

## 1 October 2019

I have sixteen days, including today, to be ready for a cross-country bike trip. I leave for San Diego via airplane on the morning of the 18th. I've bought most of the gear. The bicycle itself is with the mechanic, who is installing headlights, taillights, and a hub dynamo to power them. It feels like there is a lot to do before I leave. While preparing to bike cross country, I'm also buying a rental property. Moreover, there are a number of practical matters, like who is to watch over my own house in my absence, that I must attend to.

## 5 October 2019

I have less than two weeks until my cross-country bike trip. I've had a hard time imposing discipline on myself to write, to plan, to get up in the morning, or to train. Somehow, despite what I perceive as disorder, things are getting done.

The bicycle has been tuned up. I purchased this Surly Long Haul trucker from Nashville Bicycle Lounge in 2011. I intended to use the bicycle for commuting, but also for a tour I was sure I'd take very soon. Eight years is soon, is it not?

The bicycle shop I bought the bicycle from went out of business some years ago. The bike turned out to be too heavy for regular commuting or recreational use because it is overbuilt for those purposes. It has 36-spoke wheels, full fenders, and both front and rear cargo racks. I bought other bicycles to ride over time. I moved this bicycle when I moved house in 2014.

Plans changed. My dad died in 2010 of cancer, whereupon I thought I would be freed from taking care of an elderly parent who lived in Atlanta. I would no longer need to spend my weekends traveling from Nashville to intervene, or so I thought. In fact, my mother required increasing amounts of my energy, an ever greater number of trips to Atlanta, and ultimately relocation to metro Nashville. She died this past May in a nursing home in Franklin.

I bought other bicycles to ride over time. I didn't make the perfect plan, or if I did, I failed to follow it. And here I am, many years later, preparing for the trip for which this bike was once an aspirational purchase.

A bicycle shop that opened after Nashville Bicycle Lounge has readied the steel horse for the trip. Shelby Street Bicycle Company rebuilt the wheels, changed the brake and shifting cables, and installed a cycle computer. More recently, David, the mechanic, built a new front wheel with a dynamo hub that will power lights and charge electronics.

In the same manner that an indirect route seems to have ultimately led to the desired start of a tour, I do hope that my scattered and frantic preparation for this trip produces results I like. I haven't ridden a bicycle in two weeks. The packing list itself is not finalized. I am only halfway through with preparing freeze-dried and dehydrated meals for the trip.

Meanwhile, I'm purchasing a rental property, or maybe even two of them. I'm making arrangements with a new roommate to look after the place while I'm gone. I'm writing a will with an attorney. There feels like so much to do.

## 7 October 2019

I'm weepy-sad [maudlin] today for reasons I cannot yet pinpoint. I had a little cry at the lyrics from *No One is Alone* from the musical *Into the Woods*.

Mother cannot guide you  
Now you're on your own  
Only me beside you  
Still you're not alone  
No one is alone, truly  
No one is alone.

My parents, both dead now, did not instill in me a sense of self-confidence. Our relationship left me feeling disconnected from them. I wanted or could have benefitted from any sense or sign that I was valued and emotionally wanted, that I was a part of a club or group or a secret society called my family, wherein I was not merely loved, but even liked and admired. Maybe they told me these things were true, but I didn't hear it. I don't know.

"We admire you. You are good at so many things. We are glad you are our son." They probably did say this, or intended it to be understood. Somehow, the message didn't land. Now they are no longer here to say it.

I don't know if that original disconnection is the root cause of the ongoing lifelong disconnection that I feel even now. I feel alone. It's my default mode. I am not a part. There is not some crowd or group that is looking forward to my presence. I am merely self-important.

How I would like for someone to come around on a day like this who would sweep me off to belong amongst a group of people doing something fun. I should so enjoy it if there were even one person who might be solicitous of my time. It doesn't happen, though. No one calls to involve me. And there is no group where I am confidently a member.

I am sad today because I think I will die without feeling the affection, affirmation, and belonging I so crave.

In more practical matters, this morning I awoke around seven. I attended a pleasant closing on the single family dwelling at 409B McIver that I now own and for which I will henceforth receive rents. Mr. Grissim, the closing attorney, enjoyed my banter and dispensed advice about exterminating bedbugs. He told us that the singular virtue of Hitler's use of gas in the Holocaust was that it stopped any sort of vermin or contagion spreading from the victims, for it truly did kill everything. He provided me with the number of an exterminating company out of Sevierville that uses the strongest sorts of cyanide gas to rid dwellings of particularly difficult infestations. He claimed it was the only company in the state to offer such a service.

I went to the bank to transfer the purchase price to escrow, as well as to set up a new account for the rents. I also retrieved a cashier's check for the home inspector, who was just then looking at another property I am considering. I proceeded from the bank to meet this inspector, Tony Kerr, about his findings.

Tony had been unable to access one of the units in this duplex, numbered 3505/3507. The man in 3507, who identified himself as the brother of the tenant, would not let Tony in. Nonetheless, Tony was able to ascertain a number of problems that make the \$200,000 price I'm under contract for far too high. Kate, the real estate agent, arrived where we sat at Cafe Coco. We discussed how steep a decrease in price I would need were I to purchase this property, and also whether I should back out entirely.

It was 2P by the time I got home. I took a nap. I shuttled to the post office a return to a company called Trayvax. At the post office, I also inquired about the regulations relating to the shipping of hazardous goods. In this case, these included an isopropane canister for a camping stove and a 30Kamp (?) battery pack. The clerk assured me it would only take a few more days for my hazardous items to arrive across the country via ground transportation than would anything shipped the usual way, which includes air transportation.

The return I mailed was the wallet I have used for several years now. It is made of aircraft aluminum, two pieces cinched together by paracord and an elastic band. On this model, the company's first, the elastic had failed. I've been losing cards, most notably my debit card, as a result. Today I received the replacement model, which has no velcro. I mailed the company the defective item, as they said they would credit me the cost of the new model once they received the old one.

And now I have not done as much of what I thought I might do today as I would have done, nor do I really want to do more now. Instead, I want some buddies I don't have to pick me up for a joyously inclusive bit of entertainment I would enjoy. Alas, not a single buddy or event like this exists.

# 10 October 2019

I stayed up late last night completing a spreadsheet for the third segment out of seven of my cross-country trip, this one from El Paso to Del Rio. This segment is the last of the remote and wild western space through which I will pass. After El Paso, the landscape becomes greener and more populous. I was excited about Marfa, TX, with its artists and installations, and the possibility of visiting the vastness of Big Bend National Park.

In a continuing pattern, I believed the best thing to do would be to go to bed early, and yet I went to bed late. I thought I should prepare food in the morning, start the freeze dryer, pack and leave midafternoon for a first-and-only shakedown trip with a loaded bike to Lock A campground on Cheatham Lake. Instead, I stayed awake until 3AM, considering the vast space of Texas and researching places to stop along US90.

As a result, I don't think I shall have a shakedown tour, as the bicycle and luggage need to be shipped out on Saturday or before. Today is Thursday. Tomorrow is Friday, and I have a late afternoon meeting with the person who will manage my rental in my absence. Instead, I will spend my time finalizing the gear list and preparing meals to mail to myself.

I am underprepared in some ways. Not having a shakedown is not optimal. I gave up training for my trip a few weeks ago when it was so hot. I could not motivate myself to leave in time to ride a long distance before the afternoon heat and humidity closed in. It has been an unusually hot September, with temperatures in the upper 90s as late as the end of the month.

I also have been obliged to attend to unrelated business matters. I bought, for the second time in my life, a rental property. Furthermore, there have been details related to my mother's estate that have needed attention.

Today, for example, I corresponded with the attorney who has advised me about my mother's will. She is from the firm that advised my mom about my father's estate. There is a piece of property in Wooster, OH that my mom did not have correctly registered in her name once she inherited it from my father. Now the lawyer, Jennifer, has sent me a petition to be appointed successor executor of my father's estate. I will take this to a notary, sign it, and mail it back.

In other ways, I am rather overprepared. I've made many freeze-dried meals and other camp food that I will mail to myself via general delivery at various rural post offices across my route. I've weighed everything except the clothes I will take. I will calculate the weight of the clothing today. I have a loose plan in a spreadsheet that shows where I might stop at night across the first month or so of my trip.

# 13 October 2019

I am mostly concerned that my physical or mental condition will not support this cross-country trip. I worry that the reason I did not ride very much in the past three weeks could be that I don't actually want to ride a bicycle anywhere, ever, at all. I'm concerned that in the face of elevation gain, poor weather, and lack of confidence, I will give up and go home.

I'm biking cross-country because I need an epic victory for myself. I want to point to this endeavor as proof that I am amazing and can do whatever I set my mind to. It's also a break from some of the parts of my everyday life that I find taxing. I am exhausted from dealing with endless choice but no structure. I am tired of the choices I do make: spend all day in front of a screen, procrastinate, eat too much food of too low quality, sleep irregularly. These choices lead to poor health. I've gained five pounds since I quit my job. They also lead to self-loathing.

Biking this long-distance trip will provide a structure for living better, albeit temporarily. I will know that my principal focus is biking in a roughly eastward direction. Freedom is only as meaningful as one's ability to choose well. In this case, I will restrict myself to the terms of this endeavor in order to be bound more closely to good choices. Sometimes, removing the worst options, as if by magical force, is freeing. These are my hopes.

