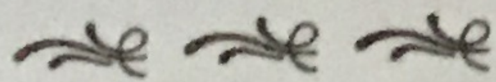


Flyover Country

It's too big to grasp—but that doesn't mean it's not worth trying.

BETWEEN BACK EAST AND OUT WEST, IN THAT OBSCURE sweep of green you glimpse from the airplane window before you close the shade and put on your headphones, roads roll out across the fields like shiny gray ribbons. The sun rises over tiny rivers that you can drive across in a fraction of the time it would take to pronounce their names. It sets over cities you never think about dominated by mountain ranges you never knew existed. During the years I lived in Missouri and almost everyone else I knew lived between New York and Boston, I drove back and forth many times across this unappreciated expanse of America.

Usually I took the Interstates, which were their own world, divorced from whatever was going on in the unseen towns beyond them. The presence of civilization was indicated by watchful cows and by truck stops, which periodically

appeared in the distance like miniature cities. I drove alongside lumbering big rigs. I was forever passing them, and they were forever appearing in front of me again. I sometimes felt like the only person in a sea of things, all kinds of things being busily carried to and fro. It was an odd vantage point, I was unused to seeing so much commerce with so few consumers.

For entertainment there were billboards: "Avoid Hell. Repent. Trust Jesus Today." "Where will you spend eternity? Jesus Christ is the answer!"

For reassurance there were Lewis and Clark Trail markers, which momentarily overruled the doubts I had about the sanity of my decision to move. I told myself that in leaving New York I was not giving up or stepping down. I imagined that I was better suited for another era, a time when West was the direction everyone in America wanted to go. Also comforting were the national forests, which reminded me that it didn't matter if I couldn't decide whether the East or the Midwest was my home; they belonged to the same country, after all, and I could claim that all of it was mine. Sometimes I was the only one driving through a national forest—not just mine, but mine alone.

Sometimes as I drove I forgot exactly where I was, which may have been because only those who lived there considered it a definable place. More than once, after an hour spent coaxing my car uphill, sure that I was crossing some grand and storied range, I looked at my map and saw that the peaks which I had just struggled to summit merited nothing more than a nameless green blob.

I spent too many nights in a dot on the map called Triadelphia, West Virginia. For a long time I thought it was Wheeling; I think *it* thought it was Wheeling. I learned it was Triadelphia because I got out the phone book in a hotel and checked. In Triadelphia hotel lobbies, surrounded by burly plaid-shirted men, I blended into the walls, so out of place I paradoxically became invisible.

When I didn't stop in Triadelphia I stopped in St. Clairsville, which was technically in Ohio but seemed to also want to be Wheeling. It appeared to have been built as a repository for cheap chain hotels. St. Clairsville was prone to intense fog, which confused the birds. They flew strangely, slow and lower than usual. Once one slammed its tiny body against my windshield. I was sure I'd killed it, but it left no mark.

At first I was surprised by the distances I had to cover. Ohio, a state I had never previously deigned to consider, was *huge*, its size all out of proportion to its importance. I learned to look out for particularly Ohio-like things: boats inexplicably stranded on the left shoulder of the highway, and barns brightly painted to commemorate the state's bicentennial. Once in Ohio on a snowy morning I saw a line of cars along the left shoulder of the road. Police cruisers, their red and blue lights eerie in the white almost-dawn, surrounded a little car, parked; an eighteen-wheeler, facing the wrong direction; a Brinks truck, lying upside down in the little grassy ditch of a median; and a second Brinks truck, waiting patiently to collect the loot.

Sometimes time zone changes were posted on signs, and sometimes they weren't. Sometimes they popped up where I wasn't expecting them. I drove across Tennessee, which looks small on a map but in reality goes on and on, and was surprised to find that I'd driven an hour in a second. I was vaguely confused for the rest of the day. The time zone changes in the middle of Kentucky too, but I never noticed it there. I once managed to drive across Kentucky and only step out of the car once, for three minutes. In those three minutes I was called "Hon" by two separate strangers.

Occasionally I would glimpse from the highway a gilded dome, of a church or a courthouse or a town hall, and think about how almost every place that had ever been built thought, at some point, that it was going to be spectacular. I thought about its inhabitants and investors, who must have

dreamed of glorious futures, and bet on that one imposing structure, and eventually realized the whole thing would never pan out.

