IAN PINES

Ungodly Gross Grafting, 2015
Oil on Board, 48 x 48 in

COURTESY THE ARTIST

RICHARD M. LANGE

Of Human Carnage

Death as Experienced by the Living

On March 12, 2012, my girlfriend Elizabeth and I were driving on Costa Rica's Inter-American Highway, the major north-south route through the country. We were on the second-to-last day of a three-week bird-watching trip that had included most of the good birding spots in the northern two-thirds of the country. That morning we had left the cabin we'd rented on Cerro de la Muerte (the Hill of Death) and were headed to our last stop, a small hotel in Alajuela, near the Juan Santamaría International Airport, where we were scheduled to catch our return flight to California the next morning.

As anyone who has done it will tell you, driving in Costa Rica is a challenge. Roads are narrow, most streets are unmarked, and the highways are filled with speeding big rigs. In many places, a lone sign telling you to *ceda el paso* (yield) is your only warning that the highway is about to narrow to a single lane for *both* directions. Throughout our travels, we'd seen pedestrians (including unattended children) walking the narrowest of shoulders. On some stretches there is no shoulder at all—the roadway is bounded by steep drops or weed-choked ditches. In these places, the pedestrians and bicyclists are forced, under threat of instant death, to maintain an extremely disciplined line along the very edge of the asphalt.

Where Elizabeth and I were traveling, about halfway between Cartago and San José, the two northbound lanes are divided from the southbound lanes by a section of neighborhood. I was behind the wheel, my eyes on the road ahead as I listened for any updates from our rented SUV's GPS system, which spoke to us in a kindly female voice we had affectionately dubbed Carmen Sabetodo. The afternoon commute underway, traffic was much heavier than it had been anywhere else on our trip. Cars were travelling at about sixty miles an hour, which is pretty fast for Costa Rica, as most of the roads are too narrow and winding for such a speed. On the left sat a row of small houses, their fenceless yards coming right to the edge of the highway. On the right, a steep-sided ditch lined with concrete—essentially a mammoth rain gutter—ran alongside. Across the ditch, a treeless embankment climbed thirty or so feet.

Well up ahead, on the right-hand edge of the asphalt, I saw a figure. It was a man, dressed in dark pants and a powder-blue shirt. In the first instant that I noticed him,

My next thought was to get beyond the scene before I pulled over, to not stop until I was out of range of its gruesomeness.

I felt something was wrong, that he wasn't just another pedestrian walking a dangerous edge of roadway. Standing on the highway side of the concrete ditch, he seemed in a particularly precarious spot. I imagined he'd slid down the embankment accidentally and, unable to climb back up, had decided the only way out of his predicament was to cross the ditch and then, if it was possible, cross the highway. And now there he stood, weighing the feasibility of the second part of his plan. He was leaning toward the moving traffic, as though seeking the right moment to dash across. As a white SUV approached he leaned back slightly, the vehicle missing him by inches. Behind the SUV was a big-rig truck. When it reached him, he dove in front of it.

In an instant, my mind involuntarily revised its sense of what was happening. The man, it seemed, had not come to the edge of the highway by accident. He was some kind of daredevil, attempting to dive into the middle of the lane so that the truck would harmlessly pass over him, after which he would quickly scramble back into the roadside ditch before being hit by the next vehicle. I imagined a group of friends were looking on, probably from atop the embankment, and he was performing for their awe and admiration. For that fraction of a second, I was so convinced of this scenario that my brain actually formed the thought: *This is dumb! You're not going to make it!* But of course the man was not a daredevil; he was committing suicide.