It was a pleasant relief to drop the bicycle off with fully packed backs yesterday at Shelby Street Bicycle Company. David, a mechanic, will disassemble the bicycle. He will box the luggage and the bike. He will leave it for UPS to deliver to Bernie's Bikes in San Diego. If he doesn't do it tomorrow, it will cost me an extra \$100 to ship Tuesday. If I had delivered it to him Friday, it would have cost \$75 less than it will cost tomorrow.

I'm glad I got it to him at all. I was worried I would not get up the gumption, get the ducks in a row, and summon my internal strength &tc to pack, pack light, and accept my own work as good enough. I am a perfectionist and procrastinator, after all. But this morning when I awoke, I felt lighter and happier than I have in weeks. Having piloted the unwieldy loaded bike for the first time to the bike shop to be sent to San Diego, this trip that I anticipate with eagerness and anxiety in turns now seems to take concrete form. To turn back now would take more effort than continuing forward. I suspect inertia may be part of what drives me cross-country.

I have yet to finish preparing food. I must divide the food into what I will take with me from San Diego, and several boxes to be shipped to me (maildrops) along the way. I must prepare a bag of everything to go with me on the plane. There are various other errands that I must finish in order to ensure all is well here in my absence from Nashville.

Today, I packaged freeze-dried chicken madeira and kale chips. I prepared potatoes, peppers, and roasted sweet potatoes. I made a dish with eggplant and tofu. The freeze dryer is full of store-bought marinara sauce, the tofu/eggplant dish, and the vegetables. There is a container of store-bought tomato salsa drying in the dehydrator. I went to Whole Foods this evening for ingredients I will use to make granola tomorrow.

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## Bike weights in pounds at Shelby St. Bike Co:

36.6 bike without luggage

14.08 rear panniers

13.07 front panniers

4.0 handlebar

67.75 total

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I'm uncertain if this is the right way to go about this. I don't have a good sense of how to use convenience store and small grocery store food to make camp meals. I'm hoping to gain that understanding along the way, but for now, I want to ensure I have good healthy options available to me. I plan on ten boxes containing five breakfasts and five dinners, with some meals premade and others merely hinted at by the various bulk goods I've included. I reckon my daytime meals I'll buy as I go along.

## 17 October 2019 Ocean Beach, CA

I am staying tonight in an AirBnB, a little cottage about a half mile from the beach. It has been an eventful day.

Last night, I went out to Mickey's to meet several people—Lenny, Dawn, Franko, Michael, and Nick—who wanted to see me off. I am not so social, so while I was pleased to see them, we weren't able to sustain the conversation beyond ninety minutes and one drink apiece. I returned home to wash the last dishes and put away the last laundry. I did these last acts in consideration of Jonathan, the housemate, so that he might enjoy the house in my absence without the presence of my messes.

I didn't sleep much. By 5A, I was looking for Zsa, who had volunteered to take me to the airport. When she did not arrive, a review of our text exchange revealed that I had not been clear as to five in the morning instead of the more reasonable 5P. I took an uber instead.

I waited in line at curbside check-in. At the front of the line, the man evaluating my extra large bike box had to consult with a supervisor as to whether it could be transported. For a moment, I feared all would be lost. I would have to wait yet longer to start my trip while I waited for my bike and luggage to ship. It would all be my fault for bringing the bike and luggage too late to the bike shop, by which cause they were motivated to advise me to check it on my flight. I was relieved when the man declared that they would take the box, despite its dimensions being over their 91" standard sum.

Southwest had open seating. The aircraft that carried us seemed a good bit roomier than the airplanes I can remember boarding before. There was enough space for my knees. To my surprise, flying was an altogether positive experience.

At the San Diego airport, I rented a cart. I wheeled the bike box up and over a skybridge and down to where the rideshare are. My driver told me she had spent her first sixteen years just on the other side of the Mexican border, so close to here. She had an accent, but it was not clearly a Mexican accent. Rather, it was a special creation of these borderlands.

I dropped all my stuff off at Bernie's Bike Shop. The shop has been in this neighborhood for fifty years. It is full to the brim of bikes and parts, piled just everywhere.

I went via uber to REI to make returns and to buy an isopropane stove canister. I also picked up two 6L water bladders. The uber trips were expensive.

I am to leave this AirBnB by 11A tomorrow, the stated check out time. After packing up the bike, I have a pair of shoes, a hoodie, some return items, and a charger to ship back. Much to my chagrin, I realized that I did not pack my bicycle cleats—mountain biking shoes with SPD clips—in the bike box, nor did I pack them elsewhere. So I'll have to deal with some of these issues before completing the very short miles I have planned for my first day.

I wish I had more time here. Seeing the ocean as we crested the hill in the Uber from the airport was the first moment in some time I felt truly excited about my trip. The beach and this neighborhood fascinate me. But it's time to get started.

*Things bought: plane tickets, uber fares, breakfast, lunch, afternoon latte, reassembly of bike, spoke wrench, unremembered bike accessory, postage, massage, lightweight drawstring cotton pants, dromedary water containers, fuel canister, mini tripod for cellphone-as-camera.*

## 19 October 2019 Kumeyaay Campground

Yesterday I left the ocean twice. I stopped about four miles down the San Diego bike trail to adjust my saddle. I stuck a laminated, rolled copy of my passport into the seat stay. The stiff document unrolled so that it was flush with the interior walls of the downtube. Its presence prevented the seat post from going as far enough into the downtube as would be required for the seat to be at the correct height. I was forced to look for a mechanic while standing on the pedals, the seat behind me at a height high enough to serve as a flag for my incompetence.

The first place I looked was marked on the ACA map. But when I arrived at the address indicated on the map, it became clear that Performance Bikes was closed for good. In fact, when I called a national number for Performance Bikes, I was informed that the company no longer maintains brick-and-mortar retail stores anywhere.

I went all the distance back to Bernie's. His wife, who administers the store, loaned me long needle-nose pliers. I was able to push the laminated document far enough down the tube that I could properly adjust the seat. I think they may have been glad to be done with me.

In any case, I returned again to the bike path. The route out of the city proper was pleasant until about Hotel Circle North. Thereafter, city navigation and vehicular cycling skills were necessary. As for the former, I had few such skills on display, and got turned around several times. The directions indicated 10.5 miles of segregated bike facilities, but I only found half as many. Thereafter, bike lanes abruptly ended and traffic became fierce. My problems were compounded by my choice to ride around rush hour.

I arrived after dark, hungry. I was pleased at my decision from a month ago to have a sixteen mile first day. I thought to myself then, "Things go wrong, I may start late on the first day, and I'm out of shape anyway." How wise I was!

Miles total; 27

Miles eastward progress: 16

Things bought: SPD cleated mountain bike shoes, rubber patch kit for panniers, which look worn, tiramisu wafer crackers, a latte, one pan au chocolat, uber fares to Fry's Electronics and REI, bluetooth keyboard I hope I may use for journaling on my phone, champagne (used to christen the bike "Priscilla" on the beach), 24 oz Negra Modelo.

## 20 October 2019 Boulder Oaks Campground

These have been difficult days. I traveled from Mission Trails Parks at 500' to 4050' today. There have been many hours of pedaling in the lowest gear for a tenth of a mile or less before stopping to take a break. The grade from San Diego to Guatay is almost without relent. At

Guatay, the first substantial descent starts, but is followed by another five miles of grueling ascent.

Just after Pine Valley, at about 4050' or so, the route, here following State 80, finally plunges back downward. My maps, limited though they may be, show my current location as a high mesa between two points with elevation greater than four-thousand feet.

Tomorrow, I will climb up the second point and descend to Live Oak Springs. Once my descent starts, I anticipate for the first time in my still-nascent journey, a net loss of elevation for a day of travel. I will descend with some hundred or two hundred feet of climbs, while on the whole rapidly heading down to the desert.

This part of the trip has gone about half as quickly as I anticipated. I thought I would leave Kumeyaay Lakes and cover the 45 miles to this current campsite in about five hours. I estimated this way based on my experience on a road bike in Tennessee, with some allowance made for ~75 pounds freight on a much heavier bicycle. Instead, I arrived just at dusk, feeling stressed, at a campground in Viejas that I would not otherwise have chosen, Mar-ta-awa. This morning, I planned to go all the way to Live Oak, but I manifested enough compassion for myself to understand that whatever the plan may be or whatever others may have done, I must be gentle with myself. If I push too hard, all may be lost.

So here I am at this beautiful campground within earshot of Old Highway 80 and the interstate, I-8, that superseded it. The Pacific Crest Trail crosses here. There is a bus sign at the PCT crossing for San Diego's public transit agency, just in case a through hiker wanted to call it quits close to his or her start near the border.

Despite the difficulties, there are sweet moments that remind me why I want to travel this way. At Lakeside yesterday, lost, I ordered a fish burrito from Roberto's. I'd never had such a good thing. In fact, I don't think I've had a burrito like it. I have eaten fish tacos, but this burrito was exceptionally tasty. The fist was crispy, the wheat tortilla soft, and the spices and onions really set my taste buds alight in just the right way.

Last night, I discovered why putting the rain fly on even when no rain is coming may be useful. I had left it off, thinking I might enjoy sleeping under the stars. For want of a more opaque cover between me and the heavens, I was awoken, not unpleasantly, by the moon.

And today, just before I reached the crest at Guatay, I decided that I needed a longer break. I saw a convenience store with several men and a young boy hanging around its front stoop. I bought a root beer, some mixed nuts, a Grandma's Oatmeal cookie, and a bottle of water. The last item I purchased because the proprietor insisted that the water in his community was so polluted that no reasonable person would drink it. His child politely refused my request to fill my water bottles.

