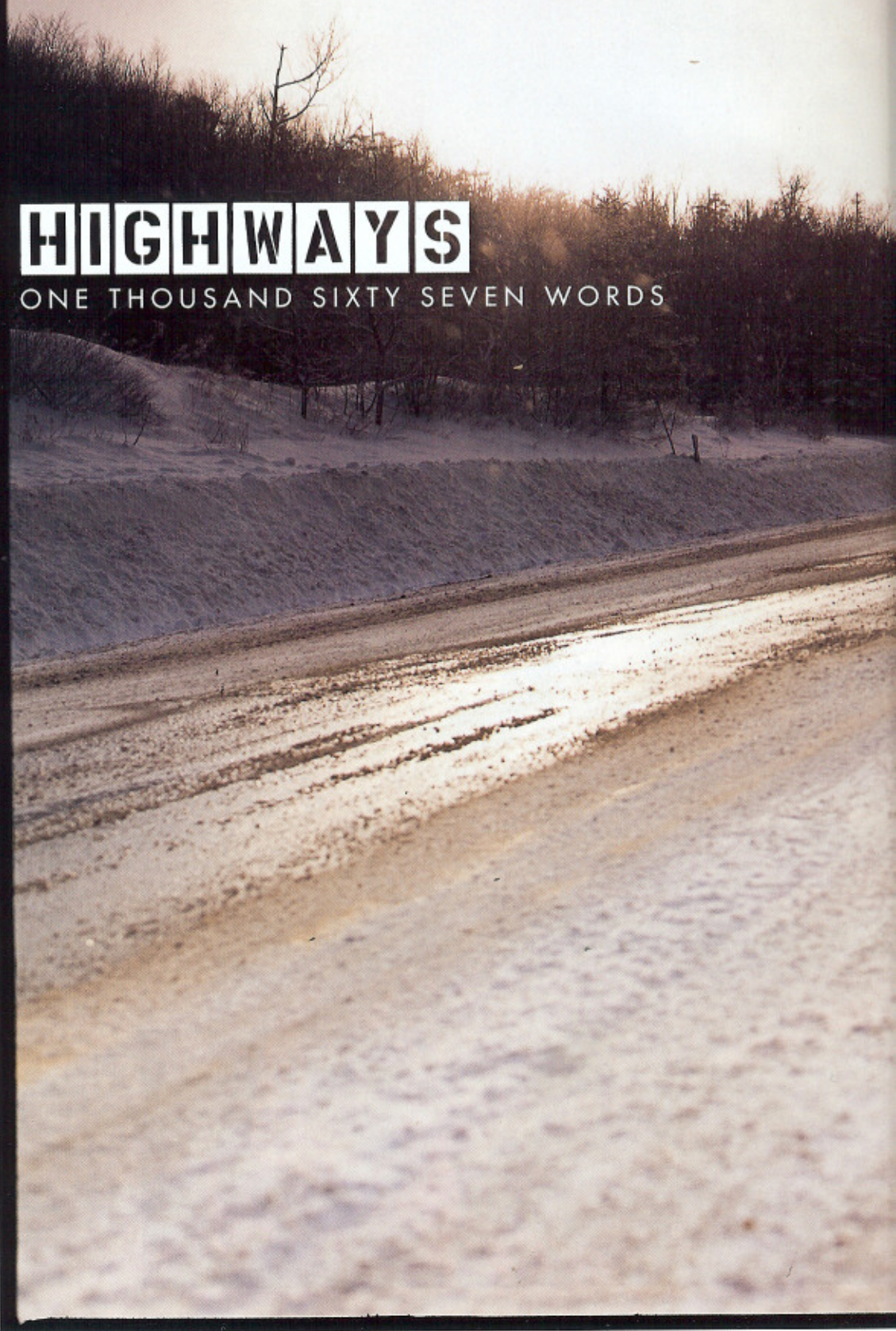


WHITE

BY PORTER FOX

HIGHWAYS

ONE THOUSAND SIXTY SEVEN WORDS





"SIMPLY A YOUTH TREMENDOUSLY EXCITED BY LIFE." PHOTO: DAVE HEATH



PHOTO: NICOLAS TEICHROB; TOP PHOTO: THOMAS T. KLEIVEN

"What is the feeling when you're driving away from people, and they recede on the plain till you see their specks dispersing? It's the too huge world vaulting us, and it's good-bye. But we lean forward to the next crazy venture beneath the skies."—Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*

Bullet holes in a road sign. Zig-zag tire tracks. A middle-aged man in a Plymouth Belvedere dangling a cigarette out the window. A gravel depot, a slash pile. Power lines with three inches of new snow balanced on top.