Mostly what I saw from the highways, though, was fields—soybean fields and cornfields and fields of crops I couldn't identify. In Illinois I was once stuck in traffic in a cornfield, a thing I hadn't thought possible. Also in Illinois, but not while stuck in the cornfield, I looked up and saw streaks of pink and blue, like a daytime sunset, stamped with a herringbone pattern of clouds. In the distance they stretched as far as I could see, their interlocking V's reminiscent of a pair of tweed pants. As I got closer, the pattern became larger, until, above me, there was nothing but a series of lines.

I encountered a tornado only once, in Paducah, Kentucky. I hid in a highway rest stop which was like no highway rest stop I'd ever seen, a stately historic building that became, for a few hours, a shelter for travelers from all directions. In Paducah, for the first time, I met grown men who openly proclaimed their fear of weather. In Manhattan, weather had never seemed to stop anyone, and real New Englanders laughed at blizzards. It was like learning a new culture in a foreign land, one where weather was far deadlier, and people had less to prove, than anywhere I'd lived before.

When I had time I left the highways and took the little two lane roads through towns that showed up on my map as the tiniest of black specks.

Here the billboards were often homemade: "Life is fragile—Handle with prayer." "Smile! Your Mom chose life!" That one was illustrated with a smiley face. "Got Faith?" That one had a picture of a faucet dripping wine.

These towns usually fit in one of two categories: Perfect, with a strip of narrow buildings like an unfurled red and white ribbon, or Unfortunate, with many churches, many cars in various states of disrepair, and sometimes a lonely-looking dog roaming around, in search of a human. When I

passed one of these I would ponder why towns with populations of less than two hundred always have a thrift store. Did the clothes simply rotate through all the inhabitants until they either fell apart or made it back to their original owners?

On the little roads, life unfolded beside me in blurred snippets, and I wrote them down so I wouldn't forget them. If writing made me drift towards the oncoming lane, it didn't matter: there was nobody there. I'd take the notes later and type them up, a compendium of Midwestern Things:

An old man in a plaid shirt and a straw hat drives an ancient tractor down the road. The cars behind him slow down, then carefully inch around.

A tiny bird runs across the road as fast as its miniscule legs can carry it, so afraid of the oncoming traffic that it forgets it can fly.

Abandoned railroad tracks parallel to the road. Disused railroad bridges, narrow and rusted and gracefully curved.

A church in a field, just across the street from a store selling guns and ammo.

A plump woman at a gas station strains to remove the large plastic numerals displaying the price of fuel. She hoists a pole to the top of the sign and detaches the numbers one by one, lowering them to the pavement. Then she reaches up again and sticks on the new numbers, and the cost of gas goes up.

Little plumes of flame shoot up by nodding pump jacks.

A girl on a the back of a motorcycle spreads her arms wide into the wind, holding on with just her legs, like she half wants to fall off, to see if she could fly.

I saw other things and doubted that I'd seen them at all: *was that really a drive-thru convenience store?*

I saw Ohio's smallest church, painted clean white, in which one or maybe two people could fit. It stood on a patch of grass near a rest stop in Coolville. In an empty parking lot under a bright blue sky I said incredulously into my cell phone, "I'm in *Coolville*."

Also in Ohio, I drove past the towns of Fly and Antiquity. In Indiana I stopped at an intersection which offered me a choice between towns named Pleasant and Patriot.

I drove along and let impatient pickup trucks pass me. I listened to traffic reports that originated in cities whose geographic relation to me I could not fathom. With the greatest of urgency, they described road conditions in places I had never heard of. I watched the local news in hotels. The weathermen spoke of viewing areas whose borders I did not recognize and pointed at truncated maps I could not comprehend.

For a long time it seemed like there was only one enormous state between New Jersey and Missouri. Rural Pennsylvania blended into rural Illinois, creating a region with a way of life all its own. Whole towns often appeared to be asleep, or hiding—on weekday mornings or afternoons, on weekends, it didn't matter. Their houses and cars were there, but they themselves were invisible. I wondered why anyone lived here, or why they stayed. Then I wondered if they had in fact left long ago, but somehow arranged for their towns to be kept exactly the same, like Midwestern Pompeiis.

Between the grass and fields and forests, these towns would pop up at intervals. There were never a lot of houses in one place, but there were so many small concentrations of houses so far apart, that I wondered how there could still be unemployment anywhere—surely everyone in the nation could be put to work as mail carriers or census takers in rural Ohio and Indiana.