I sat on the stoop and listened to a long discourse from the owner about how aggrieved he is that the Border Patrol has a checkpoint at Pine Valley, many miles inland from the border. The presence of another man, whom I came to know through the continued conversation works for Border Patrol, added another dimension to the conversation. Another man warned me that I should make sure I wasn't carrying anything illegal. Later, at the checkpoint, I was waved through without even presenting the passport I brought for the occasion.

Miles today: ~20

Miles yesterday (Kumeyaay to Mar-a-ta-wa): ~30

Best purchase: Fish Burrito at Roberto's (yesterday)

Cerveza Pacifico (today)

## 21 October 2019 Jacumba Hot Springs Resort

John Spreckels started a railroad to run from San Diego to Arizona [check all facts in future]. He called it the San Diego and Arizona Railroad [?]. It was to connect San Diego with the main line in El Centro [plaster city, actually??], passing mountains and even an international border. He suffered setbacks, but the line was built. His heir sold the financially-struggling railroad to Southern Pacific in 1932.

For a number of years [?], the railroad deposited customers at Jucumba Hot Springs. It was a popular resort. The railway even carried movie stars and celebrities. At some point, Interstate 8 replaced Highway 80, but was routed several miles away. Train travel became less popular, and the resort town began a decline. The railway stopped its passenger service to Jacumba in about 1974 [?].

Today, I am staying in the successor hotel to the original hot springs resort. There are three hot plunges. I'm sitting at the bar, having washed down a huge cob salad with a rum and coke.

Earlier, I walked to the railroad depot. To the northeast, there is a large white pyramid associated with the Institute of Perception. There are several burnt-out wooden hulks of ancient Southern Pacific passenger cars. There are also several more recent, but also nonfunctional, Amtrak cars.

The station itself is surrounded by fencing and many signs that say "No Trespassing." I wanted to get closer to the antique EMD F-unit locomotives behind the station, but the signs discouraged me.

As I walked away, a woman arrived in a Jeep Pathfinder. I hovered, waiting to see if she would get out of the car. When she didn't, I approached in the most nonthreatening way possible. She

rolled down the window and I gave her my pitch. She didn't understand, or pretended not to understand, my English, so I switched to Spanish. In response, she explained that there have been many trespassers. Notably, she claimed there were people making pornographic films in the burnt-out railcars. She said she couldn't give permission as she and her husband were just acting as agents of the owners.

"Her husband?" I asked. Perhaps I could wait until he showed up. "Okay," she said, "I don't know. He's in charge. I have to do what he says." Just then, another car arrived. The woman said her husband's name was Robert Smit (aRoobert Esmit); this man proved to be he.

Robert Smith and his wife live in the old railroad depot. He is the head mechanic of the Baja Railroad, which has lately acquired rights to use the line John Spreckels built. [the right of way and trackage currently belong to the regional transit people? They lease it?? Baja RWY is just the most recent to lease it, as others have tried to run freight over it, especially for sand from the valley to put in San Diego concrete?] It runs out of San Diego into Tijuana, and returns into the US at camp [note: there is a railroad museum at Campo. Campo is the nearest town to the southern terminus of the PCT, also]

From Campo, the rail line continues through Jacumab Hot Springs to Plaster City.

The Baja Railroad is a private-public partnership [?] with the Baja California state government. The right of way from Campo eastward remains unused. Freight service stopped and started over the years. Eventually, the rights were acquired by San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS). MTS used some of the trackage they acquired elsewhere to build light commuter rail. Right now, the Baja RR has secured a 99-year-lease to the Campo-plaster city trackage [wait? Did MTS not own the rest of the trackage? Meh?]

Robert Smith will participate in resurrecting the railroad. That is, at least once Border Patrol signs of and various business requirements are met. In the meantime, he must deal with pornographers, meth heads who have stripped one locomotive of its valuable metals, and people like me who want a closer look, but must be denied per company policy.

[also: many people use the rails as a hiking route, which annoys Mr. Smith. He mentions that the owners of Jacumba Hot Springs also own a nudist resort. The nudist resort, in particular, encourages their guests to hike the rails.]

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Today, I biked from Boulder Oaks up over the high point (4000') of my trip from San Diego to

Tempe. I have allowed myself to slow. I spin the pedals in the lowest gear. I get off the bike frequently. I gave myself permission to take it easy after the days of climbing. I ate too much. I stopped at a Casino at the top of my route, and won .35 on my ten dollars of betting at the slots. I will sleep tonight at a hotel only 24 miles from where I started, having arrived here at 2PM.

Tomorrow, I may push it a little to get to El Centro. I will descend 3212 feet, reaching twenty feet below sea level in twenty miles. This is much to my advantage. My challenges will be high winds, poor roads, and heat.

Purchased today: several rounds of slots, chicken tenders, a comb, cotton swabs, \$52 hotel stay, \$1500 or so to settle a lawyer bill, rum and coke, cobb salad

Soundtrack: America "Horse with No Name."

## 22 October 2019 El Centro Country Life RV Park

I had an epic day today. First, I descended down the grade, vindicating my effort in climbing. I endured over twenty miles of the most poorly-maintained, though scenic, road, Even Hewes Highway.

Part of Evan Hewes is officially closed because a bridge is out. I had called the county transportation officials when I was in Jacumba to find out the status of the road. They confirmed it was closed. When I asked whether the area crossed by the bridge might be passable by a person on bike or foot, the man whom I spoke with assured me that it was a very wide space, and hard to travel. He told me that he wished California DOT would give them funding to fix the road, but until whatever time that might happen, the county would not be fixing the bridge or repaving the road. Nonetheless, when I arrived at the store in Ocotillo, a young woman who was one of two employees who served me assured me that she goes that way all the time when she's in too much of a hurry for the highway, and that the bridge merely goes through a dry wash.

Because the ACA map showed Even Hewes highway as various miles shorter than what they labeled the "Yuha Alternate," and because they specified that the Yuha Alternate also suffers from poor maintenance, I ignored the signs that said the road was closed. When I arrived at the closed bridge, I felt victorious: there were many vehicle tracks in the sand next to the bridge which led down into the wash and up the other side.

In my joy and hubris, I paused in the pleasant shade under the disused bridge. I took a look, for the first time, at this Imperial Valley desert. It was gorgeous. I called the ACA routing department to let them know that the road closure was unimportant. The woman who answered told me that

a new set of maps had been issued exactly a month after I purchased my maps. My maps were from 2015, after all. She told me that the alternate Yuha route was now the standard route, and that mentions of Even Hewes were no longer.

I thought this was a shame. I was sad for wasting her time. I continued on the rutted pavement for a number of miles until I changed my mind. For its beauty, this Even Hewes Highway is torture. I can't imagine a worse road.

In Plaster City, I saw an entire industrial complex devoted to nothing other than making gypsum plasterboard (sheetrock). I was fascinated.

The bike shop in El Centro fixed the seat problem I've been having. They diagnosed the cause of the seat's tendency to incline aft into my netherbits as being caused by a worn-out seatpost. They sold me a new seatpost, and installed it. I cooled down in that shop, and then proceeded along the roads, better than Even Hewes, but still nasty, that led to this RV park. I am the only tenter in a trailer and RV park full of poor people and seasonal workers. It's not ideal.

On the other hand, I finally made my daily mileage goal of fifty miles when I rode 51 miles. I felt reassured. Maybe I can complete this trip, after all.

Bought: seat post, large package of Spanish (chili) peanuts, cut pineapple, Mexican-produce Coca Cola, one gallon water, a vanilla paleta, a ginger ale, a moleskine notebook from Amazon that will ship to an Amazon locker in Brawley, a shitty camping space in a park with lots of noise and light.

## 24 Oct 2019 Slab City Library

Yesterday, I traveled along old highway 111 from the unsatisfactory RV park through Brawley and Calipatria to Slab City. The roads were poor, the topography was flat, and I managed to cover the 36 miles or so by just after noon. My timing was advantageous because it soon became hotter than fuck.

Imperial County appears to have collectively decided not to maintain its roads. I imagine someone calling the county transportation department. A man, perhaps the same one who answered my question about the bridge of Even Hewes, picks up the phone. On the other end is an advocate for the paving industry. The advocate says, "We've got great news for you, pal!! There's this stuff called 'new asphalt.' It makes it possible for people, goods, and even farm machinery to travel more safely and quickly around your county! It's not very expensive, either." Meanwhile the county employee mutters "mhmm, okay" and "right, yes, asphalt" in a receptive and empathetic tone.

At the end of the advocate's sales pitch, however, the county employee says, "Well, Bill, I appreciate you calling us, but we just don't believe in roads. We thought about maybe spending money of any sort, and in the staff meeting, we all agreed, you know, 'Nah, roads? Good roads? That's just not us.'" And then he hangs up on Bill.

In Brawley, I stopped at a restaurant, El Cañon. They open at three in the morning. I presume this is to accommodate the working schedule of those who must produce good results outside before the sun and the heat make results of any kind very difficult to come by. On the wall hung a bilingual sign that said "Tengan un buen dia," which I took as a calque or loan translation of the English "have a nice day." To my understanding and my ear, the proper Spanish phrase is "Pase un buen dia." I am not a fluent speaker, however, as the following will show.

The help and I had a comical time understanding each other. The woman had to ask several times if I wanted ice, if she should discard the water already in the bike water bottle, and so forth, not expecting that I just wanted tap water filling up the bottle. The breakfast burrito of eggs, beans, and a flour tortilla was better and unlike any other I have tried.