When the truck's front bumper hit him, there was an explosion of pink, his body, or some part of it, bursting like a water balloon. As the truck rolled over him, he was struck by first one set of wheels then another, then another, causing him to careen and tumble along under the chassis. The amount of time between my first noticing him and seeing his body battered under the truck was probably two seconds, too short of an interval to put into words any of my quick succession of thoughts, but, when my brain finally caught up with what was happening, I gasped, "*Oh, my God!*"

Lifting my foot from the accelerator, I swerved as far to the left as I could to avoid hitting the man myself. Mindful of the heavy traffic on the road, I was trying to slow as quickly as possible, to signal to the vehicles behind me that something had happened, but not so quickly that I got rammed by an inattentive driver. My next thought was to get beyond the scene before I pulled over, to not stop until I was out of range of its gruesomeness.

As our vehicle neared the body lying in the road, I spoke forcefully to Elizabeth: "Don't look!" I think I even put a hand in front of her face. She immediately covered her eyes, which created a strange moment of solitude between myself and whatever I was about to see. I felt like a child who'd stumbled into some scary place—a spiderweb-filled basement or a dark cave—and realized he was going to face the terror alone.

There seemed no possibility the man had survived, but I wanted to assess whether or not he could be helped. My eyes found his body on the asphalt. He lay on his stomach, unmoving, his feet toward the roadside ditch. For some reason I could see his back and shoulders but not his head. Getting closer, I saw that his head was gone. A few feet farther down the road lay pieces of his shattered skull.

About a hundred yards beyond the body, the big rig was coming to a stop in the right-hand lane. I pulled in front of it and cut the engine. Hoping to spare Elizabeth any further horror, particularly the sight of the man's headless and shattered body, I gave her another firm directive: "Stay here! Do not get out of this car!"

Her face white with shock, she nodded.

I climbed out and ran back up the highway toward the truck. As I reached it my dominant thought was that I did not want to see again—or see better—what I had just seen. If someone wanted me to go beyond the truck, they would have to be armed or strong enough to physically force me. Even then, if they wanted me to look again at the pieces of the man's body, they would have to pry my eyelids open.

When I reached the driver, he was standing in front of his vehicle, talking on his cell phone. He too, I noticed, had taken up a spot that kept his truck between himself and the gore back up the road. I speak Spanish, and, initially, the bits of conversation I overheard made me think he was describing the accident to the police, but it eventually became clear he was talking to someone at the company he worked for—a dispatcher or possibly his boss. His eyes were pegged open, and he spoke as though in a trance—head still, mouth opening and closing robotically. When he hung up, I started to tell him it wasn't his fault, but my voice broke. I placed a hand on his shoulder; the hand, I noticed, was trembling. He said nothing, his eyes refusing to meet mine.

A school bus pulled up next to us in the left lane and stopped. A dozen girls, all about fifteen, sat in the first few rows behind the driver, all in some state of shock, many crying into cell phones. Without getting out of his seat, the bus driver opened the door and gave the truck driver some simple directions: don't move the truck, wait for the police, ask the witnesses to stay here. Despite his clear-minded directives, the bus driver was ashen, his voice rising and falling in pitch as he spoke. "*Estarás bien*," he said a few times. Then he drove his devastated passengers away.

At this point, I looked back down the road, making sure I'd parked my vehicle in such a way that the bus could get around it, and saw Elizabeth. She'd gotten out of the SUV and was standing on the side of the highway, shaking and crying. I ran to her.

As I wrapped her in my arms and tried to comfort her, I noticed, across the highway, a middle-aged woman in shorts and a dark shirt who'd come out of her house to see what was happening. She waved us over. I led Elizabeth across the asphalt, and the woman, without a word, took Elizabeth by the hand and led her to a covered patio that fronted her house. I started back up the hill toward the truck but was met by a different woman, this one younger, maybe thirty or so, walking quickly toward me holding a pen and a pad of paper. She wasn't wearing any kind of uniform, but she comported herself professionally, like a medic or a police officer. She told me I needed to give a statement, that the truck driver might be in serious legal trouble if I didn't. Working to stay calm and speak in coherent Spanish, I told her that I would definitely give a statement, but I also explained that I was an American, that this was my last day in Costa Rica, that my girlfriend was upset and I didn't want to keep her here any longer than I had to.