When I took the smaller roads I stayed in places that felt as if history had stopped just before the steamboat was abandoned in favor of the train. They felt not merely preserved but suspended, as if in amber. In Madison, Indiana, everything was pastel-colored. It seemed every business was an ice cream parlor, or a soda fountain, or a candy store. At a bright little coffee shop, you could have your coffee black, or you could

add cream, as if the modern notion of milk in coffee had not yet arrived. From Main Street the side streets led down to the river or up to the highway. The town faded at its outskirts, its pastels turned to sepia, and then it simply stopped.

The Ohio River spawned other places like this, quiet and as sweet as if they were dusted with confectioner's sugar. The river was quiet too. It had none of the mythology, the romance and tragedy, of the Mississippi and the Missouri. But it had a sort of confidence, being the pathway to those other rivers, the first leg for every East Coast dreamer's journey. It flowed lazily; in places it hardly moved at all. It tolerated the pale blue bridges built across its width and the little boats, American flags flying, tied up along its docks.

From these fragments I created lasting associations, mostly to do with time. In my mind, it was always just before dawn in Ohio: either dark and cold and scraping snow from the windshield in motel parking lots, or waiting for the summer heat to come and burn away the fog. Ohio was sleeping trucks humming at rest stops, and sleeping towns.

Indiana was mist rising from fields and flocks of black birds taking off in formation and streaking across the newly sunny sky. It was a single pick-up truck racing along an access road, for the fun of it, not because there was anywhere to go. Indiana seemed to exist perpetually in intense daybreak; how could it ever be night or noon in towns named Aurora and Rising Sun?

Illinois was afternoon, bright and encouraging, because if I was in Illinois that meant I had just set out or was about to arrive. Since I was never tired in Illinois, I was always seeing things I might have overlooked when less alert, like vintage Americana arranged in the windows of antique stores, and post offices so tiny and bright white that they seemed capable of delivering only letters handwritten with a quill pen.

West Virginia was night coming on, which made the Alleghenies mysterious. I could never orient myself properly

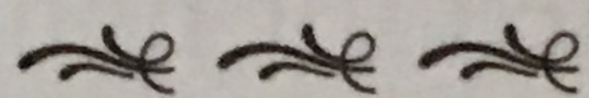
in West Virginia, because it had extra dimensions, not just forward and back but up and down. I admired the buildings planted tenaciously on the sides of mountains, the drivers who fearlessly navigated the roller-coaster roads, the hidden rivers with names I always forgot but which converged and flowed as proudly as if they were major thoroughfares. There was something a little dangerous, too, in the inscrutable mountains and the unexpected rivers. And then there were the back roads, roads that curved and dipped and sloped and bent, that kept your hands clasped on your steering wheel and your arm muscles tightened for hours at a time.

Pennsylvania was all about the weather. The skies there were like a time-lapse film of seasons changing. For years I never washed my car, I only drove every few months across Pennsylvania, and it was washed for me. In an instant the clouds would darken and the rain would pour down until the only sound I could hear was water splashing on the roof of the car and windshield wipers vainly fighting the deluge. Then the sun would come out and the landscape would feel altered, purified, blasted clean. In the fall the leaves changed in sections. On my left out the window, spectacular reds, yellows, and greens. On my right, soft russet and butter and pale pumpkin and sea foam, shimmering in the wind. It was in Pennsylvania that I rounded a corner and saw, for the first time, purple mountains. I thought, *Now I understand.*

Over time the patchwork quilt I had once seen only from airplane windows unfolded itself for me. I came to know this flyover country, not in the intimate way of locals, but in the fond, incomplete way that only outsiders can know places.

When I look back at the photographs I took along these drives, I see that they are all of the same things: rivers, boats on rivers, little multi-colored buildings in a row. I did not need to travel to take those pictures. I could have found those scenes in Missouri or New York. I realize now that they were not pictures of any specific place, really, but of a time. What

drew me was that brief interlude of history when the roads were rivers, and rivers led to frontiers unknown and unimagined. And yet there is something settled about my pictures, too, something solid and domestic about those little buildings in a row. A stranger looking through my photos might conclude that I was looking for a home. I wasn't. But I found one, in a way, in the comfort of the road, the motion of leaving and arriving, the freedom of spending all day nowhere, everywhere, in between.



Johnna Kaplan is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in Newsweek, *the* Christian Science Monitor, *and various online travel magazines. She travels as much as she can, motivated mostly by a love of history and a congenital inability to stay in one place for more than about a month. She blogs about her conflicted relationship with Connecticut at www.thesizeofconnecticut.blogspot.com.*