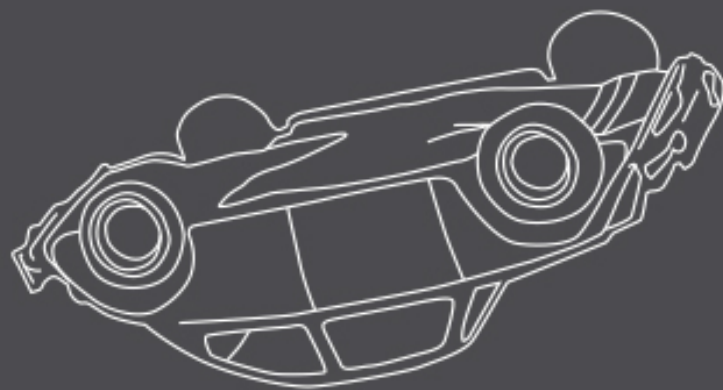


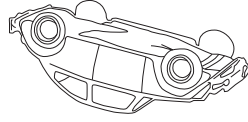
If We Speak of Ourselves in Different Ways

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The first question in a work of fiction is: How do we move from the real world of concrete and construction cranes and crowded streets to a world in which concrete and cranes and crowds are merely words? It is a technical question, a question of transportation, not unlike being lulled to sleep on a passenger plane and waking in London, Paris, or Rome. Quite often, while we understand it, we have no real memory of having arrived. There is the runway and the upward tilt and the whir of the wheels rising into the undercarriage, and already we are traveling at phenomenal speed. In a short while we will be leaving familiar territory and approaching the unknown, and all those miles of ground in between not once will we ever see.

Snowfall, three o'clock on a December morning. He drives down the Weiningerstrasse past the Schlieren train station where the flood lights light up the rail yard and laborers in orange coats dismantle and re-couple the carriages of two trains. Along Ringstrasse and onto Badenerstrasse, toward Zurich, beneath the figure eight of twin streetlamps, the streets are empty; untouched snow lay in the road.

He, the driver, Theodore Hirsch, is thirty-seven years old, at an age, he tells himself, when he is too old to change and too young to give up trying. The middle years: half his life behind him and half his life ahead, like a dry well into which he has yet to hit bottom – a mediocre life, a middle-class life, a middling life.

For a moment on Badenerstrasse, in an unlit display window of a used car dealership, he catches a glimpse of his own car's reflection: a streak of yellow and red lights, burst like a star from the borders of itself. An image of his wife asleep in their bed comes to him, the malice all but drained from her face.

The windshield wipers squeak across the windshield.

He thinks: *You must change your life.*

Near the Farbhof, near the city's old dye works, where the street splits and circles a tram stop, he sees a VW Beetle beneath the crosshatch of bus and tram cables overturned onto its roof, the sweep of the car's skid down Karstlernstrasse traced into the

snow behind it. Snowflakes drift in the headlights; the left rear wheel slowly spins.

He stops the car and twice tries to rush out before he remembers his seatbelt.

At the driver's window he kneels down and wipes the frost from the glass. Hung upside down at the steering wheel is a man in jeans and a grey knit pullover, his head awkwardly bent at the neck against the ceiling, his cheek pressed against his far shoulder – a drunk, more than likely a drunk. Apart from him there is no one else in the car.

He taps on the glass; he pulls at the door, but nothing seems to move. Up and down Badenerstrasse and Karstlernstrasse there is no one. When the door on the passenger side refuses to budge as well, he puts his foot through the glass.

'You've been in an accident,' he calls out, his voice unsteady.

On hands and knees he crawls into the car. The smell of cigarettes and something else, something pungent that could be urine. Roughly he shakes the driver by the shoulder: 'You've been in an accident!' The driver's body sags to one side and the head rolls back with a dull thud against the glass. He is about to touch the man again, but then the face he sees sends him scuttling out of the car onto the pavement.