She nodded. "*Sí. Pero dame su información*."

I carefully wrote out my name and email address, along with the name of the hotel in Alajuela where we'd be staying the night.

"*Lo vio usted?*" she asked.

"*Sí. El hombre . . .*" I didn't know the word for "dove" so I said "threw himself," "*… se tiro en frente del camion. No fue la culpa del camionero.*"

Concurring with my version of what had happened, she nodded and went back up the road.

At this point, the son of the woman who was tending to Elizabeth emerged from the house. He was skinny, about seventeen, wearing shorts and a white T-shirt, half hopping and half walking across the lawn as he struggled to fit a pair of flip-flops on his feet. "What happened?" he asked me, in Spanish.

"A man got hit by a truck."

"Is he dead?"

I nodded.

"Are you sure?"

"*Perdio su cabeza*," I said, miming the act of lifting my head from my shoulders.

His eyes grew wider and he tore off up the hill, his mother yelling after him to be careful.

Stepping onto the patio to check on Elizabeth, I saw she'd been given a seat at a table and was taking sips from a glass of water. I patted her back and stroked her shoulder.

"*Qué lástima*," the mother said to me.

A minute later, the son came running back, his eyes wide and face pale. His expression unequivocally conveyed the same message my brain had been shouting since I'd exited the SUV: DO NOT GO PAST THE TRUCK! "*Ohhh*," he shuddered. "*Es malo*." Taking his cue from the woman who'd come down the road, he found a pencil and a piece of paper and handed them to me. I again wrote out my information.

When I finished, the mother pointed to the SUV. "Is that your car?"

The SUV, I now remembered, was still parked in the right-hand lane of the highway. Its windows were open and Elizabeth's and my suitcases (which contained all of our credit cards, our passports, and most of our remaining cash) were sitting in plain view on the back seat. Before getting out and running up the road toward the truck, I'd had the thought that Elizabeth might need to move the SUV to make way for emergency vehicles, so I'd left the keys in the ignition. The backup of traffic behind the accident included taxis, buses, and other passenger-carrying vehicles that wouldn't be going anywhere for a long time, and dozens of people had decided to get out and make their way on foot. In groups of two and three, they were streaming down the highway. The mother had noticed a couple of young men standing at the open windows of the SUV, peering inside.

At this point, I made a decision that I'm not proud of. I knew the right thing was to stay and wait for the police, to give an official statement and convey, in person, my conviction that the dead man had dove in front of the truck on purpose. But my stress overruled my sense of duty. The truck driver, by way of the competent woman with the notepad, had my information, and now so did the mother and her son. If anybody wanted to reach me, they could. But I wasn't hanging around any longer.

"Let's go," I said to Elizabeth.

The mother appeared to sympathize. She nodded and helped me get Elizabeth to her feet.

I walked Elizabeth back across the highway to the SUV, our approach sending the two suspicious men on their way. I put Elizabeth into the passenger seat and then hustled around to the driver's side and climbed in. Taking a deep breath, I started the engine and carefully—very, very carefully—drove away.

* * *

For weeks after the events in Costa Rica, Elizabeth had little appetite, suffered nightmares, and struggled to enjoy anything. At random unguarded moments, she broke into tears. Before our trip, she had spent months completing applications to grad school—gathering letters of recommendation, slaving over her statement of purpose, devoting hundreds and hundreds of hours to studying for the general and subject-specific GRE tests—but now the whole enterprise seemed rather meaningless to her.

My own symptoms were similar but worse. Previous to the accident, my sensitivity to violence on TV or in movies was about average—I'd never been one for cartoonish horror-flick splatter, but neither was I much bothered by the "realistic" violence in films like *The Godfather* or *No Country for Old Men*. Following the accident, however, I was deeply disturbed by just about any violence. One night, on a sketch-comedy show on TV, a mannequin dressed as one of the characters was tossed into the street and run over by a car. I nearly vomited, turned off the TV, and left the room.