I continued past agricultural fields and Calipatria State Prison. Most of the open space seemed filled by the alfalfa crop. There were massive facilities to put the alfalfa into bales. I first imagined these bales as building materials, as in the haybale builder-occupant houses I've seen in ecovillages. Then I saw the first of many feed lots for cattle, which caused me to understand that the bales would be used in meat production.

North of Calipatria, I saw tracts full of date palms. Local dates are available in stores, totally aside from online dating. I saw bees that were trucked in to help with the harvest. Google routed me along farm roads. Some of these were unpaved, but even the paved roads were cracked, rutted, and difficult to traverse. Despite these challenges, I made acceptable progress.

In Brawley, I had bought beer (two Stella, two Pacifica 40oz) as gifts for my hosts. These, plus a gallon of water, were strapped to the bike for these bumpy miles. I saw and used a portable latrine for workers. I saw tractors and a smattering of men in trucks. The men in trucks stopped to adjust or fix irrigation works. With the exception of the date harvest, I did not see crews hand harvesting anything, much to my surprise.

I finally arrived in Niland. I first went to the Post Office. There, I picked up a general delivery package I'd sent to myself containing a U-lock and a laptop. While I attempted to add this haul to the water and the beer that were already affixed to the frame, a car arrived and a man hopped out of the passenger seat.

The man was somewhere between 25 and 35. He wore long pants and a tank top. He had a full mustache and beard. He smelled like traveler, homeless person, hippie, or anyone who hasn't

washed in a while. He had a manic energy about himself. He pressed himself closer to me than I would have preferred, and spoke rapidly.

Man: Hey! Nice Bicycle!

Me: Thank you.

Man: \*touches Brooks bicycle saddle\* Oh, it has the fancy seat! Are you traveling to The Slabs? Where are you going to stay?

Me: Yes, I'm going to stay in Rabbitside

Man: Oh, you gotta be careful! They'll rob you blind! I biked all the way from Massachusetts, and the people at the Slabs robbed me blind! They'll take you for everything! I was robbed at gunpoint!

At this point, the man was walking away from me towards the post office. He raised his shirt to reveal three hunting knives in holsters on his hip.

Man: That's why I have THREE KNIVES! If the first knife doesn't get them, the second or third will!

He smiled and went into the post office. When he returned, he showed me, unbidden, the open package he came to retrieve, so as to reveal its contents.

Man: See what I have? TESLA COILS! I'm going to make a staff with these.

Man makes a reaching gesture with one hand, as if he were extending a staff aggressively.

Man: Anyone who comes near me is going to get zapped with KILOVOLTS!

The man laughed, and got back in the car. He drove off. On my way to Slab City, he leaned out the passenger side of the car as it passed me and yelled, "SEE YOU AROUND."

I found this vaguely menacing.

## 26 October 2019 Slab City notes

The people in rabbitside first moved into that was called The Night Vale camp and then welcome to Night Vale

East Jesus notes:

East Jesus

Chastrus foundation acquired rights from Carpers from the legislature. Even the teachers retirement association

Jenn and

"This is the cool project in the desert we've told you about" was how we were introduced to legislators.

Places to see:

Active geothermal area, Adobe  
Shower across from guard shack

Chat with Scott

My sister read my inspiration for my art car. Missing limbs. Have to stay home And play with dolls.

Charlie Russell birthday January 6

First church of the chocolate martini  
Edicts:  
Do big fun  
Make good thing  
Get more laid  
Rise and infect

## 25 October 2019. Rabbitside (Slab City) to Wiest County Park (Brawley)

I awoke before 6. I snoozed my alarm several times. I knew I needed to leave the shack where I had slept so soundly. I knew I needed to manage the timing so that I wouldn't be obliged to say goodbye again to my lovely hosts. If I did it right, Peter would have already left work, while Ryan and Jessie would still be sleeping. They were so relatable and kind that if I had to say another word to any of them, I might not have been able to gather my things and leave.

I got up at around 6:30, and was careful, then, to stay out of Peter's sight. It takes me about an hour to get ready. About halfway through that, I saw Peter's car was no longer in front of the

Rabbitson camp. I continued to pack. I had the last bit of quick oatmeal I've been carrying since San Diego.

I proceeded to walk my bike out to Coachella Canal Rd, mount it, bike to the intersection with Beal, turn left, and continue towards town. Along the way, I passed a number of camps and works of art, but especially remarkable was saying goodbye to Salvation Mountain. I found myself going slow over all the broken asphalt between Slab City and Niland.

Imperial Valley has been most memorable for its poorly-maintained roads. This county, so poor, has chosen not to spend on secondary county roads. The surfaces of these are pocked with holes. Each length of street displays a veinlike network of cracks. It was not the heat today, nor my endurance, that limited my forward progress.

In Niland, I locked my bike in front of the Post Office. I had a package to send to Wickenburg, AZ, via general delivery. I included in the package several items I haven't seen fit to use so far, such as a second spare tube and a bluetooth keyboard. I plan to arrive in Wickenburg, AZ, decide if any of these items might be useful at all, and send the rest home. It was clear that the items I sent were not serving me now as well as the slightly-reduced weight might. I'd already sent a package from home, with about seven pounds of food for camping, to Wickenburg, so sending this package today would not add to the number of stops I am obliged to make.

The Post Office was not open yet. I went to the store. I purchased a sandwich. I looked over the wares for sale. I considered, again, whether my extensive scheme to prepare food for myself, mail it to myself, and carry it on the bicycle as I traveled may have been a poor choice. I ordered a sandwich-- the "Torpedo"-- at the deli counter. I also chose a snack called "Japanese Peanuts," which are not Japanese, but very certainly identifiable as a Mexican food product. I also purchased Haagen Daas ice cream bar.

I ate some of my purchases outside in the quarter hour or so before the Post Office would open. The sub roll was stale. The salami they used was the cheap cold-cut version, almost indistinguishable from the baloney that also came on the sandwich. I ate anyway. I did like the combination of hot peppers and mayonnaise, which reminds me of the times I've visited Mexico.

I sent my package at the post office without incident. I put on my highway-worker high-viz vest and set the light on the back of my helmet. I put my helmet on. I finished most of the second half of the Torpedo, but deciding that I only cared to eat the innards, threw the stale bun out into the parking lot. I did not see a trash receptacle, and carrying the trash on my bike seemed like an unfortunate penalty for not eating something. At the very moment of littering, an old man came upon me and cried, "Well, you're not leaving it to chance whether people see you, are you, now?" I was surprised as I expected him to rebuke me for littering.

I traveled the shoulders of Highway 111. Traffic was mostly light. I would hear vehicles go over the rumble strip in the middle of the highway to avoid me, and then see them pass. On the whole, this shoulder did not exhibit the characteristic brokenness of its other Imperial County peers. I set my sights on the Rite Aid in Brawley.

I was not especially pleased to be biking. I was carrying extra water, which weighed down the bike. Soon, the path Google planned for me continued on to roads that were in the usual shitty condition for roads around here. My time in the Slabs had been exceptionally social; I enjoyed it, but the sheer quantity of information to absorb, things to see, and people to listen carefully to. I felt like the bike was going too slowly, even with my efforts, and I felt this way even when I could see I was making ten miles an hour over the ruts.

In Brawley, the roads improved upon crossing the city line. I arrived at the Rite Aid around one. A package from Amazon containing a Moleskine notebook awaited me. The two clerks and I exchanged Spanish and English, switching back and forth from utterance to utterance without any particular reason being evident. I also bought a Gatorade, which I consumed with haste.

Having done what I came to do, I was at a loss. The sun was hot, and I was tired. I wanted to take a nap next to my bicycle, right there on the sidewalk outside Rite Aid. I wanted to just sit there until I was rested and the sun was lower in the sky. I knew I smelled bad, and the people here don't seem to think of what I'm doing as a leisure activity of choice. I was pretty certain I looked like a bum.

The other day in the El Centro RV park, the attendant who checked me in couldn't believe I would choose to camp. In her mind, I was homeless. She had been to Gainesville, GA, and worked in a notable poultry factory there owned by Tyson. She now manages an RV park full of migrant agricultural laborers. My privilege as a person engaged in "outdoor adventure" instead of "outdoor employment" shone through.

With this story in mind, I forced myself along.

My cellphone was not initially able to tell me how to go to the park I'm staying in tonight. It had no service. I asked one of the clerks, who affirmed that Sprint, and only Sprint, does not work well in that part of town. I intuited from the only map I had that I needed to go north and east. When I did, after some time, recover service, I found I had gone about the right way.

The wrong way and the right way were not so different. Google's idea of an optimized route took me over the rutted roads that only a malevolent God would wish on me, and then put me on an entirely unpaved dirt path next to an irrigation canal. I imagined all the hotels I'd sleep in on future occasions. I imagined swimming in a beautiful Alpine lake, so clear and cold.

When I did arrive at Wiest Lake County Park, I was relieved to see running water and a lake. The signs instructed me to check in for camping at the office. The office was abandoned. I

called the number listed in my guide, but no one answered. I called Imperial County Parks and Recreation. Kimberly, half in English and half in Spanish, offered me the number of a ranger, Jose. Jose's bilingual voicemail answered immediately, which let me know he was not going to be returning any call from me.

