

Just One Hour

This parking lot is a mirage: a slate of neatly ordered slots, white stripes dividing gray base. But why can I still see so much gray? There should be a dozen vehicles outside the Ocala Civic Theatre. Their drivers should be here, like me, to attend a board of directors meeting, but the theater door is locked. The back door, however, is open, so I go inside and find Craig, the soft-spoken box office manager. He looks at his calendar and then back at me with sympathetic eyes. The meeting is next week.

It's too late to drive back to the newsroom in Ocala and give a deeper edit to that piece about the mentally ill man who stabbed an American boxer/Labrador mix named Molly. It's too soon to drive to the University of Florida in Gainesville and assign my journalism students that deadline story about Judge Graham, who offered to cut a man's jail term in half if the man would have his

dangerous SUV—no brakes, no speedometer—cut in half at a junkyard. (The man took the deal.)

It's easy to feel estranged from the world. Jonathan Franzen mentions writers, at home long after the morning rush hour, cocooned within the quiet. It all seems natural until the mail carrier arrives and breaks the silence. Then it hits: I'm not where everyone else is. I'm not where people expect an adult to be.

No such estrangement for me. School car line in the morning, office in the afternoon, home in the evening. I'm always where I'm supposed to be. Time is like sleep. I know it was there, but only after it has passed.

But now comes this unfilled pocket, this unanticipated hour. I'm not where I'm supposed to be.

1) Driving north on U.S. 441 toward Gainesville. Might as well. Sunny skies, but

a rain cloud just moved through. Water puddles on the hot asphalt. Steam rises, as if the road is enraged. Imagine the road telling the rain: "I was here first." Imagine the rain telling the road: "Yes, but only I have clear title to the land." My friend Cynthia wrote an entire book about rain. We think we know everything about it, but everything we know is wrong. We think a raindrop has a pointed top and a fat bottom. Actually, because of air pressure, it's the other way around. The rain falls too abundantly when it's not needed and too seldom when it is needed. There's no telling.

2) Crossing Paynes Prairie, the 20,000-acre state park that U.S. 441 bisects. Tall grass, trees and marsh stretch flat on the horizon. It's a natural playground for any number of creatures, birds to bison. Earlier this year a travel writer walked these trails and told *Washington Post* readers about her near encounter with an 8-foot alligator. A modern woman and a dinosaur, separated by 5 feet. She found herself forgetting she was in Florida. The prairie reminded her of the Great Plains; the Spanish moss made her think of the Deep South. Time and place all jumbled,

all fluid.

3) Sitting in Arby's, staring out the window at a city bus steaming along 13th Street. The other day, a bus like this one hit a pedestrian less than a mile from here, on Archer Road in front of the VA hospital. The man was walking along, then suddenly drifted into the road. No reason. My friend, Rob, a photographer at the *Gainesville Sun*, took a picture of the bus driver sitting behind the steering wheel, peering down at the post-accident paperwork he was required to complete, face forlorn. Imagine him thinking: Why did the man have to step out just then? Why did I have to be on that stretch of road just then? Rob was there at the right moment, capturing the image of a man who was there at the wrong moment.

Imagine an unplanned hour that could be used—magically, illogically, in momentary bits—to re-arrange the past. A moment to stop myself from writing that unkind letter. Another to prevent myself from saying an unkind word. Ten seconds to put my eyes back on the road and not rear-end a car stopped at the red light. Why did I look away? Why can't I take

that moment back? An hour, properly divided, would be enough time to cleanse a life. To cheat time. To beat time. To tame, at least for a while, the things that are just beyond my reach.

Sunlight streams through the classroom windows, making the space seem emptier

than it actually is. Addie, one of my students, is here. She flashes a rueful smile. She forgot that we were starting class late this evening. It made no sense to go home and then come right back, so she sat and waited. Really, when you think about it, no other plan made sense. 🍀