



PRISM REVIEW

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Special Thanks to *Peggy Redman*, High School Contest Judge

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STOP AND GO

I have driven the southern California freeway system for 17 years. I once dominated the office competition of who drove the furthest to work. I described my commute with pride, as if it were a war story, like that time when I lived in Valencia and worked in Manhattan Beach. I woke up at 4:45 a.m. to beat the southbound traffic and merged onto the beginning of the 405 freeway only to inch across the San Fernando Valley floor, hoping to beat the half a million other commuters who also drive through the nation's number one freeway bottleneck, the 101 and 405 interchange, by no later than 6 a.m. I eventually crossed the 10 freeway, the number five bottleneck, and reached my destination just south of Los Angeles International Airport sometime, anytime after 7 a.m. I made this drive in as little as an hour and a half on up to three hours if there was a Sig-Alert, a traffic incident that paralyzes two or more lanes of the freeway. Then, after working all day, I retraced these same 42 miles on the northbound side of the road.

I remember driving home one summer afternoon somewhere near Burbank. In my rear view mirror, cars crept behind me, just as they did in the southbound lanes, just as I did in my own. The sun beat down on the left side of my face. My skin tightened under the heat and I was tired. As I counted the lanes of this road, I thought about the time that all of us have spent crawling on this hot asphalt treadmill. I recalled the day before Thanksgiving when it took me almost five hours to drive home. Those hours once worn as a badge of pride were hours of my life that I had squandered.

A decade later, I was a graduate student living at the southern end of that same freeway, near the nation's ninth and thirteenth worst bottlenecks. I needed to attend 10 consecutive days of classes in Culver City, about 30 miles north of my home. I did the traffic math and calculated how early I would have to leave the house in order to make it to school by 9 a.m., and added extra time, just in case of a Sig-Alert. I figured out that I would either show up too early and then I would be tired in the afternoon, or I would risk being late to class. I decided to stay at a hotel near the university instead.

The bell captain opened the door to my room, carried in my oppressive luggage, walked up to the window and said, "This is the best part."

He opened the curtain and the white, hazy June sunlight poured into the room. My eyes scanned across the gravel covered roof of the lobby below us and hopped to the four northbound lanes and five southbound lanes of the 405 freeway filled with vehicles that rushed by us like running water.

"You're right. The freeway, it's . . . so . . . cool," I blurted. My own words surprised me.

"I meant the skyline," the bell captain said.

"What skyline?"

"That's Culver City over there," he said pointing off into the distance.

The tall glassy buildings and billboards could have been a façade. Even the palm trees didn't seem real. My eyes returned to the cars on the freeway. The sounds of the traffic hummed quietly in the room, soon to be drowned out by the air conditioner. To me, the freeway was the only part of the landscape that was teeming with life.

"Who cares about the skyline?" I thought.

During the next few days, I never turned on the TV in my room. I attended my morning classes, returned to my room alone, and ate lunch while staring at the lines of cars. At night, I watched the white and red airs of lights pass by as if they were embedded in a vein. These cars were like blood cells traveling in my own body that carry oxygen and fight infection. The streetlights stood still, but as these cars moved up and down the freeway, I was reminded that even at night, the city was alive.

My boyfriend, Grant, called and wanted to know how school was going. "You sound distracted."

"I'm watching the freeway," I said.

"You were watching it last night when I called."

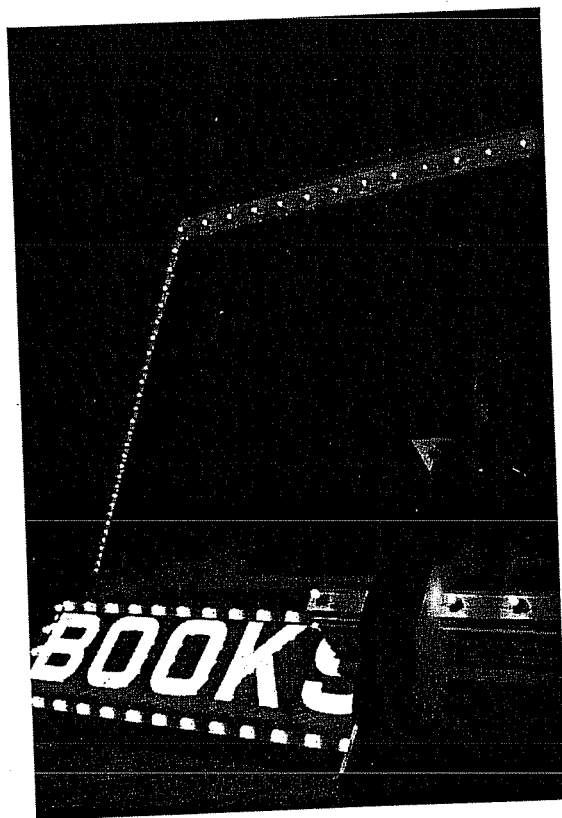
"I can't help it. I have to watch."

I remember watching the freeway once while flying out of Los Angeles on a business trip. As the plane headed north, the freeways below looked like thick scars deliberately carved into the surface of the city. Just as I can look down at my own skin and remember how a blemish got there, I looked down at the cloverleaves, the wide stretches of pavement and I knew where I was. The 1,075 miles of freeway that cover the 4,084 square miles of Los Angeles County grounded me from the sky.

Throughout the week, I noticed that the northbound and southbound lanes were largely unaware of each other, unless there was an accident that would turn the faucets of traffic in both directions down to a trickle. CalTrans, the state department of transportation, quantified this frustration by reporting that the

delays experience on the Los Angeles freeway system cost the commuters \$3.9 million dollars a day in fuel and time. Yet the traffic also seemed equalizing because each car had to wait its turn. For once, no individual had the socioeconomic or geopolitical advantage.

On my last morning at the hotel, I woke up at 5:45 a.m., rolled over, and looked out the window at the freeway. Some of the night still stained the sky. I rolled back onto my pillow, closed my eyes again and concentrated on the sounds of cars rushing by. As I breathed in the quiet morning, I thought about the freeway, this steel and concrete net that had been cast over my city, and I listened as the weave held Los Angeles to the Earth.



Book Light by Mathew Digges