

North of Chicago, along Lake Michigan, runs an old thoroughfare named Sheridan Road. It wends its way from the fancy residential districts of the North Shore, through the woods north in Lake County, all the way up to Kenosha and beyond. Outside the city, the street has very few stoplights, and so at night it makes a wonderful venue for a joyride: the mansions to the left, the endless void of the water to the right, the sparse streetlights ahead. The road bends and dips, as a driver's thoughts might, as it hugs the shore; the driver forges his way into the northern black, clinging to the lake as if he would lose his way without it.

In my younger and more introspective days I would leave my house (which was quite a distance from the North Shore) late at night, perhaps at midnight or so, and take my father's car east until I hit Sheridan Road and could go no farther. I would turn left and head north, losing myself in thoughts and repetitive music, driving until I reached a break in my thoughts somewhere beyond the reaches of suburbia. I'd then turn around and head back the way I had come, watching the black lake and pondering my place in it all. I'd speed past Emerson Street, where I'd gotten onto the sacred highway, and head all the way to Lake Shore Drive, opening up the gas, faster now, speeding along towards the starry skyline ahead, finally exploding in a rush of lights on Michigan Avenue, feeling alive for the first time since the night before, feeling good the only way I knew how. I'd catch my breath and roll over a few city streets before finally heading home to tiptoe back into the house, recharged and cleansed, ready for another day in the high school grind – ready mentally and spiritually, anyway, for my nocturnal sojourns led to many a nap in classes on days following.

It was an odd relationship between my father's car and me. She knew all my secrets, I suppose; she certainly always coaxed out my clearest thinking. I remember getting out of her every night and staring at her for a minute or so, hearing her click and breathe as she cooled down. She was beautiful.

Now I'll be the first to admit that I was one lonely boy, prone to fall for just about anyone who'd love me back. Sheridan Road and my father's car took full advantage (possessive ones, they were); they had me swearing that nobody understood me, that the only way I'd ever get it right was to continue to cruise the street at night with a religious patience. And so I developed a sacred love for that shoreline, swearing I'd go to Northwestern mostly because Sheridan Road ran right through it and because the lake lapped up against it, writing premature memoirs about my time on that road, and developing a unified theory of myself linking myself via the green lights of Michigan Avenue to Gatsby's Middle Western American Dream.

Of course, we all grow up; I went off to college, sans my beloved car, far from Sheridan Road. Other symbols crowded into my self-conception. My first summer job was in downtown Chicago, so I took the El train; my next job was at Microsoft in Seattle, and I lived close enough to walk. As I grew into a new kind of life, mature and extroverted, I began to dislike automobiles. World matters and my own maturation combined to form a powerful force; when I finally returned home from Seattle, I could hardly start the engine of a car without feeling dirty and guilty. Motor vehicles suddenly struck me as wastes; my summer jobs had taught me the ease of the train and the joy of proximity. Of course, at twenty-one years old I had also grown my obligatory disdain for suburban bedroom communities, and this hardly improved my opinion of motor vehicles.

And so I was faced with an overwhelming question: what had all that coming and going to Sheridan Road been for? Only two years prior, I had been so sure that those trips were fundamental to my identity – were my identity, perhaps. Now they seemed tremendous wastes. I had lost myself in thought on the train just as easily – after all, walled in on the subway, a man had nothing to study but himself – and years in central Illinois had weaned me off of my emotional dependence on large bodies of water. And a world was at war to support the wanton energy consumption that had gotten me to Sheridan and back every night. How could I reconcile my romance with Sheridan Road with the realities of a more mature life?

That question still perplexes me, and it does so even while I am not writing reflections on it. I still cannot decide whether I should care more about the world before my eyes or the one behind them.

The overwhelming question once bedeviled me so greatly that I was compelled to start up that Chrysler up again and revisit Sheridan. I took those streets once again – they don't change – and made that same trek up and down the shoreline, climaxing in a shower of light on Michigan Avenue as I had each time before. Even upon the closest review, it is difficult if not impossible to articulate the value of chasing of a distant light along the water and at last bathing in it. Such a journey colors the heart. Whether the color is worth a war-torn, poisoned world is a question whose answer I do not profess to know – but I do know that the freedom to chase is very valuable indeed.