

Christopher Cunningham  
The Things You Know

You know how when you're sitting at a redlight,  
and you turn to the person next to you

to say something, maybe about the guy at  
work who never refills the coffee pot or about the Nat Geo

article on sea turtles you read at the lawyer's  
office—it's a little thing, not something that takes much time,

just a quick turn of the head, so it's not that you're  
not paying attention, because you are, you're the kind

of driver who stops for pedestrians at crosswalks,  
you change your oil every three thousand miles, your instructor

in that defensive driving course even talked  
about how attentive you are, told the whole class, so you turn

to say that little thing, that inconsequential  
nothing to your ex-wife—who really is a bad driver even though

you can't tell her that, like the time when you were still  
married she'd had all those drinks at Stephen and Jo's

wedding, and she'd been flirting with that guy, and she insisted  
on driving even though she was drunk, shrieking

at you in the parking lot with everyone listening  
and pretending not to, and finally you hand her the car keys

just to shut her up, and she almost crashed the Buick,  
twice, on the way home—and then the light turns green, but

your head is turned, so you don't release the brake  
right away, and then you turn back (what

you wanted to say was such a small thing, an aside  
really) and you notice that the light's

changed, and just as you start to slide  
your foot to the gas, the person behind you hits

his horn, as if you can't see the light is green,

as if you're asleep or something, and need reminding

to wake up and make your car go, and you begin  
to pull away from the light, and the guy behind

you thinks it's because he's done his civic duty, roused  
you from a little stoplight siesta, awakened

you from the humming depths of some rush hour  
reverie, and you know that you were going to pull away

anyway, without the horn, but there's no way to tell him that.  
You can't wave, because then he thinks you're thanking

him, like you're admitting you didn't see the light,  
that you wouldn't have noticed it without him. And you can't shake

your fist or flip him off, which is what you really want  
to do, because he'll just think that you're pissed,

that you feel stupid about being caught  
not paying attention, that you're embarrassed

and just taking it out on him—besides, he might be some wacko  
with a gun, and maybe he's had a really bad day,

been laid off from work after twenty years, his boss just walking  
up, Your division's redundant; we'll give you severance pay,

and suddenly they don't need him anymore, like some piece  
of obsolete office machinery, like goddamn typewriters

or something, even though he worked his ass  
off, never saw his kids, ruined his marriage with all of the hours

on weekends, all of the traveling, so that finally, one day he  
came home from a trip to L.A. and his wife

was just gone, the house empty, and maybe  
he's behind you right now, with a fifth and a loaded forty-five,

and all you need to do to send him over the edge  
is to give him the finger, he'd wait until he'd pulled

alongside you, and you'd look over and see this huge  
gun pointing right at you, and then he'd shoot and that would

be it. So you can't wave and you can't flip him off, and you pull  
away from the light, accelerating, and he passes you, and you do

nothing, and you will never see him again, and you will  
never be able to tell him all that you might about how you

were just about to go when he honked his horn,  
and as you drive down the road, you shake

your head, reduced to a lonely and raging despair born  
of all the things you know and will never be able to say.