Emden. Population: 881. Incorporated: 1806. The highway reaches out through a stand of pines, wraps around the river bend, then runs flat out across a hayfield and disappears. It's snowing. The crystals swoosh off the hood and swoop over the windshield. It's been dumping for three days. It's raining on the coast. We knew it was snowing in the mountains. We've been looking out the window since Wednesday, waiting to load the car. Now we're on the road, knocking down green mile markers, in between places, and waiting...

The pines are tall and skinny. The paper company planted them to conceal a clear-cut 100 yards off the highway. My ski partner and I chatted at the beginning of the drive. Now we're all eyes and ideas. This is No Place, Nowhere. You have to go through here, this geographic and psychic place, to get there. This is where skiers consider

just about everything in their lives, stack up plans and needs, break them down, line them up in neat rows. I run through a checklist of things: *skis, poles, hat, gloves*. Gloves. Oh, shit.

Annie's Country Store has lambskin work gloves with shearling liners for \$7.99. They're \$50 at the resort. Annie's has pizza dogs for sale too. *Whoa*. And a free-small-cheese-pizza-with-any-large-2-way-pizza-4-7-only. The pumps advertise \$2.15 per gallon. They've been closed for two years.

These are the places where the big thoughts happen. Big roads near big mountains: Jackson Hole from the east over Togwotee Pass; Telluride on the way up from Ridgway; Thompson Pass to Valdez; Highway 191 and 64 right before Big Sky; the Sea-to-Sky Highway to Whistler/Blackcomb; just about anywhere on Vermont's Route 100; Oh-My-Gosh corner right before the Sugarloaf access road.

Back on the road and the speed limit is 50 mph. Anson Grange #88 is closed. Gertie's upholstery is closed. Why not 55? These unfamiliar places are settings for our thoughts. A wide, shallow river; a flagstone dam; a steeple jutting up through the trees; a ski track leading into the woods; a backyard plastic play land that's just too big; black ice on the road; snow banks to the eyes.

These are the conduits: Rogers Pass; Red Moun-

tain Pass; Bridger Canyon Road; Col de Montets; Donner Pass; Interstate 395; Ski Hill Road; Baker Highway; Passo di Gardena.

Here is a barn with a caved-in roof, a cemetery with crumbling headstones. Then the power lines again. I don't know what it is—how the thick black lines cut through the gray sky. Maybe it's the arc. *Eyes on the road.* The dotted yellow line disappears under the bumper. The engine hums. The stereo tink and tunks. *What the hell happened to Big Head Todd? Where the hell did the last five years go? Boots, pants, goggles, money.*

There's a fake lighthouse in someone's backyard with a windmill attached to it. *Someone built that, with their hands!* Thoughts of people, places, things. How about the things you can't see? Like the adrenaline from dropping a 20-foot air? Or the feeling of a long, slow turn between the trees? Or the mountain two hours ahead still, caked in new snow. We saw the storm on the news Tuesday night. The radar image looked like someone had gotten sick on the entire East Coast.

Here's a funny thing: skiers don't remember the drive. The in-between time doesn't hang for long. Time itself is in transition. Slow, then fast. When we drop into Tower Three, Al's Run or Widow Maker, the road no longer exists. Which is funny, because most people spend more time getting to the hill than on it.

Here's what Matt Hansen remembered when I asked about memorable roads: "Up Little Cottonwood Canyon, beyond the White Pine trailhead, you come to sort of a granite quarry (not the LDS one, but a boulder field). It is here when you can finally pick up speed after the long slow ascent up the canyon. You can finally make out Wilbere Ridge at Snowbird. The tunes get cranked, the single lane turns into two, and the race is on. And, if the quarry is buried, you know it's super deep."