I was also hounded by a pervasive sense of fear. I couldn't help thinking it could have been *my* vehicle the man selected and repeatedly imagined making eye contact with him as his head dropped below the horizon of the SUV's hood. As bad as my trauma was at having simply *witnessed* his death, I couldn't imagine the pain of having been the agent of it. I was sure that, on some future road, I would kill someone. Aside from never getting behind the wheel again, there didn't seem to be anything I could do about this. (My fear ramped up considerably when, a few days after Elizabeth and I arrived back in California, a distraught man killed himself by jumping into traffic during the morning commute on Highway 1, less than a mile from where we live.)

But my deepest and most unrelenting symptom was a profound obsession with death itself. Before Costa Rica I had not spent much time thinking about it, but afterward I not only replayed and dwelled on the images I'd seen out there on the tropically heated asphalt, I thought about death throughout history—particularly gruesome, violent death. I imagined the accidents and calamities that must have struck ancient humans trying to bring down mastodons and rhinos with rocks and spears. I pictured hunters and gatherers being taken by tigers, wolves, and other apex predators. My mental re-creations spared no details: razor-sharp teeth and claws shredding flesh, powerful jaws crushing bone, people crying out in agony, their mouths filling with blood.

I thought too of the violence that humans have perpetrated (and continue to perpetrate) against other humans. Lines from Homer that I'd read years before kept running through my mind: "Agamemnon stabbed straight at his face as he came on in fury with the sharp spear . . . [and] the spearhead passed through this and the bone, and the inward brain was all spattered forth."[1] As an avid reader of history, I knew that from ancient times through the Dark and Middle Ages and on up to the modern era, just about every civilization has condoned, under some circumstance or another, the savaging of human bodies. The Romans fed slaves to lions. Nordic peoples broke open rib cages so lungs and other vital organs could be removed while the victims were still alive. European Christians put heretics on Catherine wheels and beat them to death with clubs. Muslims buried people up to their necks and pummeled them with rocks until their skulls were lumps of bone and meat. Here in the modern civilized West we killed people by shooting them, hanging them, or sizzling their lungs with poison gas. In addition to these "intimate" kinds of death, we killed each other by the thousands and millions during periods of mass slaughter. The American Civil War: six hundred thousand killed; World War I: sixteen million killed; World War II: sixty million killed.[2] I thought about the genocides in Rwanda and Serbia, the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, and the lesser-known but no less gruesome battles in places often neglected by the Western media: Eritrea, Chad, Congo. The attendant human savagery of these conflicts—the pain and blood and suffering, the raw carnage—suddenly weighed on me as never before.

It also occurred to me that, for as long as humans have been suffering gruesome deaths, other humans have been witnessing them. (Indeed, the ancient and medieval killing rituals I mention above were usually witnessed by large crowds, with audience members often encouraged to take part in the savagery.) During prehistoric times, it doesn't seem likely that anyone lived a natural life without being present while some member of his tribe, clan, or family

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was mauled by a bear or eaten by a puma—or speared or bludgeoned or thrown from a cliff. Shifting to more recent history, I wondered what it must have been like to survive Columbine, to have been one of the firefighters who, on September 11, witnessed bodies impacting the ground from eighty-six floors above. Or to have seen friends and fellow soldiers killed in Iraq or Afghanistan. It did not surprise me to learn that, according to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 20 percent of the soldiers who've returned from fighting in those countries are suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.[3] Other statistics are even more telling: though Iraq and Afghanistan War veterans make up far less than 1 percent of the U.S. population, they account for more than 20 percent of its suicides.[4] In 2010, on average, twenty-two veterans committed suicide *every day*.[5]

In the last century, human beings have gotten used to some very traumatic things. We routinely scream across the surface of the earth at seventy-five miles an hour or hurtle through the sky thirty-five thousand feet above it.

