

The Light Men

by Michael Culler

How far can a person drive until the outcome of a single stoplight no longer affects all the others.

Is it at the beginning of highways, where people pour onto exit ramps and all that interconnected time suddenly ceases to matter.

Better yet, is it at the smaller, less populated roads, those roads that don't require any stoplights at all, like the grey parts of the body that are neither blood, bone or fat.

Is it that the stoplights never really stop—at least, not altogether—and that there are entire networks of stoplights all programmed in order somewhere.

I ask, who controls the stoplights in a particular area, and at what point do they hand the area over to the next guy and say, "Hey buddy, this region's on you. I'm stopping over at Grove Street, you remember."

Are these men in contact with one another.
Who calls whom when there are problems. And there will always be problems.

Who calls whom when the stoplight goes out and the cars are crushed together and the mother is laying supine on the pavement. Where the loss of that one stoplight, even for a second, was like the mouth of time had opened. What happens after this.

Do the programmers point fingers.
Do they come together at the spot where the stoplight blew, where the mouth of time opened.
And if they go there, are they tensed up when they arrive, gnashing their teeth at the other programmers, pointing at the supine mother

and at the dead bulbs of the three-pronged hanging light now swaying dumbly in the wind. Or do these men instead concentrate on the many things that are going right elsewhere.

If you had to think about it, do you think that any of these men would ever call each other on the phone and ask the other how he's doing, or what he plans on getting his children for Christmas—or would it only remind the programmers of the many wives and children they've left stamped onto the road out there.

Something they won't say to each other, and this is actually something worth thinking about, is that most of the time the lights will change without anyone ever noticing.

And what about their wives and children. Are they scared. Are they angry. Are they resentful at the fact that their husbands and fathers are never home at night. Surely they register something, think of something else as they speed so quickly through that beckoning green light that is not, never a red. As they head straight through that open-armed green.

In the end, do they even bother to look up and recognize that a stoplight is actually a network of men who are afraid for their lives.

