

LIFE INSIDE THE GRID

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Plantation

I LIVE ON A STREET that runs east and west, about a block inside of a major north-south artery. It's a working class neighborhood of 1950s-style Florida flats, originally built as winter homes, or by those looking for a permanent escape. As the old-timers pass, young couples buy their homes. We cover the original terrazzo with tile, and replace the old pink and green bathrooms with cool slabs of slate and travertine. We swap the old jalousie-style windows for large, thick panes of glass, so there is no need for the aluminum clamshell shutters, painted mustard and green, that could be quickly lowered in the event of a hurricane. We remove them with bolt cutters and carry them to our curbs.

We live between highway systems, between canal systems, between the ocean and the Everglades. We live eight feet above sea level, on a bedrock of limestone, and within a shared illusion that the ground below us will hold.

We drive to shopping plazas. We buy organic kale. We take hot yoga classes. We throw outdoor parties in the winter and spray ourselves with lemongrass and DEET. We watch rats traverse telephone lines and talk about that *one time* an African rock python made its way out of the Everglades and into a Fort Lauderdale backyard. We are sure this will never happen to us. We are 8.89 feet above sea level and blocks away from a canal.

We drive to work. We drive alone. We clog the highways that were built years ago, highways that continue to be expanded to appease our taste for large cars, our insatiable need to go. We've considered alternate modes of transportation. The train. (It adds an hour and only goes north and south.) The bike. (Ha! You'd get killed.) Carpooling. (Too much trouble.) So we drive. We sit in traffic. We do it every day.

When we head home, it rains. It's as if the sky is sad we're returning to our places, sad the day is over, and so must dump hot tears all over us and cause us to wreck, or sit behind wrecks, or park under overpasses while we wait for the wrecks to clear.

At home, the ground is soggy. Runoff flows down the sidewalks toward grates that gurgle and spit. At night, the storms wake us. We sit up in the dark, listening to the drum of rainfall against concrete, asphalt, and fill dirt. The sound is biblical, wild, drenching. It lulls us back to sleep and enters our dreams:

We're in London. It's raining. We're rushing to catch a train.

We're in Tokyo. It's raining. We're looking for a phone that works.

We're at home. It's raining. Our roofs are leaking (again).

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But the rain doesn't come like it used to. Our lawns yellow and crackle underfoot. The water flowing out of the canals is slow, and so the canals grow a skin of debris and oil and excrement. The streets are dusty. It's too hot to go outside, and so we watch through hurricane glass as heat refracts off the asphalt and makes the streets look serpentine and unreliable.

We grow tired of this place. We plan trips abroad. We pack socks and boots and scarves, excited for a change in elevation and latitude.

As we fly away, we rise above the grid. From here, our houses look like toys. The streets like x- and y-axes. The canals like dark, unbending rivers.

My house is the size of my hand, and then I could squeeze it between my fingers, and then, it's gone. ●