

The Myth of the Long Road

The long road—lined with poplars for the first few miles, a gentle meandering hallway between soaring limbs bundled against their trunks like chaste debutantes. Poplar walls giving way to pine and then dark larch, gawky branches akimbo under the sprawl of late clouds. Later still, scrubs and cacti poking abrupt below the ache of wilderness sky, uneasy against the night.

The fine macadam between the rows of poplars repeats the same transitions—to seamed slabs, to the crafted disharmony of paving stones, to cobbles, graded dirt, then ruts, and finally a shadow of departed passage. The road goes on, invisible, following only the habit of prior curves and courses.

Along the virtual road a ghost path branches off across the desert, fast lost among random boulders and escarpments, winding inscrutably, fording an occasional dry wash, descending into a brown arroyo lined with skeletons of dessicated shrubbery. The path turns across a diminutive alluvial plane. Traverses a shallow blowout lined with desert pavement and rounds one lone sandstone outcropping. Winding in tighter serpentines until, amid the eroded trunks of a copse of former juniper—a great flat stone, square, flush with the ground. Fine-hewn chiseled edges, ten meters on a side, dusted with sand, smooth and dark, a slab of iridescent basalt upon a grey-brown ground of sedimentary gravel.

The end of the long road: a door in the desert, a hatch, an invitation, an opportunity, an admonition, an end to all things lit by the sun. Here: the silent entrance to the subterranean, sixty cold tons of vitrified lava glowing black, dim glassy reflection of the moon, black specular starlight shining

amid tiny rills and dunes of dirt and dust. A cube, in fact, thick as wide or long, set into the earth, an inverted monument to another kingdom, gateway to darkness and silence and unutterable mass.

The crust of the Earth descends below the sky as far as the sky soars above it. And deeper still, to the fringe of semi-molten mantle, the main substance of the world. This descends another 1,800 miles toward the molten core. A sea of liquid rock, as hot as the surface of the sun, and floating in it, balanced at its center, an island sphere almost as big as the moon, of solid iron, alloyed with nickel, the stuff of steel, of myth, forged in the fire of the sun's nativity.



He was a king, once, long ago, with a polyglot retinue from far flung dominions. He ruled lands and fiefdoms barely known and rarely visited. His queen was his pride, the model and envy of womanhood, the impossible dream of men. Their destiny was to rule with equanimity, to persevere for the benefit of all, from nourishment of the weak to enrichment of the deserving.

The king arose and went to the kitchen for his morning coffee. The queen was at the counter buttering toast, and he stood behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist, kissed her neck.

"I have to meet her," he said.

"I know you do," she said.

"You understand," he said.

"Of course. We do what we must."

The toast was warm and buttery, with that perfect crunch. He took a sip of coffee and headed for the garage. The queen smiled.

The king tossed his briefcase in the back seat and settled behind the wheel, wondering why he had bothered to bring his papers. Habit, no doubt, not a problem, not important. The car started as the overhead door groaned open and he backed out into the morning sun. Calvin was just pulling out of his driveway next door, and they waved at each other. Then the king backed down past the mailbox and the trashcans and drove down Maple to Harding.

On any normal day he would have turned left on Harding to the Cross-County, but today he made a right. At the interstate, he paused for the light,

and then accelerated down the ramp, gauging the gaps between semis, and pulled into the high-speed traffic.

The bedroom communities transitioned immediately into plazas full of big box stores, then a band of factories and light industry. Then a ring of warehouses and truck stops and natural gas storage tanks, some freight yards and railroad sidings, the slums, then duplexes and small condos, the low-rise subsidies, and finally the steep pitch of the city's bell curve.

The interstate vaulted across neighborhoods and parks, riverbeds and construction sites, rounding clusters of office buildings and brand-name headquarters, new ventures, a university, municipal buildings, the highway department complex, the city bus lots and the light rail depot, and then traversed the other side of the bell curve where the landscape opened up and the last few miles were lined with lampposts welcoming arrivals from the East, and rows of poplars planted on either side.

Outside the city, traffic began to thin out, and the tractor trailers were content to cruise in strings of eight or ten, holding to the speed limit while the cars streamed by with greater and greater gaps between them. The sun rose in the blue cloudless sky and the interstate was no longer lined with trees. Off-ramps were fewer now, but a handful of trucks and cars veered off at each one until there were almost no other vehicles on the road.

As time wore on, the king's mind grew blank, a stream of pavement with a blinking center line, a silent sentient pilot light behind autonomic physiology. Merged with the car, motorized musculature. Time measured in off- and on-ramps, pulsations of memory on the faint drone of consciousness, forgotten songs, categories.

The long road slowly transitioned to concrete slabs with rhythmic seams from the highways of an earlier decade. There were no more ramps, and fewer cars to need them. He slowed, and the tires clumped over the seams at a leisurely pace, a contented rhythm, free from urban urgency. Some slabs had risen slightly, jarring the car. He slowed some more. The slabs became cracked, some patched, others devolving to pot-holes. There were no more vehicles.

The car rumbled on, and the concrete deteriorated to paving stones, then stretches of flat-worn cobblestone from another age. Memory and sunlight began to blend into a shimmering counterpoint to the engine hum and the slow jounce of suspension. And then the road was dirt, smoothed

and uniform for some miles, and set the car to buzzes and hums never heard before.

A section of washboard forced him to a slow crawl for a few miles, and then the road was beyond the reach of heavy equipment, no more than ruts leading like missing railroad tracks into the desert. His memories drifted away like the circling desert birds high overhead. The mid-day sun flattened the landscape into shadowless disorganization, a studied asymmetry of rocks and ruts that grew ever more indistinguishable from the random tracks of tumbleweed.

The king turned right on the ghost path above the escarpment and bumped over the dry wash, turning abruptly down the brown arroyo, his track marked by low leafless bushes on either side. At the bottom, the car wallowed through loose alluvial gravel, surged down and up through a shallow washout, turned sharply left, then right, then left again, and lurched to a stop in a cloud of dust.

The sky was hot and bright, empty but for the unspeakable sun and the high-flying birds scanning for prey. He stood for a moment looking at the basalt square, set into the desert floor, half covered with sand and debris. Then he walked past the car to a large rock, twice his height, and clambered to the top, and sat with his legs over the side, looking down at the submerged square stone.



The air is hot and dry. The boulder is hotter still, rough and uncomfortable. The rock seemed so big when he climbed up, but the scale of the black inverted megalith is now clear, and the rock and car are dwarfed alongside it.

He imagines it rising out of the ground. He knows it is a cube: what else could it be? He imagines it above the desert, casting a shadow black as itself across the sand. White marble steps descend into the earth, suffused with a rosy glow from two thousand miles down. There she waits. The stairway resonates with a deep sliding vibration that arises from the steel sphere as big as the moon, as hot as the sun, slowly turning.

Overhead the black birds break from their own ragged orbits and fly away to the far corners of the sky.