When I called the Parks and Recreation department again to press my inquiry, Kimberly passed me on to her boss, who gave me Ranger Jaime's number. Upon answering, Jaime was surprised, but he gave me permission to camp, subject to paying a seven-dollar fee. I thanked him, but after I hung up, I soon called him back with more questions. He confirmed that the water in the taps is potable and that the swimming area of the lake is swimmable. He wanted to know how I got his number. He assured me that everything was absolutely fine and that if I didn't see him tomorrow to pay the seven-dollar fee, everything would still be fine. I surmised that I would not see Jaime, that he wished I'd only called him once or maybe not at all, and that he thought I was looking a gift horse in the mouth.

The showers are broken. The entire place has an abandoned look. Still, I made do, all the time dreaming about the perfect Forest Service campground in a remote wild.

I tried the lake, but cautiously, as I'm wary of the lake water. I'm wary because the artificial lake is filled from the canals. I worry that the canal water has vile leftovers of the nasty things needed to grow food in our industrialized agriculture system. Despite my concerns, the water felt amazing. I used the collapsible bucket and the last bit of Dr. Bronner's to bathe in the nonfunctional Walking Dead shower house. I reconstituted a freeze-dried meal from home, Risotto with Sausage and Parmesan.

Tomorrow, I shall visit a desert with fewer people than the one I have been visiting. The part of the desert I will visit is so essentially barren and desert that it could have served as a set for Tatooine in part of the *Star Wars* series. I'm concerned about the distance to my next campsite, Oxbow Recreation Area, which is more than sixty five miles away. There are no services until Glamis Beach Store, at mile 29. I could plan on stopping at a primitive, no-water campground, Gecko, at 26 miles. Instead, I'm going to see how those first 25 miles to go before I make up my mind.

## 26 October 2019 Brawley to Oxbow Bend BLM campground

I awoke around six. I feel like my efforts to ensure that I could leave quickly once morning came paid off. The only bag missing from my bike was the front pannier that carries only the tent and

sleeping pad. Because everything else was arranged, I was able to leave in under an hour. With practice, I hope to get this down to thirty minutes or less. Hence, my travel started at 7:30.

With some uncertainty due to the added mileage on a long day, I biked over the horrible, rutted roads of Imperial County back to the intersection of ironically-named Best Ave and Main St., at the very middle of the east side of the town. I bought two burritos (breakfast with eggs, ham, and beans; chicken with chipotle) from El Cañon, which had so impressed me during my first visit on my way to The Slabs from El Centro. In the market next door, I bought cup-o-noodle soup ramen, a pound of almonds, Japanese peanuts, chocolate protein cookie, four one-liter cylindrical water containers containing water, and a pound of dates. The dates were said to be locally grown, which clued me into which harvest I have been witnessing in the palms.

With hindsight, I think that buying all this food and water was for the best, and the additional five miles of backtracking was worth it. Without the food and water, my travel across the desert, which is, amongst other things, barren of convenience stores and restaurants, would not have gone as well. Additionally, backtracking to the ACA route put me on roads that appeared better maintained than what I might have otherwise been on.

There was a lot of traffic on Ben Hulse Highway (CA 78), especially trucks hauling OHVs (dune buggies). At first, there was also a wide shoulder. Just out of town, I passed a long line of cars and trucks at stand-still. At their head was a herd of sheep being moved. I stopped for a moment to ask a man I saw there as to what was going on; he turned out to be the proprietor of the ranch.

He said that his were merino crosses, and that it was shearing time. He has 1800 head of cattle. He tried goats before, but found that they didn't like being herded. He hires Peruvian farm hands who have experience.

I continued eastward. Sometimes, the shoulders narrowed uncomfortably. There was an increasing amount of traffic. To my right for most of this journey was a canal with markings on its gates reading "ORITA." I took a photo for Instagram, proclaiming that the irrigation water would arrive "Orita."

A little ways on, a man pulled up opposite me on the canal. This turned out to be just before I reached the end of irrigable land in the valley. We spoke to each other in broken Spanish across the sound of the water in the canal, nearby sprinklers, and the traffic behind me. He wanted to know where I was coming from and going to bike, and my answers left him amazed and incredulous. I wanted to know why a canal would be named "Orita": he informed me that was short for "Oriental." He also told me that the biggest canal of all, the Highline, was just a hundred meters eastward.

When I reached the Eastern Highline which ran roughly north to south, I saw on one side the irrigated rectangles of Imperial Valley agriculture. On the other, I observed the road begin to shift

from its rectilinear habit. Standing on the west bank of the canal and looking southward, my back was to a storage place named "Dunes Edge Storage," whose lot was bounded by the Highline Canal and the highway. To my left, east, across the canal, sand. North of the highway, across the canal from Dunes Edge, there was a for sale sign. "Who would want to buy such a parcel," I asked myself.

I was pleased to be leaving the Imperial Valley. I was at about 156 feet below sea level, according to the indications on my phone. The desert started to look like a desert again. There were ever more cars, motorhomes, and trucks pulling trailers with OHVs. The shoulder was marginal. I listened carefully for vehicles behind me. I scanned behind and in front just so as to expect whether passing traffic would give me room, or if I needed to get off the road. A few of the truck plus trailer-with-OHV units got uncomfortably close.

I was doing fine, though. The miles were going better than I might have expected. The grade was gradual. It was not as hot as I feared. The landscape started to change as I gained elevation, until soon I could see the famous dunes for which I was bound. By the time I arrived at the turnout for Gecko campground, it was clear that all the traffic I had witnessed was for a special event. From a mile or more away, I could see the clusters of motorhomes and RVs. Closer, I could see tents for vendors. On the south side of 78, dune buggies and dirtbikes went back and forth. I was glad that I was feeling strong enough to pass Gecko by, as the scene was noisy and busy.

In the environs of Glamis Beach Store, a full-fledged festival atmosphere predominated. The area was packed with off-road vehicles. There were stages set up, and large vendor tents. From behind the Beach Store itself could be heard the voice of an announcer narrating a race. The Beach Store was thronged with people. I bought a gatorade and a number of postcards. In response to my inquiries, the cashier told me that this weekend was one of the largest festivals of the year, called "RZR RALLY." I sat under the awning of the store, a little out of place in a sea of dune buggy enthusiasts. I ate half of each burrito from El Cañon.

However grateful for the shade I may have felt, I left after an hour. I estimated I had another forty miles to go. I had gone eight miles an hour, average, through the morning. I had this dialogue with myself many times throughout the rest of the day: Will I make it? Am I going fast enough?

The dunes themselves were lovely. Motor vehicles, such as OHVs, are prohibited from the area north of the highway. I took a walking image of myself for the Instagram in which I pretended to be Luke Skywalker, out shopping for drones. I have been told that this was, in fact, the scene in which that part of the saga was filmed.

As I rose in elevation, there was more scrub and the desert returned to a more ordinary look. For several miles, I rode alongside a massive mine, though I don't know what the mine was for. I pushed myself to keep going, despite the heat, knowing that I had a good ways to go. At one

point around 3PM, I did find a tree to sit under for a moment while I ate dates and Japanese peanuts and drank water. Always, I keep in mind the balance between stopping to rest, which improves my morale and performance, and continuing to make it to my destination.

At a little over 1000 feet of elevation, the road started to dip, as if in imitation of a roller-coaster. In my direction, each hill was a bit higher than the first. Near the top of this topography, I was surrounded by these chocolate-colored mountains. I continued with the dips and valleys for some time. Back at the RZR RALLY at Glamis, a CA Highway Patrol officer had told me that I would experience wide shoulders for much of my trip until I came upon some “mountainous terrain.” Upon reaching that terrain, he said, I would then suffer little to no shoulders with curvy roads and poor sight lines. Such was the case. I liked the view, but I kept having to listen for motor vehicles, especially trucks towing OHVs and semi trailers. Until I reached the highest elevation of the day, I was forced by my slowness and the narrow roadway to stop and remove myself from the road many times to make way for motorized traffic.

At about 1100', I continued through the roller coaster hills, but now with the advantage of inertia. I could pedal in the highest gear for the descent and reach midway on the opposing hill without slowing. Gearing down to the second-largest cog on the front, I could surmount the top of the rollercoaster, gear up, and go again. My average speed increased drastically. But I was still concerned whether I would make my destination, or else needed to dry camp along the highway.

My judgment in playing this day's game of “Are We There Yet?” was impeded by the loss of signal with my phone. Wondering if I had reached the peak altitude, I asked Google maps to give me directions to camp. Instead, it crapped out and told me that I should try again later. This forced me to coordinate between the ACA map, Ride With GPS app, and the roadside mile markers. I was only sure to within five miles, give or take, of my estimate. I continued to worry, despite feeling powerful as I sped over hills.

I passed through the Border Patrol checkpoint. The sole officer in sight asked me if I was a US citizen, to which I replied, “Last time I checked.” He seemed not entirely willing to look up my camp on his computer and tell me how many miles it would be. He futzed around, as there was no other person's fourth amendment rights to violate, and came back with an estimate that was ten miles give or take, and thus no use to me.

Not but ten minutes later, I ran into a man with a bicycle piled high. I saw him in the distance. I took a break to collect myself and catch my breath. I was looking to meet my first fellow cross-country tourist. Instead, when I rolled up on him, I found that he was pushing a decrepit, unrideable bike. He was turned red by the sun. It was clear he was pushing this contraption, half-bicycle, half landfill, through the desert. “Is there anything I can do to help you?” I asked. “The Border Patrol gave me water, but I'm hungry,” he said. “Do you have anything?” I gave him the almonds and a number of dates. He made me promise I'd be off the road by sunset. He seemed delirious, as if he had already been melted by the sun.

