

IAN PINES

Gilded Anthropocene, 2015
Oil on Canvas on Board, 84 x 84 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

in front of the SUV, I'd pressed harder on the brake pedal. Eventually, my leg had cramped.

"No," I said. "We can't. We can talk to them on the phone. If the police want to come here we're happy to answer any questions they might have. But we're not getting back on the road."

The desk clerk registered how serious I was and nodded. "I'll call the driver back." The driver didn't pick up, so the clerk left a message. I told the clerk I would sit in the lobby until the driver returned the call—I'd already left the driver hanging once, and I was determined not to do it again. I suggested Elizabeth take the key and go find the room, but she didn't want to separate. Neither did I. We took each other's hand and sat down to wait.

The clerk had someone bring us glasses of water. Knowing that our reservations had been booked by Aratinga Tours, a company that caters to bird-watchers, he tried to take our minds off the situation by asking what birds we'd seen on our trip. We did our best to respond, but our hearts were not in it.

After twenty minutes, the driver called back. To avoid any confusion that might be caused by my less-than-perfect Spanish, I asked the clerk to translate. But the driver was only calling to tell me my statement was no longer needed. Other witnesses had come forward to say what Elizabeth and I would have said, that the driver had done nothing wrong. A few people who lived in the houses adjacent to the highway had also come forward. Apparently they'd seen the suicidal man standing on the side of the road for some time before he'd made his fatal decision. They said it appeared he'd been "timing cars," waiting for the right vehicle and the right moment to make his move.

Taking the phone, I said to the driver what I'd tried to say when we'd both been standing in front of his truck, that I was sorry for what had happened to him, that he shouldn't blame himself for the man's death. In a quiet, pensive voice, he said, "*Sí. Gracias.*"

The call finished, the clerk again tried to cheer us up. "Okay, now you can relax," he said. "Enjoy the hotel. The grounds are filled with many beautiful birds."

Following his earlier tone-deaf attempts at idle chit-chat, his advice made me want to snap at him. Had he not heard the tremble in the truck driver's voice? Could he not understand what we'd all just been through?

Months later, as my morbid fascination with death finally began to fade, I realized some obvious things: We're not going to stop dying in horrible accidents or intentionally killing each other anytime soon. Nor are we going to stop witnessing such events. Carnage is here to stay. Since the dawn of time, we've been accommodating it. It circumscribes every aspect of our lives. Indeed, the very reason we organize ourselves into families, tribes, clans, and nations—the reason we create things like the Federal Aviation Administration and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the reason we wear helmets and buckle our seatbelts and lock our doors at night—is to avoid becoming carnage. The clerk was not discounting the horror of it. He was just reminding us that the point is—has always been—to go on living.

Richard M. Lange's short fiction has appeared in *North American Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Ping Pong*, *Portland Review*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *The William and Mary Review*, *Eclipse*, *Green Mountains Review*, *Georgetown Review*, and elsewhere. His story "The Deaths of Various Animals" was chosen as a Notable Story of the Year in the *2009 Best of the West Anthology*. He has twice been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.