. I have gotten better about this as the trip has progressed. I'm usually good with communication, but the first few days felt so urgent that I forgot at more than one stop.

Oklahoma. The western part of the state rolls and breaks into patches of red dirt, but it's more desert-red than southern-clay-red, still. Trees still scrubby, but getting a little bigger all the time. Cows on rocky outcroppings. Silos. Farmhouses that are in varying states of disrepair along the highway; rusty trains and tracks. Run-down gas stations and shops and schools. This does not look like an empire at its zenith. When *did* it look that way? No wonder the middle of the country feels forgotten.

I find a gas station selling actual Clorox wipes behind the counter, ask if they are for sale, and upon an affirmative answer, buy just one tub of them and walk out feeling

like I've just purchased contraband. My hotel life is about to get a whole lot easier the next couple nights.

Along the highway in Oklahoma, it starts to rain. It's blustery, shoving my tiny Honda Fit each time the wind gusts, causing me to grip the steering wheel hard. For the second time on I-40, I see a dog that has been dumped on the side of the highway. The first was a beautiful shepherd, but my little dog doesn't go for big dogs; her fear-aggression too often triggers their prey-aggression. This one is a scraggly looking black spaniel mix of some kind with a hugely distended belly. I know I shouldn't, and I don't exactly even have room in the car, but I can't help myself. I pull over. I pull half-off the shoulder of the road and get out, go around the passenger side. I call to the dog, and it looks at me, but hesitates. I call again, but it looks around, looks toward the highway as semi trucks blaze by us, their drafts buffeting us with the Oklahoma winds and the spitting rain. The dog veers slightly toward traffic.

Dammit, no. I will not--cannot bear to--be responsible for this dog's death here. I turn around, go back to the car, grab the end of a bag of dog treats, and scatter them towards the woods. Maybe at least the dog will sniff them down and get away from traffic after I pull away.

I pull into Oklahoma City after dark, and the highways are all but empty. There is a metal structure that looks like a giant jack—the kind you play jacks with—all lit up purple and green and blue—over a highway overpass. I am going to try to make it two more hours to Fort Smith, Arkansas, but just past Oklahoma City it starts really raining. I don't like it, but I can drive in the rain, in the dark. But then the lightning starts. And

then I see a double-fork strike from the clouds to the ground, and I know it's time to get off the road for the night in Oklahoma. Shawnee it is.

The ruddy white man at the desk asks me what brings me out in all this. I give a very brief version of my story. We talk about how there's no breakfast right now, how he's still working, how people have come into the hotel coughing. I suppress any semblance of cough I have left. He is scared any day could be his day. I thank him for staying open—he says it might not be for much longer with business the way it is. I realize then that everyone trying to get across the country right now is stopping only in major cities; the outskirt towns and rural stops are getting almost no customers. He asks me if I would like a luggage cart, and then sees my hesitation before I touch it. He offers me disposable gloves. I tell him that would be really great.

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In the morning, Arkansas rolls purply into spring that blossoms by Memphis. I start hitting the ceiling of my car like I'm rolling through a yellow light every time I cross another state border. Maybe it does feel like I'm rolling on through yellow lights about to turn red the whole way home. But I don't kiss my hand before I do it—don't touch my face. Pay attention.

The Ozarks remind me of the rolling hills district of Ohio, where I was born and lived until I was eight—where I have returned twice a year nearly every year of my life to see grandparents and cousins and aunts and uncles and second cousins once-removed. The dirt, the rural houses, they all bespeak hints of northwest Appalachia. And in Arkansas, I start to see flooding. It has been a winter of inordinate wet in the

Southeast, a year of unseasonable dry in the Northwest. Last fall the fires in California left their mark even on the University of Oregon, as some California students were left homeless, even *townless* by them. I have the distinct sense that this is only the first pandemic of the global warming era—and the sense that this is only the first of many globe-wide unavoidable calamities to come. For four generations raised with microwave ovens and televisions, three generations raised with computers, and two (including the one just being born) who will be raised with smartphones, I have to wonder how our survival skills will pan out. At least in the so-called "first world." And I am immediately reminded of how everything—climate change, pandemics, wars—is stratified by race, class, gender, disability, geopolitical location and power. Most of the people in my circles are stressed about staying home with their kids with schools shut, learning to work from home full-time, not going grocery shopping or out to parks on a whim. People all along I-40 from California to Memphis and beyond, and people all across the nation and world, are losing jobs, breaking apartment leases, are without medical insurance, without enough food, are not able to feed both their dogs and their kids now, are worried about not having legal status or protection if they show up at a hospital during this. People without homes in major cities are out in the hurricane of a pandemic with no house or shelter. People are packed into ICE detention camps, having run from things even more terrifying than a pandemic, only to be crowded so close in confinement without proper sanitation that a pandemic could only add exponentially to their existential dread. There are people who, because of the color of their skin, are more at risk of dying of this thing. People who live with the embodied consequences of

the stress of not being white in America every single day. In this country, my white skin means I know police and medical workers will respond to me, take me more seriously--will protect and serve me anywhere I might happen to go. I feel my own relative privilege deeply—not with shame, but with a razor sense of how it quite literally saves my life--time, and time, and again. And how so many others here do not have--have never had--such protection in a crisis now--*or ever*.