It was starting to get late by now. It was five, then five thirty. The cycling was feeling like what I had come for. The traffic had eased after an intersection that, according to signage, would lead to I-8; many of the dune buggy aficionados traveling in my direction must have turned there in preference for traveling on the interstate. I felt like I could race up and down the rollercoaster hills for a long time. This effort was like what I had trained for. I was a bit out of breath, but also a bit exhilarated. Every pedal stroke pushed me forward in a pleasant way. But the other racer in the competition was night.

I saw signs indicating Palo Verde was 13 miles away. I remembered that the map mentioned the camp as being seven miles south of Palo Verde. I looked at whatever my mileage was, and told myself that if I hadn't gotten to camp by eight miles later, I'd admit defeat and camp next to the highway.

The intersections with other roads were few, but when I came to them, I stopped to look at the map and narrow my estimate. I only had an estimate to Palo Verde. I didn't bother checking whether my memory of camp being seven miles south of Palo Verde was correct. Eight miles had come and gone. I was about to admit defeat when I saw an irrigation canal, and sprinklers running in a field. A sign in the dimming light said "Do not spray. This field is transitional organic." I figured camp must be ahead, and that I must be getting closer. In any case, camping in someone's field was different than just camping in the desert. I had to continue.

Dark was almost fully upon me. I could see the modest light projected by the dynamo-powered headlamp mounted on the bike. I checked the map one more time. This time, I verified where the map said the camp would be relative to Palo Verde. "3 miles south of Palo Verde, down the road that leads to the river." Well, fuck me.

It was the very tail-end of dusk, then, when I saw a sign for the BLM Oxbow Bend Recreation Area. I turned onto the dirt road, which was horribly rutted. I thought to walk, but when I did, the sharp stinging pain caused by my chamois liners rubbing as I walked against my chafed butt and taint almost immediately provoked me to remount, riding, jostling, to the campground. I picked a campsite, lay on top of the table, and didn't move for a moment. Then I set up a tent and ate the last of the peanuts. I promised myself I'd have a half-day the next day, and stay in a hotel.

In the morning, the sun rose to show the most beautiful view of the Colorado River, running right next to my camp. I opted to stay another day, despite no running water here.

Mileage: 71.

## 27 October 2019 Oxbow Bend Recreation Area

I decided I'd stay for a day at this most beautiful campground. There was no running water, but I had a filter, a Sawyer Squeeze. I bathed in the river. I brought water from the river and washed laundry with Dial soap.

I spent a lot of time avoiding the two women who were the only other obvious occupants of the campsite. I worried about appearing to be a threat. When they went bathing, I did not go bathing. I kept my eyes to myself. At some point, one of the women left so that now only one was left. I did go bathe then, and I introduced myself to this woman, Rachel. It was awkward.

Rachel floated out the cove and into the river. I thought she would float in her pool floats just a few feet down the shore to her campsite, but she continued on. I felt concerned for her wellbeing. I told the camp host. I worried that if she disappeared, and I was the last person to see her, I would somehow be implicated.

Later, Rachel and I had a pleasant conversation. I also spoke with a couple from Vancouver, BC, who told me about their daughter's recent publication of a book about a trip the daughter took via bicycle from BC down to Cabo.

No steady cellphone voice or data. Cellphone died looking for service.

Mileage: 0

## 28 October 2019 Oxbow Bend Recreation Area near Palo Verde to Super 8 in Quartzsite, AZ

I was awoken early by strong gusts of wind beating at my tent. The wind had started as I slept, and had woken me several times. I could secure the tent, but could not keep the sand blowing into the tent, even through the mosquito netting. Around five, I gave up and arose. I estimate that the wind was going at twenty to thirty miles an hour. And it was cold.

I put on as much clothing as I had available: long cotton pants, a fleece, a hat. I went to the structure holding the chemical toilets in order to get out of the wind. I read my book on kindle. When it was light, around 6:30, I packed as quickly as possible. The wind blew my bike over so that the contents of bags scattered, and some of those contents also were blown around. I had to disassemble the tent in a systematic way so that it wouldn't blow away: I left the ground cloth

and tent body staked down while I removed the fly and poles. Then I removed two of four remaining stakes. Finally, I rolled up the tent body and ground cloth while they were held in place by two stakes at the smallest end of the tent.

Despite my early waking, it was 7:30 by the time I left. I watched the sun rise over the most beautiful camp I'd stayed in one last time. I took my bike and panniers to the toilet building for some final arranging. I looked back over the camp to see if I left anything. Then I started out on foot along the rutted gravel road out of the BLM site. I got a little ways when I decided I would ride the bike. But when I mounted the saddle, I found that the chafing in the fold between my anus and my right butt cheek was too much to handle. I thought I would put on a chamois liner.

It was still quite cold out, I believe 57 degrees Fahrenheit. I leaned the bicycle against what appeared to be a pumping station for a canal: gate, stairs leading down to piping, an electric meter and circuitry. I got half naked right there in the open, put on the chamois, and shorts. Then I rode out to the same Hulse highway, CA 87, I've been following. The chamois didn't help the stinging pain from my buttocks, it was cold, and the wind was nonstop.

I had not anticipated it being so cold so soon on my ride. I thought it would be a warm desert. Now, among the irrigated crops along the Colorado River, I rode into the headwind. I counted miles and tenths of miles to get to Ripley, where I hoped to break fast. The terrain was mostly flat, the shoulders were adequate, and the traffic was light. If it weren't for the strong headwind and my tender tush, it would have been perfect riding.

When I revived my cellphone and finally got a little bit of service, I asked for directions to Ripley. I ignored Google's suggestions that I take various dirt or canal roads. I relied more on the ACA map. Three miles and half an hour later, I arrived at the only store in town. I bought coffee, beer nuts, a pan de concha, unsalted cashews, and trail mix. There were no other options, really, unless I wanted a hot dog. I sat at a table outside until my coffee was violently spilled by the wind, whereupon I went inside for another coffee and stayed there in the warmth until I was finished, talking with the counter help about the limited jobs available to people in this town. I also bought a print of an art-map of Imperial county, which the clerk says was made by her sister-in-law. This last item, I intend to send to Christopher, Jennifer Plemons' son.

I went to the Post Office. Despite it being within the stated hours of 9AM to 1PM, no one was there. I dropped off one post card for Marilyn and several envelopes containing bill payments. I then continued back out into the headwind for a number of miles, counting each one and feeling the pain in my rear end. I stopped a number of times on the south side of a tree to avoid, temporarily, the strong wind from the north.

I crossed over I-10 (?) and then got to a new gas station. The wind was dying down, and the sun was warming up. It was about 11, and I'd traveled some 13 miles so far. I bought a gatorade and two cliff bars. I filled my water. I stood outside with my phone connected to the extra socket in the outlet that supported the store's bagged ice freezer. After two days and one night in a

camp without electricity, my batteries were out and my phone kept dying. I waited a few minutes for it to charge, and then continued on a road paralleling the interstate. Soon, this brought me into Blythe.

I considered hotels in Blythe and also Ehrenburg. They looked so burned out and down at the heels. I crossed the river on a Pedestrian walkway that shared the span with the interstate. Immediately afterward, I entered the interstate. By now, there was no crosswind. I was settling into the pain of my chafed rear end. I liked the steady uphill grade. At a rest area, I plugged in my phone, which kept going out, and called ahead to check in on places to stay.

I passed the BLM long-term free camping area at Dome Rock. I almost regretted not camping out, but I felt like I could do better for myself, overall, if I stayed in a hotel tonight and organized myself. I need to get to the Post Office in the morning. I'd also like to get to a place that sells isopropane canisters. I've done laundry. The internet service makes it possible to research where I'll stay tomorrow night. And there will be no packing up a tent.

Also, felt fat and wished I wasn't such a fatass. Mirrors in hotel rooms do that to me. Also, also, took pictures of my ass to make sure nothing was too broken. Just looks like a minor abrasion.

I saw my first saguaro cactus today, proving that not all deserts are the same. This desert, compared to Imperial County, CA, has more rocky outcroppings and tall cacti. The soil is as much rock as it is sand.

Mileage: about 40

## 29 October 2019. Quartzsite, AZ to Salome, AZ

### Note after the fact

This is where my intestinal distress started. I arrived in the RV park in Salome. I chatted up an old, sad man, who gave me government cheese. While he was giving me government cheese, I was suppressing a need to shit, which came out as a shart. It was the first time since I lived in a third-world country that I shat myself.

### The many sorts of desert

I grew up in metropolitan Atlanta, GA. I played in lush green forests of tulip poplar, oak, magnolia, dogwood, and pine. A creek ran through the land on which our house in our streetcar-suburb Decatur stood. As a young child, I was also familiar with the forests of the mountains to the north of Atlanta, the flat pine woodlands of further south in the state, and also the ecosystems of the beach. In summer in these places, everything was verdant and humid. When we visited my paternal grandparents near Cleveland, Ohio, I saw that the flora there along Lake Erie were similar to what we had in Atlanta, allowing some variation for the cold of winter.

In a time before the VCR or the Internet, I could rely on pictures from National Geographic magazines, the children's encyclopedia my parents bought me, various books, and an occasional television show or filmstrip. None of these gave me enough context to understand the great variety of landscapes that cover the earth.

