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Deep, inky, humid, ultramarine blue frames the silhouettes of two enormous oak trees, their black bodies merging with the ground and filling the dark foreground. A string of yellow and red dots forms a diagonal near the middle of the painting, referencing the headlights of lazy traffic snaking its way through the dusk and into the night. The surface is heavy, slick, and smooth. The oil paint layer is reminiscent of a Chinese vase -a carapace encasing the heavy MDF board. The board itself is cut at an angle so as to appear thin and floating away from the wall. Dylan Collier painted and gave me this painting in 2000, or maybe in 2002, before I left Philly for New Orleans. He died some years later. My son is named after him.

This painting has always been with me. I've stared at it in many places for two decades, yet I stand before it now and think, not about Dylan and his death, but about beauty. One dreadfully hot day around 2004, Dylan made me drive with him around New Orleans for hours looking for the perfect magnolia flower to photograph. He made dozens of drawings in search of an image for a tattoo he eventually got on his forearm of a magnolia with a light bulb in the middle. We stopped at many blooming trees and climbed a rickety ladder in the back of my pickup truck to look closer at the blooms. He would look and look and then say that we needed to keep going, searching for something ineffable held by a specific flower. Dylan was looking for something I didn't understand.

This past year has compelled me to look closer, and to look for that which I don't know how to look for. I stand in my living room with coffee in my hand every morning. I look at Dylan's gorgeous painting of a highway, somewhere in the American south. I look at it and sense the sweetness of the air, and remember the many road trips I took by myself in the 90s on those very highways, listening to music and waiting for the click of the old-school car lighter. I fully get the reality of this profoundly American feeling -the sweetness and seduction of alienation. It's a kind of freedom akin to the relief one finds in the idea of death. But this brutal Covid year has sensitized me to Dylan's actual, and very profound and transgressive, connection, not to alienation, but to beauty. The last lines of Mary Oliver's poem, "The Swan," come to mind: "And did you feel it, in your heart, how it pertained to everything?
And have you too finally figured out what beauty is for?
And have you changed your life?"