

Gray Area

Driving East on Interstate 70 across Kansas is a dull but direct way to get from Boulder to St. Louis. The scenery is sparse and vast. In many places, giant white windmills outnumber the trees. They stretch endlessly into the indefinite horizon, spinning in mesmerizing synchronicity.

The sky had been threatening for fifty miles when I noticed that the cars and trucks on the other side of the interstate had their wipers on, mostly at high speed. Two seconds later the rain smacked into our windshield like a splatter of pebbles.

We have a heavy, powerful car with new tires. I slowed down to 70, then 60, then 50 as the rain thickened in intensity. My wife said, "This is bad."

I said, "It's terrible."

I tried to focus on the white car in front of me as I drove even slower, to keep a safe stopping distance between us. The rain grew stronger, harder, thicker. My windshield wipers, even on the highest speed seemed desperate to keep up.

It was futile. The white car faded away in the rain. The white lines on the side of the road disappeared. Left and right, up and down disappeared, too, and all that was left was gray. It reminded me of a dream I've had more than once, in which I am driving at night and my brakes don't work and I can't see the road ahead of me. Was this how JFK junior felt before he crashed into the sea?

Something rumbled against my left front tire. It was the warning strip next to the guardrail on the left side of the road. Before the rain I'd been driving in the right lane. I steered to the right, trusting fate that there wouldn't be a car in the right lane. We floated across the void until I felt the warning strip on the right lane. I eased the car a touch to the left. The entire sequence lasted maybe fifteen seconds, but it felt as if time had been suspended in the gray.

The white car had disappeared. Why another vehicle hadn't broadsided us, I don't know. Why we didn't end up in a ditch, or worse, I don't know that, either. Call it luck. Call it God.

The rain slowed down. Visibility returned. I sped up. My shirt collar was damp with sweat. My wife asked if I were all right. I lied and said I was.

We told ourselves, wow, what an incredible deluge, we were lucky nothing bad happened, thank God. We talked about stopping for lunch and playing with our dog again and many other everyday things, longing for the comfort of the mundane—a rest stop, a cheap hamburger, a fill-up.

That was five days ago. Every night since then, as I lie in bed the grayness washes over me in all its amorphous terror. I wonder why I am here today and not in a hospital or dead.

I think about breathing. Then I breathe without thinking. After a while I begin to see a sliver of white light cutting through, and I sleep.