

JONATHAN TRAVELSTEAD

PAIN OF OTHERS

On I-64, heading home from the airport I find what was missing
from the pamphlet of addictions. A wreck on the highway's fast lane shoulder.
Bad. Orange cones shunt the eastbound lanes together.

As if designed to draw attention only so we can then look away,
the rescue trucks ahead pincer the scene.

Flashing wigwags. Letters in gold leaf naming the town and station
they hail from with reflective trim made lambent by the headlights
of passing vehicles. I look. I don't want to, but I do,
then say it's so I can reconstruct the scene's events as if understanding the
past

could change anything. On my left, the Wal-Mart box trailer has tumbled
and split in the wide, grassy median. A pillow's batting
bursts from its riveted seams, a superstores' detritus

littered behind it. Paper-thin televisions,
corrugated in plastic. Dolls, ripped from pink packaging,
dismembered likenesses of limbs flung ahead where rescue trucks
stage to protect the victims, firemen from traffic

in case the cones fail. This is how it must have happened: Westbound,
the diesel tractor jack-knifed, causing the kingpin

to uncouple from the fifth wheel, and where the trailer diverged
the unburdened semi did a half-left and dished the median so the last thing
the driver of the white Mazda 3 saw as she torpedoed
the truck's grill was a strangely human face wolfing the hood.

Motoring fills the dusk, unpuzzled before me. Portable lights
on tripods strung to generators. Sirens

and the lead man's shouted directives displace the air
I steel myself against when I crawl by, face set firmly in my prejudice
that the victim inside must be a woman. I steel myself against
the need that's always there and always will be
to look closer, that this time I'll glimpse the face I know entangled
with sheetmetal and flecks of paint
which share a shade of iron oxide. But this Plinko life
of random occurrences I can do nothing to steel myself against.
All these meteorites falling from the sky I've dodged but will one day
crater, and splash molten earth onto someone close to me.
Fryman, Knabe. Mason, Alexander. Sure as whatever names
I've made up and appended in day-glo to the first responders' backs
who now help the victims, I know their effectiveness
comes in believing one day it will be their sons,
their wives pinned at the A post, pierced beyond the Nader bolt
where gloved hands cannot reach. I wish I were as wrong about their
methods
and what afflicts them as I am about the blue feather
braided like steel into the victim's straight, blonde hair,
or that the driver has a chipped front tooth whose planes I could map
if asked, its enamel speckled with clots of blood.
No, of course it's not her, but they all are,
really. *Someone's* her, separated from *my* only by circumstance,
a thin scrap of time and place, ignition temperature,
and the spark of a small death suffered between two bodies.
Feathering the accelerator as if an egg nested beneath, I ask myself
Where do I get off being so lucky that I've carved
out the time for poems?, and *How long can this really last?*
Reader, I have a confession:

Sometimes I'm so afraid of flying my lungs forget they're
a life support system for a body. One wrong move and dead is dead
in any numbered world you're breathing in. Ionizing radiation.
Scraping your leg against an uncovered screw
packed on the L, days later tetanus, or the red lines of infection
beat a sprint down the home stretch to your heart.
Something mundane as walking back to our country's analog
of the *favelas*— or Johannesburg's *Homelands*—
your gutshot by a conscripted rent-a-cop for not carrying
your work pass. So many snares set between the night's driftaway
and gasping awake to an alarm's tachycardia,
you can't hardly move without getting some on you.
Wave a UV light over all this dust and watch it glow into evidence
of a world knitted together by misfortune.
Reader, remember your own conflict tours as we pass
the wrecks of other peoples' lives, saying to ourselves *at least that's not me*,
or, *at least that's not my someone trapped, bleeding*
as the golden hour slips away. We're lucky. We know exactly
how good we've got it. In my insufferable happiness
as I speed away from the accident scene
I call the only parent I have left because I haven't yet heard
his deep, comforting baritone today and then I call my partner whom I love
partly because of how hard she tries loving me. Friends wait
in my garage where we will roll cigarettes
and drink our dark beer in a timbre just below sinuous conversation
which moves from wood-turning to motorcycles,
but which ends the night in the key of gratitude, brothers.
Fire Department brothers I interchangeably love to hate/hate to love.
Air Force brothers I haven't seen in years,

and my one true brother in Germany whom I miss
so badly I'm weeping above the space bar as I type this.
We have everything in this world, and nothing is taken we do not
freely give. The clamminess in my palms when I buy
another plane ticket reminds me of the relative safety of my own life.
When, taking off or landing, the wheels separate from earth
or grab tarmac again and I know the roulette wheel's golden triangle
has again passed me by and in its tailwind is only
the bone-filling urge which expands until I am many-tongued
and helpless with it- near to fever with whispered gratitudes
like the Serenity Prayer into my clasped fists,
or a prayer for the businessman beside me who says every second
after eighteen is one in which we are really dying.
I turn, thanking him but not him- the fact of him-
in these words of the living: *Thank you that from this seat*
I look over this blessed wing and see more comfort than pain.
Thank you for every moment,
for every breath still in me is extra.