

Creatures in Mirror Are Often Closer Than They Appear

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I have a long-running fantasy about becoming a troll in a wooded strip of median along the highway. I settle down in a lean-to or a nest of leaves, possibly raise a family to the rhythm of the passing traffic. We harvest wild plants and eat from rest stop vending machines. We trap small mammals and carrion birds with the carcasses we find by the road. In darker versions of the fantasy, we eat travelers.

I have not owned an automobile in years. I don't mind not driving, except that I rarely get out of the city and on occasion I miss the highway. Somehow it always felt like I was being stretched when I drove fast on the highway. It felt like I had been living in a shoebox and someone just removed the lid. I loved it, but it was weird. I'd drive and drive until I had to take a pit stop. When I got out of the car I felt the same way, like I'd been cooped up, and the first thing I had to do was stretch.

Then I would look around for

trolls.

Having lived in the city my whole life, I am comfortable with the notion of squatting and homelessness in an urban setting. But there is something otherworldly about living on the highway. Hitchhikers I see on occasion, but never any of the tree forts or roadside scarecrows that would indicate a semi-permanent existence. I assume they are there. I rush past too quickly for sightings.

I used to wonder about this on road trips with my father. I liked to think they were all hidden in the woods, looking out. I imagined a little settlement like an Ewok village hidden in the median. Or a solitary trash bag teepee off a desolate tangle of interchange. I was always looking for signs of hermits by the roadside.

In my fantasy, I live for free on public land and do not pay taxes. I lead a simple life collecting redeemable cans and robbing cornfields, tending to my woods. Cities of people slip blindly through my world each day in automobiles. They are oblivious to my presence. I am not able to keep track of them either. They fly past like drops of rain in a windstorm. In my fantasy, their taillights appear like the eyes of retreating dragons. I watch them disappear, drunk on gasoline and liquor distilled from poisonous berries. Sometimes I shake my fist.

As a child, I used to wish I was retarded. I know it's a terrible thought to have, but I wanted to be almost catatonic. I thought life would be easier that way; I wouldn't have to live up to any expectations, including or particularly my own. I also wanted to be an alley cat or an earth worm. I feared basic responsibility. I wanted the simple problems of an animal and I wanted simple animal emotions to deal with them. I still sometimes wish to be something other than myself. If I cannot be a lottery winner, I dream, then I will be a highway troll.

I dream of wrapping myself in an anthracite tarp torn by sheer speed from the top of a passing RV. I carry a club, a scuffed Titleist, and I grow hair on my eyelids and tongue. I climb Jersey barriers and nurse milk from the goats of nearby farmers. "Don't worry about the winter," I whisper to my fleas. "I will always let you inside."

As I was writing this essay, I became very unsure of everything and

began to read out loud to my girlfriend. “I did that for three days once,” Carabella told me. She went on to say that she was nineteen and in the process of splitting up with, John, her husband at the time. She ran away from an argument in a parked car. John drove away. “I had to escape and just live in my head for a few days,” she told me. “Rather than deal with reality.” She said she hadn’t thought of the event in years.

She sat on the toilet while I took a shower and grilled her about the experience for the benefit of my essay. She told me she was outside Annapolis when it happened but never having had a driver’s license she had no clue what highway. She found an abandoned tent in a patch of woods that acted as a barrier between a suburban development and the highway. I asked her if she was scared to sleep in the tent. “What if the owner came back?” I asked, thinking of trolls.

“I didn’t care what happened to me. That’s why I was sleeping in the woods to begin with.”

I kept asking stupid questions.

“It was pretty boring,” she told me. “But gross. I couldn’t tell my hair from the sweat from the bugs anymore.” When she said that last part, I got almost jealous. She had nearly lived my fantasy.

She went on to tell me that the heart of the story, the really crazy part, went down after she had emerged from the woods. But that didn’t have anything to do with life in wooded median strips, so I jumped out of the shower and began typing. I felt low and knew I should be listening. I knew she only wanted to finish telling me her story. But I didn’t want any additional information. I was afraid I’d forget what she told me in the shower if I listened. I deserve my fantasy sometimes.

I was very interested in the lives of the saints when I was a child. My mother used to read about them to me from a little yellow book, which I still have. Despite being born on Saint Patrick’s Day, my favorite saint has always been Saint Simeon the Stylite, who lived atop a craggy pillar. He fasted and practiced his devotions from a narrow plateau for thirty-seven years. During Lent, his torso was strapped to a stake so he could let himself be beaten by sandstorms.

Eventually the wind and desert sun cracked and blistered his skin. Maggots began to breed in the wounds. Simeon kindly allowed the worms to feed.

Pilgrims and kings would visit the pillar to seek the hermit's guidance. Once Emperor Theodosius sent three bishops to persuade Simeon to descend from the pillar and receive care from a physician. He refused, leaving himself in the hands of nature and the Almighty. I don't want to be visited like that when I am living in the median. I want to be spotted on rare occasions, like Bigfoot. I want hoaxes created about me. I want to live in grainy home video footage.

Recently, I was in the car with my father and Carabella on our way to hike around an abandoned Nike missile site in Patapsco Valley State Park and my father started talking about all the wasted land that surrounds the highway system. I told him about my fantasy. He said he had always harbored a similar fantasy, except in his version he was never a troll. And he didn't pretend to be so austere about the self-destructiveness of the whole thing.

I try not to overanalyze my fantasy; I shouldn't even be writing about this. Everyone grows weary of human thought from time to time. It's natural. And probably part of the reason I want to mutate into a troll and live on a plot of wooded land fenced off by hot asphalt and roaring traffic. In my fantasy, I don't read anything but billboards. And the writing and symbols on the billboards confuse me. My only conversation is with the fleas and the road and my poor, poor family.