1 Homer, ***The Iliad***, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 237.

2 The number of casualties in these conflicts vary somewhat by source, but the numbers here, which include civilian deaths, represent a general consensus.

3 "PTSD: A Growing Epidemic," *NIH Medicine Plus* 4, no. 1, (Winter 2009), http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/magazine/issues/winter09/articles/ winter09pg10-14.html.

4 Janet Kemp and Robert Bossarte, "Suicide Data Report, 2012," *U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs*, http://www.va.gov/opa/docs/Suicide-Data-Report-2012-final.pdf, 15.

5 Ibid.

Nor is carnage traumatic simply because when people are ripped apart they die. Death itself is not necessarily traumatic.

Some of us even jump out of airplanes or off cliffs and plummet toward the earth at terminal velocity—for *fun*! But shooting someone and watching them die, or witnessing someone getting shot (or hung or stoned to death or decapitated)—things that cause us no *physical* harm—can be so emotionally painful as to be totally debilitating and sometimes, as the Veterans Affairs stats make heartbreakingly clear, unbearable. If, in a few dozen years, we can get used to high-speed driving and jet travel, why, after *tens of thousands* of years, are we still traumatized by seeing people's limbs ripped from their bodies? It seems an absurd question to ask, but following the events in Costa Rica, I needed to answer it.

Clearly the answer is not because, as a species, we're revolted by the sight of exposed muscle tissue and bone. If we were, every meat counter across the globe would be shut down and we'd all be strict vegetarians. Not only are meat counters still in abundance, here in the United States we have a system, via the U.S. Department of Agriculture, for grading the quality and attractiveness of animal carnage. And even the vegetarians among us—even those who claim to be "revolted" or "disgusted" by the sight of meat—usually manage to walk past displays of beheaded chickens or hanging gutted pigs without fainting or breaking into tears. Nor is carnage traumatic simply because when people are ripped apart they die. Death itself is not necessarily traumatic. Sometimes, when someone is suffering and that suffering cannot be alleviated, it's actually a mercy. We literally pray for it to come. If someone dies after living into her nineties or beyond, we sigh and say, *Well, she had a good life.*

But when the exposed muscle and bone involved is *human* muscle and bone, and the resulting death is seen as premature and cruel—and what violent death is not premature and cruel?—witnessing it is a different experience entirely.

Of course the trauma of inflicting or witnessing carnage is related to our love of human life, to the recognition that we too can suffer such a fate, that we are fragile in the same ways. But why is it that, when we read about such a death in the newspaper, or hear about it on the radio or TV, even in great detail, it's not as traumatic as actually seeing it? (Why, for example, was I not plunged into morbidity after reading Homer back in college?) Consider the difference, emotionally speaking, between coming upon a dead body and watching someone die. Perhaps you've never experienced either. If so, consider the difference between coming across a dead animal, a dog or cat on the side of the road, say, and seeing a dog or cat get hit by a car. The former is sad, possibly even depressing; it will likely affect your mood for a few minutes, maybe a few hours. But the latter is horrifying, likely to stay with you for days, if not weeks or months.

Consider another aspect of death. We all have dead loved ones, but unless their deaths were recent or tragic, most of us are not particularly troubled by this. (In other words, if your Aunt Sally died in 1983, you're probably over it by now.) But when someone we love is in the *process* of dying—is fighting cancer, say, or is in surgery following a serious accident—we are generally in terrible shape: stressed, crying, lashing out. (Our "loved" ones, after all, are not only the recipients of love, they are the providers of it.) It seems few of us fear *being* dead but, to a greater or lesser extent, we all fear *dying*.

