

## There Are Distances Between Us

by ROXANE GAY • May 15, 2011

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5 The interstate highway system in the United States is the largest and most sophisticated in the world. It is named for President Dwight D. Eisenhower. There are two points and between them, a distance between you and me. These two points are connected in ways we will never fully understand but they *are* connected. You are there and I am here. We are red stars on maps protected beneath hard plastic in  
10 highway rest areas tired travelers touch to make sense of where they are. I have counted the miles, yards, feet, and inches between us. There are too many. When I was young, my father had an atlas I liked to study, bound in leather, worn. I traced tiny lines with my fingers and said the names of cities like Waukesha and Cody and Easton and Amarillo. I once came home to a canopy bed. That summer was long, hot,  
15 terrible. Before I left, there had been an incident involving some boys who broke me right down the middle and, after, I couldn't pull myself back together. I simply stopped talking. My hair started graying. I stayed in my room. My parents fretted. A change of scenery, they decided, would be good. I went to Port au Prince, the city of their birth, stayed with an aunt and uncle I hardly knew. Each time we needed to  
20 flush a toilet or take a bath or brush our teeth, we carried huge buckets to a well and carried those buckets back, warm water sloshing everywhere all to wash ourselves clean in some small way. It was never enough. I never felt clean. I only felt those boys. When I returned home, I walked into a perfect bedroom. The wallpaper was covered in little cornflowers. There was a canopy bed covered in gauzy material,  
25 draped perfectly. I loved to stare into the canopy and forget about all the ways I felt broken. Whenever we went on vacation, my father would study his atlas to find his way across America. My brothers and I sat in the back of our 1974 Grand Prix, bare legs sticking to the leather seat, hot and irritable, often bickering, forced to participate in my father's endless exploration of how far he could go. He often said  
30 the United States is a great country because with enough persistence, with enough patience, a man can travel from one end to the other. He said he never wanted to take for granted that he could not be kept from any place he wanted to be. Every

morning, when I wake up, I think your name. I think, "Marry me," over and over and over. It shocks me, the clarity of those words, the intensity and depth, how the emotions behind those words defy logic, possibility. I do not say the words "I love you" often, not to anyone. Those words mean something. They shouldn't be used carelessly. In a photo album there is a faded Polaroid of my dad and my middle brother and me at the Grand Canyon before the third child came. We are painfully young, the four of us. I have no recollection of this trip. Behind us is our car and on the roof, the atlas. My father stands with one leg on a rock. My brother and I hug his other leg, hold hands. My father smiles. He is not a man who smiles easily. There is a gravity to him. When he speaks or acts, he does so with purpose and sincerity. I have spent the past several years trying to become like him so when I say, "I love you," *you* can know I mean it. My father is a civil engineer. He is always concerned with infrastructure, the strength of holding the world together. He has always filled my head with information about highways and tunnels and concrete. I've retained little. The ingratitude of children is staggering. I do know this, however: if nothing else were in the way, we would always be able to reach each other. We could close the distance between our two points. We could point to a place on a map and say, we are here.

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**Roxane Gay's** writing appears or is forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *Cream City Review*, *Annalemma*, *McSweeney's (online)*, *The Rumpus*, and others. She is the co-editor of *PANK*, a regular contributor to HTMLGIANT, an assistant professor of English at Eastern Illinois University, and can be found at <http://www.roxanegay.com>. Her first multi-genre collection, *Ayiti*, will be released in 2011.

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