

It's twilight and the streetlights are casting their warm amber circles through the car window in even pacing (*fig. 1*). *Streetlight* implies a different sense of scale, something you can stand beside, old and iron, maybe painted teal like the ones on El Cajon Boulevard. The scale of this photograph is not intended for people or their bodies, but it's a picture I would like to be inside of: the darkening sky, the pools of light, the reflections from across the river. There's something extra strange about highways that abut bodies of water like this, where access to the shore is completely blocked. I enjoy shorelines, and the road creates a false or inaccessible shoreline. (It is, however, very beautiful when train routes abut bodies of water, how the New Jersey Transit lines appear to glide through the marsh, or the curtained view of the ocean from the Pacific Surfliner. Trains do not require the traveler to operate heavy machinery to appreciate the view.) I imagine that driving through this picture, with a friend in the passenger seat, the windows rolled down and the radio on, would feel perfect, particularly if it were late October and the air was crisp, particularly if you had nowhere to go. As a teenager and in college, I sat in the passenger seat, and lovers drove me to nowhere. Boyfriends, really. But it felt extraordinarily romantic to drive to north Jersey and back for no reason, to *feel* the lights of the city, a place you did not drive to.

There is a small framed postcard on my desk: a view of the Driscoll Bridge in New Jersey, miles from my childhood home, the widest bridge (by number of lanes) in the United States. This photograph is in color, the muddied color of a postcard reproduction, and also at twilight, car taillights streaking red as they climb the slight hill of the bridge. To the right, you can see the sign for the old movie theater, now abandoned, and another neon sign, perhaps for a strip club. The streetlights are neatly placed, silhouetted against the blue-purple sky. In the foreground, the periwinkle sky reflects in marsh waters, a guardrail and billboards deeper in space. I learned to drive here; it is where multiple highways knit together and unfurl themselves in different directions. Every freeway interchange in San Diego feels like this to me, and I refuse to drive on them; my brain has room for only one incredibly fucked up interchange, one cloverleaf.