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I see the first tall, scraggly pines in eastern Arkansas. Southern pines never looked so damn good. I never felt kudzu penetrate my soul so deeply upon first sight. By the time I stop for the night in Fulton, Mississippi at a Days Inn by the highway, there are pink and fuchsia blossoms interspersed everywhere with rolling pine hills. One more night. I bed down relatively early, turn on CNN. Anderson Cooper reads a poem about the pandemic on air. Poetry! My English teacher soul wants to cry, wants to say I told you so. When we have nothing else to turn to… we still need it. It is not, and never was, as Audre Lorde stated, a luxury.

When I cross the Alabama state line in the morning, I just can't help myself—I put on the Skynard and send Marco Polo messages to my friends. I allow myself to dwell in the gritty cheesiness (cheese grits?) of southern rock classics for an hour or so to Birmingham, then start flipping through local radio again. No NPR. Imagine that.

I find a local white Christian radio station. A man who claims he is natropathic doctor is pushing herbal remedies that his business sells. The show's host seems to give the green light to everything he says. Now, I go to integrative doctors who use

natropathy, so I am no doubting Thomas concerning natropathy in its entirety; however, this man claims that he has an M.D. friend whom he texted concerning the COVID-19 outbreak to ask his personal opinion. He emphasized *personal*, seemingly implying that this doctor's *personal* opinion was the *real* truth, regardless of his professional opinion. The man talking said that he would not state the doctor friend's name on air, as he had "not asked permission" to read the text, but he would read it. This "doctor friend" stated in his alleged text that the COVID-19 virus was "just another virus like any other," and that the world was "really no different" than it was in December; it was just that people were now acting differently. He believed it to be a "liberal conspiracy" to establish a "one world government," and that the "liberals" would stop at nothing in order to do so—including bringing out the national guard to enforce a lockdown that would shut down the economy and make the current president look bad. From there, the man relaying this "text" from his "doctor friend" encouraged listeners to be on the lookout for disinformation; there "really is a virus," but it's not as bad as people are saying. We do need to take health precautions, but the pandemic proportions were a hoax. That said, he was offering very fine immune-boosting products if you just call this number… Furthermore, he reminded listeners that if their finances were being impacted by COVID-19, not to forget to tithe to their churches, because in his experience, not tithing always made things worse, not better. He did admit that if listeners simply didn't have the money, priorities would have to be set; nonetheless, I have to change the radio channel at that point. But I think also about how I learned from One America News in Nampa that it was disinformation that President

Trump "refused" test kits from the World Health Organization; according to Snopes and PolitiFact, that rumor was started by a Politico.com article and repeated (knowingly? unknowingly? either possibility seems equally terrifying) by Joe Biden, but apparently, the WHO usually only supplies those tests to countries who cannot afford to make their own; moreover, they were available, but never directly offered. The current president simply never asked for any.

I pass into Georgia—it is a happy, bizarre moment. There is some traffic on the west side of Atlanta, but not much. I drive straight into downtown, straight under spaghetti junction (where highways 75/85 meet the 285 loop), and straight through to exit 108. It is odd, coming from the west—I am always driving to Atlanta from Greenville, not coming in this other direction. I nearly do not notice that Spaghetti junction is Spaghetti junction until I am physically underneath it. My parents live off either exit 104 or 107 (they'll eventually take you the same place if you know where you're going), but I don't stop. I won't risk exposing them. They're healthy, but they're over sixty. There is no way I am stopping. But I have to stop one last time for a restroom break and gas. One last time with the gas glove, for now. One last antiseptic wipe down of the cockpit.

My phone's GPS said seven hours ago that there was a slowdown at the Georgia-South Carolina border. I expected it would be cleared seven hours later. It isn't. I spend the last hour of a 53-hour drive stuck in traffic. I remind myself to breathe. I text my mom and my friends while stopped. I complain. And I remind myself continuously that having a bad accident that requires a hospital visit during a pandemic is much worse

than a 53-hour drive. When I finally cross Lake Hartwell and the South Carolina border, two emergency response vehicles, two police cars, a firetruck, a small backhoe, and a dumpster have been hauled in to clear the charred remains of a vehicle.

The last 40 minutes are a mirage; it feels impossible that I am driving back through Anderson, South Carolina. Impossible that I am at the Clemson exit, where I've spent the last eight years—and I drove here alone from Oregon. Impossible, yet completely real.

The familiar becomes strange when one has been away, and the Pilot gas station, Sweet P's restaurant, and the bridge over the Saluda River in Piedmont feel that way. I pull over on the side of Furr Road in a gravel pull-out near some construction just before my street, Susan Drive, to text everyone that I am home. Once I walk in, all I want to do is let the dog out back to pee, drop my things, and shower so that I can hug my husband without the possibility of virus on my clothes. The clothes—all the clothes in my suitcase and car—go straight in the wash. And then I am home.