It starts with a shudder. Not an earthquake, or some kind of aftershock, though that’s what most people think (at first, at least). Simply a deep-running tremor through the ground, damaging nothing but shaking everything, leaving not one stone unrattled, not one light unflickered. It’s the subject of confused whispering for a few hours, of scientific bafflement for a few weeks, and later, largely, it’s forgotten.

And then, today, the ground breathes in again, air and noise filling its dark, buried lungs; if the first quake was a startled little inhale, this is the deep, long breath that drags the sleeper up into the waking world, brings life into an organism that had begun to think it was dead. So, though this is not the first quake, this is the start. This is when the earth begins to move like an animal, this is when the dirt begins to vibrate like iron shavings close to a magnet. This is when the roads come alive.

The highway comes first. The I-195, starting to shift, stretch. It lets out a long, gravelly groan, and then it begins to rise, dragging up out of the ground, dislodging pillars and pylons and concrete columns, sloughing off cars and trucks like pebbles and sand. The buses stay, and their drivers and passengers have no idea what to do.

As I-195 lifts itself up, looking over the city and the water, rearing its odd and solid bulk against the darkening sky, it trails exits and roads and other highways that split from it, widening and pulling into a vast net of asphalt and movement. I-195 is the spinal cord, and the Providence highway system around it, the nervous system, the veins, the skeleton, the tendons and twisting ligaments. Buses flicker over the strange, oscillating web; neuron signals, moving it, keeping it alive.

The ground below is unrecognizable. The stars above are unfamiliar; some blackened, blotted out by the thing that dances in the sky. Hasbro Children’s Hospital dangles off one swaying limb. Water gushes from another, thrashed into a river and brought back hydroplaning. Most streetlights are dark, but some of them still fizz and flicker, bright little pinpricks against a night ever darker as the roads tear themselves from the ground, half the city wrenched up along with them, paying little attention to the flooding or the noise, simply standing taller and taller, freer and freer from the ground below, walking in great, loping steps across Providence, and then Pawtucket, and later Massachusetts beyond, now a tangled, hulking behemoth of a thing, picking up infrastructure as it goes, following the weak sun as it rises, not stopping for even a second, not looking back.