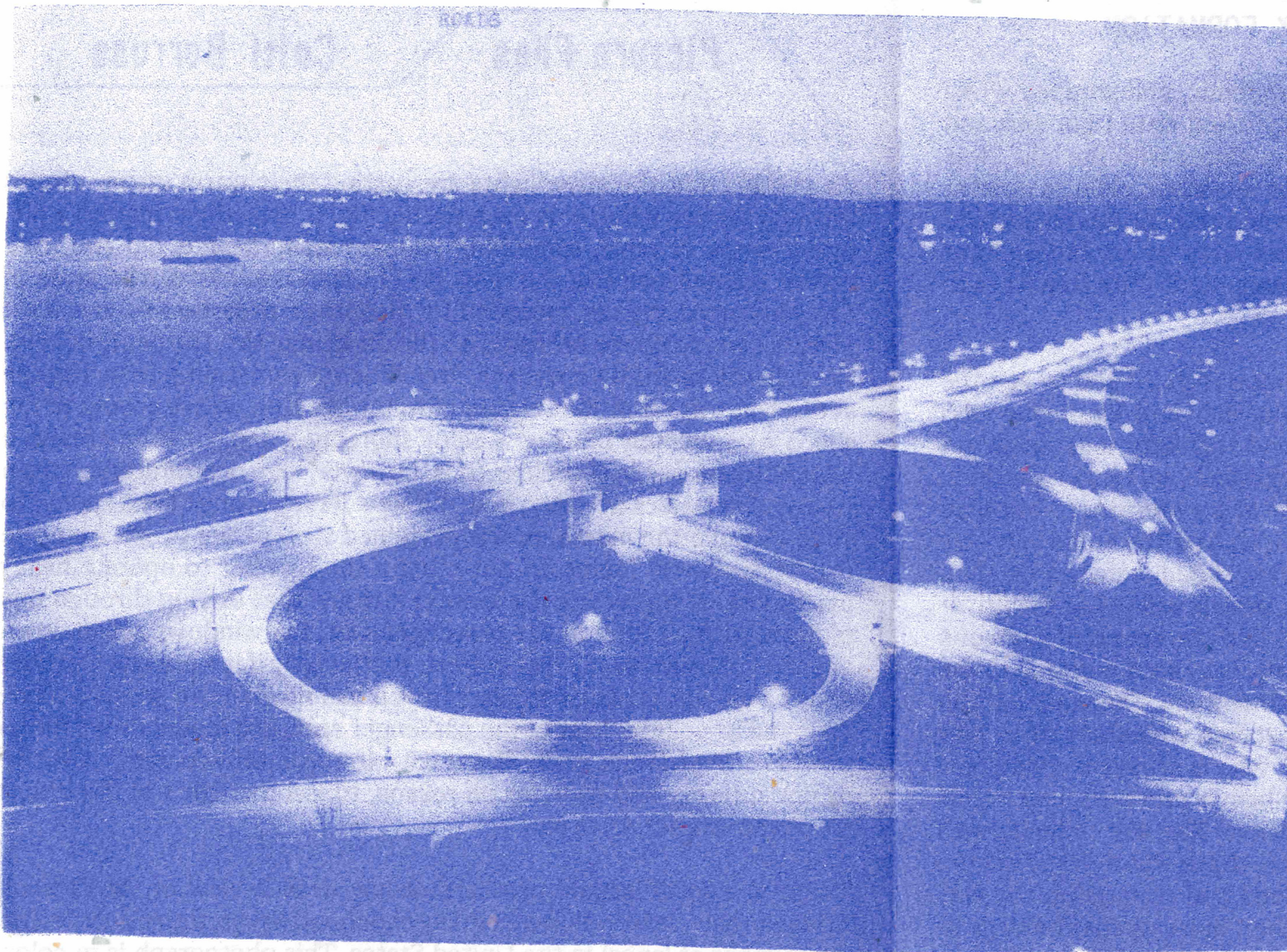


fig. 1

At this point in history, writing about roads means writing about cars. Some of the road images in the Picture File folder are pre-automobile roads, meant for carriages or people on foot. But most of the captions are about progress, about endless forward motion, about trimming off the excess of the human experience so that one can drive very fast and feel very

alive. Beneath an image of a carriage parked crookedly along the side of a country road: "THREE SIGNS OF PROGRESS: Rural delivery, the telephone, and a good road. Near Fort Smith, Ark." Beneath an image similar to the one above, an aerial view showing lanes weaving around one another: "Here Is the Road Engineer's Answer to the Riddle of Traffic

Jams at Intersections: No waiting for red lights to change, for the policeman's whistle, or for lagging pedestrians to get out of your way. On such ramps and crossovers you simply keep moving in the riverlike traffic stream." Ominously placed over an image of a sedan approaching a triplicate fork in the road: "Temptation comes in many forms. Choose wisely."

The images of roads are beautiful, especially those used for advertising, mostly showing empty, sinuous lanes, mountains and desert and ocean and glorious nature on every side. (The images of the roads leading into and out of cities are less aspirational, because the roads are clogged with cars and the air thick with smog.) The dream of the road is solitude. No one dreams of sitting at a red light. No one dreams about pedestrians, and it often feels as though drivers don't think about them either. In driving lessons, I learned to drive defensively, to view everyone else as a threat. This is a horrible way to live. In the car, everyone else is in your way, slowing you down, impeding the riverlike stream. It is fundamentally bad to think of other people in this way. There are many horrible things about the way we've designed our society around cars: the pollution, the microplastics from the tires, the sheer amount of death. The noise. The heat. The amount of space we've decided cars require. But most of all, it has made people antagonistic to one another. When you mostly walk in a city designed for cars, you notice how angry people get, how close their cars come to you if you do not get out of their way fast enough. Before I moved to San Diego, I didn't take the bus frequently. I didn't need to; I lived in New York and took the subway everywhere. I drove when I first moved here,

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when the roads were empty due to the pandemic, and stopped when my job moved closer to my house. I mostly biked until I got sick and could no longer bike, and then I became acquainted with the bus. I was sick enough that I would take the bus one or two stops, riding a quarter of a mile so that I didn't have to walk. Or I would ride the bus to doctors' appointments, places that were ten minutes away by car but an hour via bus, until I finally caved and began utilizing Medi-Cal's free rides to appointments.

On the bus, everyone is together. In the mornings, I used to see the same man, a Vietnamese man with graying hair and kind eyes who worked at one of the hotels downtown and regularly told me about his life. I was sad when my schedule changed and I no longer saw him. There used to be a man with beautiful hair and a messenger bag who got off at my stop in the evenings, and we walked the same way until eventually he disappeared into the neighborhood. I always saw him when I was wearing ugly pants. On the bus, people will yell at the driver if they don't open the back door for you; I find the sound of someone hollering *back door!* soothing. Every morning, I say *good morning* to the bus driver, and when I get off the bus, I say *thank you*. There are certain drivers I'm always happy to see: the older woman with short silver hair and extremely reflective silver sunglasses, who is always training new drivers; the slight, young driver with their hair in two neat long braids and a wide smile that reminds me of my friend Rae; the redhead with curly hair who also seems too young. Once, there was a driver on the 11 so breathtakingly attractive that I blushed and tripped on the way out the back door. He was neat, put together, in a way that belongs to a different decade.

Sometimes I talk to other riders on the bus. We all grumble about how long the bus takes, about the lack of benches or shade, about the awful traffic on University. Or we talk about how expensive the rent is. Sometimes they tell me about their lives. One man has been riding the buses since the seventies and calls the 1 a sightseeing bus because of how slowly it crawls through the city. One man details his ice cream recipe to me and then pulls the cord, realizing he left his ice cream supplies at the last stop.