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## All Roads

Malcolm Flanigan

*Mohawk Valley Community College*

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MALCOLM FLANIGAN

# All Roads

## I. Martin Street Amtrak

Set the scene—the desolate, gray platform ambushed by train tracks on each side, a long strip of gravel and metal bordered by trees on one side and a steep, grassy hill on the other. The seats covered in writing. Bench philosophy. Meanderings on life and death, blow jobs and hand jobs, phone numbers and names. The windows of the shelter huge and dirty, but it's a sweet home for the warmth.

Silence! Except for the cars on the road below, speeding like hummingbirds through the air, except for the occasional train making a scene with its vibrant whistle and its plodding wheels turning into the most brilliant noise pollution. The doors of the shelter rattle and swing open a tiny crack before shutting and repeating. The hulking freighters are aesthetically weathered by time and covered in anonymous tags by covert artists. The sleek Amtraks look as if they were once futuristic as they zoom into a silver blur. The combined sounds create an orchestra of noise à la Coltrane's *Ascension*. But in between: silence.

Alone, but not lonely. The passengers occasionally shuffling off and on the Amtrak. I'm able to sort through my thoughts in a way I'm not when I'm in a house full of despair, amidst anguished screaming and angry yelling. I can hear myself think. I can see every disturbance (if that's what you want to call it) in the environment and ready myself. There's never any curious door slamming, never any faint yelling slithering through the floor. Everyone who comes wants to be there and you can see them coming.

## II. Jervis Avenue Cemetery

The lights from cars creeping up behind us every once in a while catch us off guard. Riding up Jervis Avenue. The streetlights intrude on the darkness. The lines of the road flow past me, while Andrew rides an arm's-length ahead, pedaling casually. The cool wind slides underneath my clothes and brushes itself against the skin on my face; it whistles through the chimes on the porches and through bushes in the yards and the water dripping from the overhangs. The road fluctuates and with the concrete waves, the suburban homes deteriorate into empty fields of grass enclosed by chain link fence. The houses ebb back in, and to our right is the cemetery. We ride into the grass. Tires hiss on the wet lawn. We glide over the dip in the steel wire fence and take refuge behind a tomb. We sit on the concrete steps and look out among the rows of graves descending into the darkness. The noises of the nocturnal, of bugs and birds and cars off on some main road somewhere, swirl together in the absence of light. No glare from the sun to hypnotize us. Our minds' eyes as clear as the emptiness shrouding the cemetery. A weight lifted from our shoulders.

Light spills over the side of the tomb. A huge rumble. We jolt to attention. We feel our hearts drumming in between our ears. The light quickly fades with the clamor. A horn honk carries off through the wind and the darkness.

## III. Bosco Avenue

The dandelions bloom in the yards, some exploding with yellow; some puffing white. Suburban houses juxtapose boarded up brick buildings. A black SUV stands at the dead end of an almost abandoned alley. Upholstery hangs from the doors. The sun catches the thick smoke filling the air. Windows frame an alley of mangy stray cats. The back window is a gray garbage bag plastered thick with layers of black duct tape. Roger at the wheel, sunglasses strapped across his eyes, brown hair tossed back in disagreement as to where it should part. I'm in the passenger seat, artificial tears roll down my cheeks while I clean thick-rim, plastic glasses. My blonde hair is strangled into a tiny ponytail. Andrew is in the back, eyes woven with red, pushing back long black hair.

The garbage bag flutters like a flag in the breeze as the car rumbles, idling. Music vibrates from the speakers: "But frustration and heartache is what you got." Voices and laughter dance with the smoke. Through the scratched glass of the windows, children's screeches mix with the industrial roar of steelworkers. Welding torches sputter, metal resonates and echoes.

A roach ages backwards as it passes from hand to hand. A summer ritual. The dazzling sunlight illuminating the voices talking and laughing relieves the

tension of the nuclear family warzone. Smoke pours upwards when the doors swing open. Roger lights a Lucky Strike, as we walk up the driveway back into my house. I joke with him about the dangers of smoking without a filter.

“You’re right,” he says. “Things need a filter.”

#### IV. Gigliotti Avenue

The hallway is short, no lights, with steps next to a concrete incline for wheelchairs, and a doorway to a long unoccupied room filled with newspaper and stained cardboard. One end spits you out onto Dominick Street filled with parked cars, the other end leads to the back anonymous businesses, and an alley littered with garbage, sidewalk cracked, chain link fence bent from being backed into by a car. The boulevard’s constant drone of traffic provides the only appropriate sonic backdrop for truant conversations. Bad ideas, unethical experiments, shit talk. We stare at a Grandma Moses-like painting of a boy on a skateboard, holding onto his dog by a leash—his face covered by a blob of black spray paint with dripping words next to it. “SXWND—SKATE OR DOG.” Without saying anything, we laughed at the nugget of ignorant humor. *The Daily Sentinel* headlines speculate that the SXWND phenomenon is gang activity rather than noticing it as sex wound minus the vowels—nothing but immature scrawling. As the pack of cigarettes empties, the day gets dark.

“What do you wanna do?”

“We could go back to my house.”

“Word.”

#### V. Building Along the Erie Canal

Off a main road, in the shadow of the green, metal bridge adorned with owl sculptures stands a brick building, an entire wall missing, like a gaping mouth facing the water. There are no steps down into the structure, just a ledge and a giant metal pipe to step on. There are a few holes in the ground and the interior is covered in crude pot leaves and messages about long gone generations of Rome deviants. There are rusted metal boxes that resemble gutted circuit breaker panels forming a little U-shape in one corner. The water ripples and the sun reflects off of it, glaring white. Cars above honk as they go through the tunnel before the bridge and rush past. Sounds of the trains passing across the river, whistles screaming in our ears—welcome interruptions.