I was told that China was hot and had deserts. I remember thinking that other countries, other than European ones I knew more about, were probably deserts. Mexico was a desert. I pictured these places in my seven-year-old mind as if they were like the pictures of the African Sahara I ran across: barren dunes and perpetually hot weather. I was told that Russia was cold, and I saw lots of pictures of Europe, which looked a lot like home to me.

Over time, I came to know more about other landscapes, and to understand that even poor countries have lush ecosystems. With hindsight, I think that my seven-year-old self was projecting subtle biases Westerners have about the rest of the world. But more importantly, I came to know that not all dry and treeless places are like the Sahara. Even among just the dry places called desert, I see there are different sorts of deserts.

In this trip, particularly, I have witnessed several varieties of desert. The high mountains of San Diego County had rocks, and trees. The main part of Imperial County, where not irrigated, was dusty, hot, dry, and flat in every direction. I saw sand on top of a harder layer of soil. The ground would show where the last ever-so-rare rains had eroded creases in its surface, and the sun had baked those creases in. There were some trees of a species I don't know the name for, and short bushes that I similarly know little about. At the Algodones sand dunes, I did experience a scene that my seven-year-old self would recognize as a desert: loose sand that blew around with no vegetation, and there was no base under the sand except for more sand.

After the dunes, I traveled through the Midway Mountains, chocolate-colored because, I suppose, of the iron in the soil. There was the same scrub and sparse, short trees as in the main of Imperial. After the respite of a day traveling through the land next to the Colorado river, which is mostly irrigated, I have crossed a state line, have climbed to 1500 feet, and now find myself in yet a different variety of desert.

This desert is mostly rocks. There is some soil on the very top in some places, but just as often, there are merely pebbles and boulders. This desert is neither flat like that of the Imperial Valley

nor filled with dunes like youthful my imagination of the Sahel. Jagged mountains and rock domes erupt from the landscape. There are small trees and scrub plants, but also cacti. I saw my first saguaro at 1000' and have seen more of them as I have climbed and traveled eastward.

All of these are ways to be a desert. If I had been raised in California or Arizona, the parched brown landscapes here would be nothing novel. But I'm from Georgia, so I am here to declare that there are many ways to be a desert, and that not all deserts are the same.

## The Obeast Transcontinental Bicycling Championship

About six months ago, in the most the most divisive status I can remember ever having posted on Facebook, I spoke about how much I loathe living in a clinically-obese body. A so-called normal weight for a person of my height is about 160 pounds. I last weighed under 170 when I was a teenager. I weighed 175 in my twenties, after getting really ill in the Dominican Republic during my time as a Peace Corps Volunteer. In my thirties, I bounced around a bit in the range of 180 to 200. And now, for a number of years, I have consistently weighed in at 200 pounds or more. At 5'9, 200 pounds is the dividing line between a body mass index (BMI) in the “overweight” range, and that which is in the “obese” range.

In my divisive Facebook post, I wrote about how unhappy I was that I weigh so much. I explained my loathing of my body, with its man-tits and belly. I expressed how demoralizing it had been to have within the process of the year previous to the post lost down to 195 pounds from 220, only to have the weight creep back on when I was not being vigilant. Moreover, I called myself an “obeast.” “I am an obeast!” I wrote.

Some of my online friends argued that it wasn't so bad because I actually didn't look all that fat. Most of these people were not overweight, and certainly not obese. They hadn't stopped to consider that their particular way of reassuring me gives greater force to the idea that looking fat is a bad thing. Or, put another way, they basically agreed with me that it is awful to be fat, but I'm not all that bad.

A couple friends who are fat as fuck, who each have their own take on whether being so plump is a good idea or should be more socially acceptable, lit into me for having the nerve to even call myself fat. Compared to them, it seems, my fatness didn't even count. Alternatively, if I felt sorry for myself being just over the line into obesity, this cohort of online friends believed it must show that I think badly of *them* and *their body size*. “If you don't like how fat you are,” they seemed to say, “you must *really* hate *us*.”

The angriest online connections were bothered that I called myself “an Obeast.” In their defense, “obeast” is one of a number of petty insults that are often associated with a vile online community called Fat People Hate, which I'll call FPH, for short. It's one of a line of novel FPH

identifiers that includes “hamplanet,” “junior fat,” and “fat scout.” It seems that these most angiest of friends would not give me leave to use a novel and particularly apt insult against myself if the insult originated with a group that has stalked, doxxed, and harassed fat people. I can understand their position even without agreeing. I wish to reserve the right to insult myself with the sharpest, newest, and most cutting-edge insults, and will not be deterred from doing so merely because someone else doesn’t like me being just that mean to me.

In any case, I do hate my belly and my man-tits. I acknowledge that there are two sides to this. On the one hand, I have the belly and man-tits-- moobs, if you will-- that I have. On the other hand, there is how I feel about being a fat fuck. Obviously, it would be fine to look as I do and not care, or to effectively change my appearance to something I would like. Both are fine strategies. Nonetheless, a mirror in the hotel I stayed in last night, along with an uncomfortably snug waistline in the mountain biking shorts I’m wearing have reminded me that I loathe myself for being fat.

I hope this tour puts some of the self-loathing away, if even temporarily. Today, regardless of the righteous online indignation of my friends, I declare that I am the Obeast. This Obeast hauled itself from San Diego all the way across California. This Obeast climbed thousands of feet on a bicycle whose frame was every bit as overburdened by luggage as the Obeast’s own skeleton is overburdened by the Obeast’s layers of human tallow. I will arrive at the end of my tour, and feel congratulatory enough towards myself that I will come to a certain acceptance of me, a fatass, who just happens to be a fatass who can bike across the country.

I will order a special trophy from a trophy-engraving business. At the top, I will have a statue of a fat man. I will borrow a sumo wrestling figurine for this purpose, or have a custom one designed. The plate on the trophy will read “KARL DANIEL KAPPUS/1st Transcontinental Obeast Bicycling Champion.” Then I will take a picture of me, standing in the Atlantic ocean, just to irritate the haters.

Dear Christopher,

Your mother asked me to write you postcards as I travel. She plans to give you geography lessons to enrich what they already have taught you in elementary school. I have written these. In addition to the history and geography of San Diego, the Imperial Valley, the Algodones Sand Dunes, the Colorado River, and this Arizona desert, I’ve been thinking a lot about a topic inspired by what I see around me. I will not put it on a postcard, but I wish I could tell you about it anyway.

Parents and adults tell you that when you grow up, you can be whatever you like. “If you want to be an astronaut,” someone might tell you, “you should dream of it and work hard. There are no limits.” Everyone is told such things when they are young. For a young person, any young

person, it may be true: the young person may become just what the young person dreams of becoming. Only time will tell.

Some young people do grow up to do what they dreamed of. Even adults, if they are youthful, have the potential to change into something more in line with what they believe they might desire. I have a friend who decided at age 30 to train as a nurse. She was successful and is happy about her career now. She travels on contract; today, we talked online about how pleased she is to be in California right now.

My friend Sarah wanted especially to be married to a wonderful man and to raise a family with him. Her husband Chris is smart, sweet, and kind. I watched them fall in love over the course of college parties and joy rides in Chris' vintage red Mustang. I've been with them as they worked hard to develop careers, her in teaching Montessori and him as a city planner. They started out in dingy scarcely-furnished apartments with roommates when they graduated college, and have now been through a series of successively more pleasant living arrangements that have led them to own a fine four bedroom, two bath house in a sought-after suburb of Asheville, NC. Chris and Sarah have three children. The eldest, Maddie, looks a lot like how I remember Sarah having been when we were both teenagers. I think Sarah got what she wanted.

The key to understanding adults when we say that you can grow up to be whatever you want to be must be based on a careful reading of the modal verbs "can" and "may." We say "can," but we mean "may" or even "might." We should say, "If you want to become an astronaut, you very certainly might! You should dream it and work hard. There may not be any limits." Instead, we use "can" out of a lack of precision.

We hedge our bets. Telling you that you may become anything you might wish as long as you dream and work hard is a proposition with zero risk for us. No one is capable of knowing what will happen to you. If you dream of something and work hard towards it, you may, in fact, realize your dream. In that case, we who now advise you to dream and work hard will then appear vindicated. You will congratulate us for the marvelous advice we gave you as a child.

On the other hand, since we cannot know what will happen to you, there is no risk in saying that, in this example, you may become an astronaut. We don't know yet if your vision is good enough, or if you will master calculus. We don't know if you will be selected by an organization that sends people to space to be on a space crew. If you do not become an astronaut, we will tell you that you didn't dream hard enough or work hard enough, and you will not be able to impeach our claim about what would have happened if you had worked harder or believed in yourself more. Besides, we might say, when we advised you that you *could* become an astronaut, we had no definitive knowledge of the future, and really, in the strictest use of language, should have said you *might*.

Again, we are all hedging our bets.

We don't know the future. Scotty, here in the campground in his SUV, which tows a small teardrop camper, has just sold his cabin in Montana, his primary residence of many years. He has no family to speak of. He had a stroke a few years ago, which makes it hard to chat up new friends. He's long-ago retired, and lives off of a fixed income that consists mostly of social security.

Scotty lives here in this out-of-the-way camp right now because it's inexpensive and not so cold as back home. Even when he owned the cabin in Montana, he came down here some winters. Once here, he moves camp from time to time from RV park to RV park. He tells me that thirty years ago, when he was 42, he took a cross-country bike trip just as I am doing now. It seemed important to him that I accept his gift of individually-wrapped American processed cheese food, Kraft brand. He says he has plenty, as he just went to the food bank distribution today.