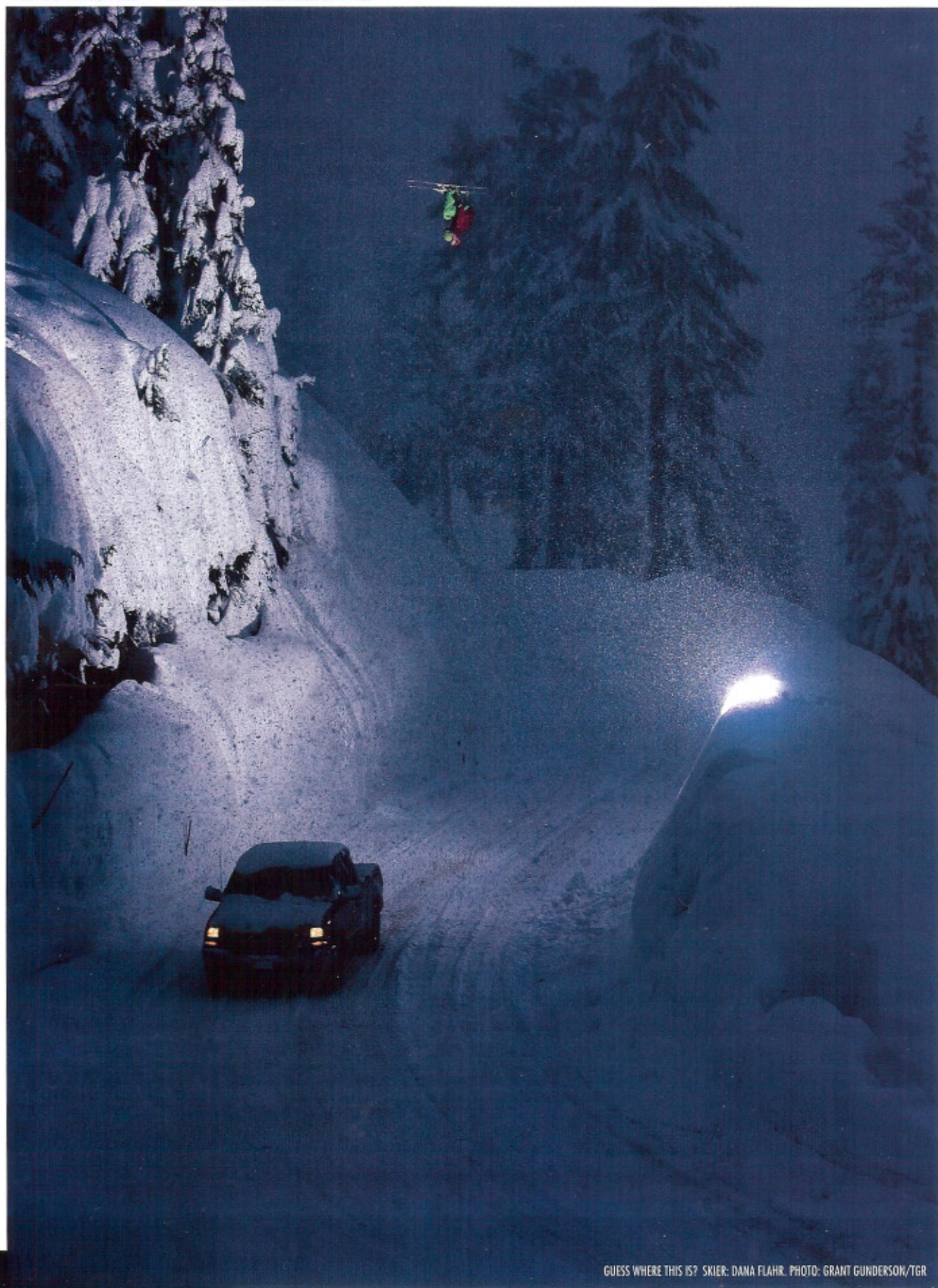
JF CUSSON FINDS HANG TIME IN BETWEEN. PHOTO: FÉLIX RIQUX



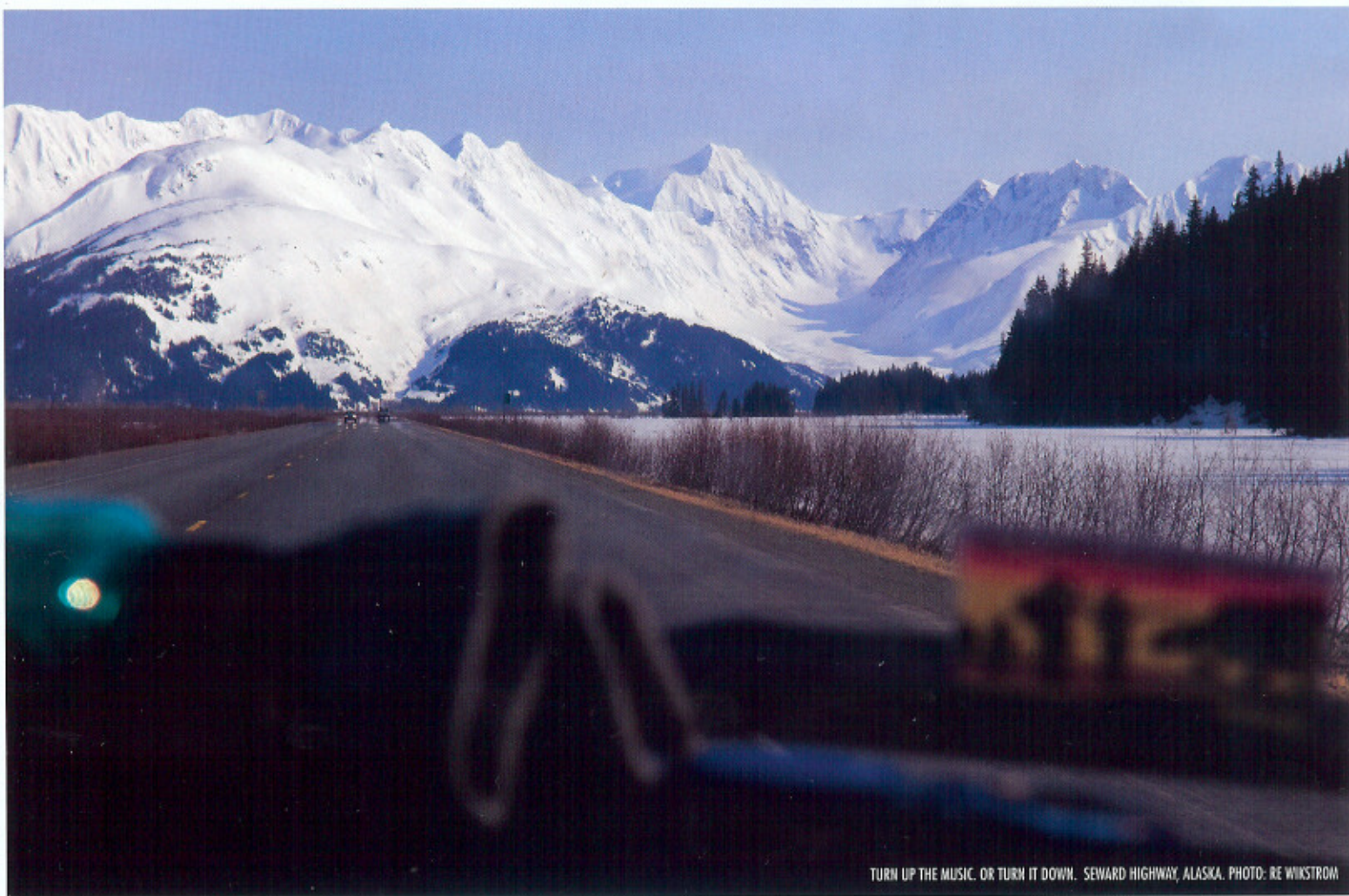
PHOTO: RE WIKSTROM

JF TAKES IT TO THE BRIDGE. PHOTO: FÉLIX RIQUX

WHITE HIGHWAYS



GUESS WHERE THIS IS? SKIER: DANA FLAHR. PHOTO: GRANT GUNDERSON/TGR



TURN UP THE MUSIC. OR TURN IT DOWN. SEWARD HIGHWAY, ALASKA. PHOTO: RE WIKSTROM

Another: "A great one is I-90 at the Idaho/Montana border. Lookout Pass is roughly halfway between Coeur d'Alene and Missoula. This is where Lookout Pass ski area is located, in the middle of nowhere. Tiny area with 400 inches of snowfall. Great comfort to see ski lifts on a long weary drive."

From Les Anthony: "On the way to Whistler there's a stretch of Highway 99 (the Sea-to-Sky/See-to-Die Highway) where you come face to face with the blue-toothed grandeur of the Tantalus Range, which lets you know you are ascending into the Coast Range and a different kind of ski universe; it's a portent of things to come. Real Toto-we're-not-in-Kansas-anymore territory. It still grips me after hundreds of trips past."

There are real estate signs now. We must be close. More tiny shops: "My Wife's Place"; "My Father's Place"; "The Scissor Wizard." The car is just a toy; the people on the streets are toys. I have receded. I'm recollecting a day so deep that it didn't feel like skiing. It felt like something I'd never done before. *Long underwear, socks, hat.* Or one back East when it was so cold the tip of my ski snapped off. *Fleece, sleeping bag, toothbrush.*

There are plenty of things skiers enjoy. There are only a few that sustain them. The difference between the two is difficult to explain. Suffice it

to say that certain adventures bring us above life and joy. They are crystalline moments when everything in the world has been put right. They are elusive and indefinable. And we'll drive 10,000 miles to find them.



MOM? ARE YOU IN THERE? PHOTO: MARK FISHER/TGR