What the building was ever used for is beyond any of us, but it is a nice place to sit, dangle our feet over the ledge, and watch the ducks float in the canal.

## VI. The Woods at the End of Riverview Parkway North

At the end of a dead-end street, over a wooden rail fence left unfinished, splintering, through the bushes, into the clearing of razed woods, the stalks and leaves and grass crushed into dirt. Towering dominoes of utility poles and power lines stretch along the river, spit from the mouth of Lake Delta into the Erie Canal. The clearing flows into a larger ocean of grass—an empty baseball field and a playground in the distance. The cold air rings with childlike voices. We sit on a locked metal door mounted on a concrete square in the ground and light cigarettes and joints. We snap hollow, thin, wooden pipes and rip weeds out of the ground, roots and all. Engulfed in speechless smoke, our hands pass back and forth. The clouds glide along the sky and the gray turns to a dark blue.

We stomp out the cigarette butts and joint roaches, and climb through the thorned vines and clusters of leaves, emerging from our hiding spot. Back on the street, we make our ways back to our bedrooms on another Saturday evening.

## VII. Behind Dewitt Clinton School

The deer wander on the concrete and jet when they see me coming, hopping along the fence covered with vines and leaves until they find the opening, disappearing into the woods. The windows of the giant brick building are covered with metal grates and boards. Solid concrete blocks stand in front of the doors and some of the bottom windows, not blocked off, reveal classrooms in ruin, and a library with books left on the shelves, thrown across the floor, covered with dust and dirt. The cracked, torn pavement stretches to the woods, broken bottles and scattered garbage. Old tags on the brick wall are obscured by old burn marks, remnants of aerosol can explosions.

I sit on a concrete block and go back to the summers spent playing with fire and smoking stolen cigarettes in the very same spot I sit in now, behind this building, as forgotten as its namesake. Chris's dirty face smiling, cheeks red, greasy curls protruding from the sides of his baseball cap as he blows smoke towards me. Gasoline trails on the concrete flaring up for a moment and then fading from existence. Bundles of paper and T-shirts we salvaged on garbage day burning in a heap, throwing in toys we pilfered from our siblings and watching them melt in the flames, basking in the danger and destruction. My mother's voice carrying through the neighborhood letting me know it was time to return indoors, long before I carried a cellphone in my pocket. Chris would ride off into the distance, and I would stand at the dead end of Lynch Street, half out of the woods, and stare at my house.

## VIII. Louis V. Denti Playground

The old playground is covered in graffiti, prompting the school to demolish it and rebuild. The old swing sets stayed while they added a huge jungle gym, along with new slides connected by bridges and wooden platforms with tic-tac-toe games mounted on the walls, and a boat that rocks back and forth and can make you seasick on land. Across a field is the volunteer fire department and every few hours a cop pulls into the parking lot to check for trespassers. No lights illuminate the little playground in its suburban pocket separated from the surrounding neighborhoods by fields and forests.

I sit in a doorway behind the school, where I used to go in everyday, reading, straining my eyes, sacrificing vision for the peace and quiet. The instances of happiness and embarrassment come flooding back in the all too familiar environment. The furthest place from home in my younger years, the only place outside of the neighborhood I was allowed to venture to from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon. A place where my mother's shouts can't reach and never could. Where no one could call names and if they did, they got in trouble. Where rooms weren't filled with vitriolic yelling or tense silence. Where the words on the page didn't go in one ear and right out the other.

## IX. Lake Delta Dam

My father and I used to walk down the steep grassy hill, through the thin veil of trees to the river and fish silently for hours. I remember being very little and hooking something very large, the pole bending and curving, the reel making a sound like a cicada as I struggled to grasp the handle. My dad grunting and swearing at the fish, held on to me and my hands to prevent my body, and his rod, from being pulled into the water. The line snapped, my body lurched backwards, and I stood in amazement at the strength of a fish. My dad told me we almost had it, then repaired my line.

I don't fish much anymore. Usually I just park my bike and sit at the picnic tables, weathered by rain and snow, or stand on the fenced-off bridge and look down at the water gushing from the spillway. A long way from the neighborhood, from the sprawling developments filled with families in the midst of conflict. The empty hum of traffic from James Street and Erie Boulevard left behind. Just me, the fish, and the water.

## X. Griffiss Air Force Base Houses

Gansevoort Avenue runs through part of the ghost neighborhood, the two-story houses decrepit, siding torn apart, windows shattered and gaping, doors missing, lawns overgrown with weeds and shrubs, and the deeper you maneuver into the labyrinth, the worse the natural violence of time: trees

impaling roofs, entire halves of houses missing, exposing the internal organs, the inner workings of the walls and the floors. The twisting roads are gated off, but the gates are easily ducked under. The houses are barren inside, the cupboards ripped out along with the copper piping. Mold gropes the walls, and leaves fill rooms. The floors creak with each step, glass crunches under foot. Derogatory graffiti clutters the walls of the houses; anything interesting has since been covered by racial slurs and swastikas. I step through a large back window onto the wet grass. I see Rome Free Academy on the horizon, through the drooping branches of a rotting tree. I cross through the conjoined rear lawns, detouring into the houses my gut tells me are stable, inspecting every room, avoiding the basements. Any trace of inhabitants has been removed, leaving nothing but an expanse of decaying village. As I meander through the remnants of a community, I feel at ease. The homes are quite literally broken, a foreclosed maze. The sounds of dogs and rabbits and cats rustle in the bushes, their cries bounce off the old drywall and out the broken windows.