My own experiences are a case in point. Prior to the horror on the Inter-American Highway, I'd seen four other bodies that had succumbed to fatal violence, each the victim of a vehicle crash. At the age of nine, I was riding in the backseat of the family car heading south on I-5 in San Diego when we came upon two motorcyclists lying dead in the middle lanes, their bikes (and helmets) in the roadway nearby. At twenty-six, I was driving home from work late one night when, a hundred yards ahead of me, a drunk driver lost control of his car and flew off the highway into some trees. The impact of the crash cleaved his skull in two. In my late thirties, a friend and I were traveling on U.S. Route 50, southeast of Great Basin National Park, when we came upon a lone motorcyclist who'd lost control of his bike and ridden straight into a roadcut.

Each of these events had been gut-wrenching. (Indeed, the drunk-driving death was nearly as gruesome as the one in Costa Rica: arriving at the crumpled car, I'd reached through the shattered driver's-side window and touched the dead man's shoulder before registering that the spot of lighter color at the top of his head was his exposed brain.) But none of these deaths stayed with me for long; I was rather morose for a day or two afterward but didn't miss any work or sleep. At no point did I shed tears.

Why? The biggest difference between these deaths and the death in Costa Rica was that I never saw any of these people alive. Even though I only saw the victim in Costa Rica for, at most, two seconds before he made his fateful dive, it was enough to register him as a living, breathing human being. The way he stood at the side of the highway—slightly crouched, his posture full of intent—and the particular way he dove—feebly, like an exhausted traveler flopping onto a hotel bed—said something about him. From the simple circumstances of the scene, I knew he was a man who had the fortitude to stand by the highway and calculate the right moment to carry out his terrible plan. The spot he'd chosen for his death told me something as well: he'd kept himself on the side of the highway away from the houses, a place where he'd be less likely to be stopped. He didn't hang himself or take pills or slit his wrists, methods that would leave his body more or less intact. Instead, he put himself in front of a moving truck, ensuring his body would be brutally crushed. This carried a message of self-hatred. Even more revealing: he made someone else kill him. He caused an innocent person to experience the pain and trauma of destroying another human being—in one of the most gruesome ways imaginable. And he did so at a location and time that ensured a high number of witnesses. This was an expression of rage.

So the trauma of witnessing his death was, at least in part, associated with witnessing the transition, with seeing a life—whole, animated, vibrant—become broken, still, hopeless. Of seeing someone with the potential to love and feel loved lose the potential to do either.

But it was also due to something else: intentionality. Those other bodies I'd seen were the victims of accidents. They'd wanted to live, but luck (or bad judgment) had conspired against them. The man on the Inter-American Highway had *chosen* to turn his body into carnage. Intentionality, I realized, was the deepest horror of Columbine and 9/11—and Auschwitz and Hiroshima and Jonestown and . . . the list goes on. Accidents happen. But when someone makes the decision to toss life—delicate, precious, the source of love—aside like a piece of trash, the horror cuts us to the bone.

* * *

When Elizabeth and I reached our hotel in Alajuela, we walked into the reception area and gave our names to the man at the desk. In a barely audible voice I told him about the accident, that the police might be calling to speak with us.

Nodding, he handed me a piece of paper where he'd written some names and phone numbers. The truck driver had already called. So had the police. They all wanted Elizabeth and me to drive back to the scene and give a statement.

This was not going to happen. It had taken us ninety minutes to get to the hotel from the accident scene. All through San José, traffic had been a mess. When we'd reached Alajuela, the main road through town was under construction, so we, along with the rest of the late-afternoon commuters, had been detoured onto side streets, which were clogged. We'd progressed one or two car-lengths at a time, moving slower than the pedestrians on the sidewalks. This invited people to walk through the lanes of traffic and cut between our SUV and the cars in front of us. Normally, this is fairly innocuous behavior—anyone who's navigated a jammed parking lot following a concert or sporting event has done it. People who live in New York or other big cities prone to gridlock do it every day. But, having seen what we'd seen, it struck us as reckless and terrifying. Each time someone had walked

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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 chitchat, 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.