

Night Rider for BBC Radio 4's Short Cuts

Narrator:

I've always disliked wide expanses of space.

As a child my family moved frequently and I learned quickly the art of packing a cardboard box, of squeezing into our car's back seat, which I shared with pieces of our linens and duffel bags of our clothes. These things eventually became routine but I could never shake the terrifying, alien sensation that would come once the sun set over the highway and the already empty space became completely illegible.

Locked inside the shuttle of our car I might as well have been an astronaut floating through space, watching for comets the headlights of the rare car that would occasionally join us on the highway. These were long nights disconnected from time and space. My young brain failed to understand our location failed to distinguish the night from the land and feared that we would lose ourselves to this inky expanse.

I wasn't afraid that my mom would misread the map or that my dad would make a wrong turn, but that the night would never give way to the day and that the land would dissolve, dissipate as slow leaking shadows and clouds of dust. I was afraid of falling.

I was afraid of dissolving the already tenuous membrane between my body and the outside. But, of course, my 6 year old self had yet to find words for this fear and let others mistake the dread that accompanied the car trip with homesickness or some other discomfort.

I do not sleep on these nighttime rides.

The disoriented magnet of my internal compass keeps me awake with its wild turning; so I am lucid, vigilant, when the first light appears. No, not sunrise and not the twinkling radiance of a city skyline. We're still too far out for that.

It's fast food restaurant signage rising from dimly huddled pines, neon beacons, neighboring planets. The gravity tilts, drawing us nearer and I am blinded by their glow. It's been so long since my eyes have registered color.

I feel our car drift to the right and slow down as we descend the highway exit ramp. We drive down the path of neon illuminating the road and pull into a parking lot dotted in streetlamp puddles. To stop is to feel the land for the first time in a long while. Soon, I'm washing down French fries with cherry Coke and my father is taking bags from our car into the motel behind the restaurant while my

mother keeps watch over me. She tells me we're home at least for now. She tries to explain what the morning will show us.

In Macon, the houses sit nestled in thick woods. You won't believe it but the soil here is rich brick red. In Arlington there is a six flags amusement park right in the middle of town. You can hear the roller coaster riders scream on their way down. In Stuart, we're just 10 minutes from the ocean. The seagulls will wake us. You'll see.

To this day it is hard for me to be on the road at night. The vehicle is such a thin shell. The night leaks in all liquid against my skin. I prepare for road trips as if they are deep space journeys. I prepare to leave the Earth behind. I prepare to feel buoyant and untethered in a slightly altered gravity. I prepare to search for comments for stars for new moons scattered across asphalt drenched in fresh rain and shadow.