Arthur jumped out of planes in the Marines. He explains that he trained at Fort Benning at Army Airborne school, even though he was a Marine. He was proud enough of his training that he had the airborne logo, the parachute with wings, tattooed across his chest. He deployed to Iraq. His back, hips, and joints hurt all the time, even though he's young, because he landed one too many hard jumps out of airplanes. He hopes that the Veteran's Administration will increase the benefits he receives, as the meager \$300 he gets in disability benefits is the only stable income he receives. He continues to be a leader in his community, which is a squatter's camp. He helps run the so-called library, a big shack with piles and piles of old books and a bar. Some of what people pay for bottled water, beer, and soft drinks lets him have a beer, too, and take his mind off his pain.

Gina (not her real name) worked in food service, and later retail. She landed a job at a comic book and gaming store back in North Carolina. She started a relationship with a man I'll call Stabby McStabperson. Eight years on in that relationship, things weren't going well, and she decided to leave Mr. McStabperson. She shortly thereafter took up with John, also not a real name. Mr. McStabperson came around and stabbed both John and Gina multiple times with a large knife, leaving both of them in critical condition. He then went to a secluded place to try and kill himself. He didn't succeed.

John and Gina knew Mr. McStabperson and had thought of him as a friend. They assumed their stabby buddy was not really essentially violent, but rather had suffered from a temporary psychological problem. When there was a trial, they testified to his character, and begged for leniency for their erstwhile friend, with the result that he was only given two years of confinement. Much to their chagrin, their assailant contacted them repeatedly from jail to let them know that he planned to come back and complete his failed attempt to kill them.

John and Gina disappeared with a trailer to a squatter's camp in the middle of the desert. It's hot in the summer, but it's better than being stabbed.

There are so many of these people all across Imperial, Riverside, Maricopa, and La Paz counties. They have come here with an RV or a trailer, and have set up shop for the winter. This is the best place for them as old or sick or poor. Imperial County, in particular, is one of the country's poorest counties per capita.

Old, alone, broken down, victimized, poor: if any of these are things you want to become, and you dream it, you certainly might become one of them. In fact, you might become one of these things even if you don't desire it, dream of it, or work towards it. And that is the sad fact that no adult will likely ever want to tell you, the fact that I am writing about here in my journal instead of putting on a postcard.

Good luck, kid!

Dan

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Only 40 miles or so today because I lounged and procrastinated in Quartzsite. There were many interesting stories.

Soiled my pants and exposed myself to oncoming traffic when I had a bout with the runs. I stopped along the highway. I went down away from the roadway, but there was no vegetation cover or anything else to block drivers from seeing me. I dropped my shorts, and came into a squat. As I came into a squat, I simultaneously fell backwards and spurted liquid shit behind me. In order to avoid putting my shorts in the feces, I had to do a backbend, showing the passerby in all glory my cock and balls. After I moved from this delicate position, I found that I had succeeded inasmuch as there was only a very small bit of shit on my right shoe.

I almost immediately had to take a runny shit again. This time, I walked a little further away, down into the wash, and sat on a rock. The liquid crap flowed, as it should, down the other side of the rock. I am carrying a spade and some toilet paper so I might dig a hole, squat over it, wipe my ass, and bury toilet paper along with shit in the hole. But fuck it. I'm not backcountry camping. This is hardly some pristine wilderness I'm messing with.

## Wednesday: Quartzsite to Wickenburg

Not very far, but I have packages waiting at the post office. Stayed with Bev at her trailer/RV park. Her husband died in August. She has a book of all the cyclists who have come through. She was profusely solicitous of my needs. Had to bike back uphill to the post office to get general delivery, REI packages, maildrop. Pad sprung a leak. Really f'cking cold. Argument between me and the cover of Watchtower magazine:  
Is this life all there is? Me: You say "all" as if life is a small and unimportant thing. Life is great, even if there is just one. Other RV resident later added "Amen" under my words.

## Thursday: Wickenburg to Tempe

69 miles, Thursday

Well, this was a bitch. I started out late because of the dance with the post office. I was getting sicker. I navigated the last twenty miles or so in the dark along the canals, not all of which were paved. It was ridiculously cold compared to the day. At night, cold, without a car, it's hard to tell oneself apart from the truly desperate vagrants. Theme: what is the difference between being a bike tourist by choice and being a bum or homeless person?

Hosts Ryan Guzy and Jenn Guzy were gone in Joshua Tree, but I had the house to myself for three nights and two very-much-needed days. I was sick all day Friday, but still managed to get the bike to The bicycle cellar and returns to REI. Otherwise slept all day and ate little. Ordered Pho delivery. Felt way better Saturday. Scaled A Hill, aka Tempe Butte. Still ordered Pho delivery. Digestive system appears to be in relatively okay working order now.

Decided that the ACA route is not a good match for my goals between here and about Silver Spring. My understanding is that the mapped route originally went on US60 out of Phoenix metro. Then, some riders didn't like a short set of tunnels near Superior that have no shoulders. The ACA planners then put the route up through Tonto National Forest, as if to complete a triangle with the original route. As a result, the current route gains almost 5k (???) elevation coming out of Phoenix, and takes a lot of miles to go only a very short distance eastward.

Others have commented that the Southern Tier route is a bit of an odd mix. Of course, the route must go from coast to coast. But its authors have not chosen the most brutally efficient way to express the transcontinental intent of their route. Nor have they been mostly efficient while taking care about road safety conditions that impact cyclists, like shoulders, bicycle lanes, motor vehicle traffic volumes, or quality of maintenance. Instead, they have balanced these first two requirements, that the route cross the continent from Pacific to Atlantic efficiently and safety, with an understandable desire to show interesting places and themes along the way.

The result is that the Southern Tier doesn't do any of these things-- efficiency, safety, showing the sights-- all the time. The sights might be better served, in some ways, by individual tours, such as the Western Parks loop or Bryce Canyon, or even a tour of how irrigation has made the current way of life in the southwest possible. In fact, the authors compromise, here focusing on sight-seeing, there focusing on getting the rider further eastward more quickly, and down the road a bit, avoiding some banal but legitimately scary road feature, like the aforementioned tunnels on 60.

After reviewing everything, I've decided I will part from the ACA route. First, I'll go to Tucson, where I'll see a really great buddy from high school who lives there. Then, I'll make my way to Lordsburg, NM, which is more or less the next point on the map where I had any specific interest.

Writing this on 11/3/2019, a Sunday, at a coffee shop. I am already behind because I want to be at a KOA in Pichaco, 60+ miles away and it's afternoon. Dark comes at 5:30ish. Meh. I am a nightowl.

## 3 November 2019 Tempe to Picacho KOA

The getting up late and starting out late shit has to end. Riding in the dark, or being concerned it may become dark, takes a perfectly pleasant situation and makes it into utter shyte. I biked over very level ground in typical southwest landscapes for eight hours and only enjoyed six of it. The last two were me freaking out that I'd never get to camp or that I'd get hit by a car; moreover, without being able to see the landscape, I failed to appreciate it.

I'm trying to summon my best inner Mr. Rogers to reassure me that I'm fine and that I love myself just how I am, even when I don't make the best choice. At least I'm here now, right? And tomorrow is, of course, another day.

If I were less concerned about seeming like the wrong sort of person, I would have camped out on the unused lots behind the truck stop nearby. It would have technically been trespassing, or maybe vagrancy. But a shower at the truck stop is only \$10. That's pretty much the best part of what I'm getting out of the \$40 KOA tent site. It's not gorgeous or anything. I want to work on being more willing to transgress this norm and take the risk.

## 4 November 2019, Picacho to Tucson (Kevin Matthews' house)

about 50 miles

I departed slowly from the KOA. I met one half of the married couple that bought the place recently, though I took no notice of her name. We struck up a conversation when she saw I was from Tennessee, which is so much closer to her native Dothan, Alabama. We code switched into a more Southern way of speaking. She said her husband had until lately been in the Army as a warrant officer who flew helicopters and trained new pilots.

This helicopter pilot left service before he reached retirement. The two of them decided they would buy a business. The man's extended family owned a storage facility for RVs. Being familiar with the snowbird industry, as it were, made them feel confident they would do well with either a storage facility or a campground. The woman indicated that the upcoming winter season would be their first. I said, "You're just getting started then!" She commented, looking temporarily perplexed or unhappy "Yes, we're in here doing the bes..." and I interjected "You're here hustling to make the magic happen!" She smiled and agreed with my heartfelt optimism. I congratulated her on her business and moved on.

Most of the day was spent on pleasantly-unused, but well-maintained highway frontage roads. I paralleled I-10 and double tracks of the Union Pacific (originally Southern Pacific). In Marana, I switched from the lovely century route that Ryan Guzy provided to recommendations from Google maps. I was directed to a bicycle path that is part of a massive bicycle and recreation trails facility called "The Loop." This facility connects many of the county's parklands, and is mostly sited along the Santa Cruz River or its tributaries. It is projected to have 131 miles of paved trail by the time it is completely finished. As is, more than 100 miles of interconnected trails have been constructed.

[https://tucson.com/news/local/tucson-s-loop-started-out-as-a-flood-control-measure/article\\_298fffd0-d0af-5d6c-8f8f-73a5b237e653.html##targetText=Technically%20the%20Loop's%20construction%20began.%20walkers%20joggers%20and%20equestrians.](https://tucson.com/news/local/tucson-s-loop-started-out-as-a-flood-control-measure/article_298fffd0-d0af-5d6c-8f8f-73a5b237e653.html##targetText=Technically%20the%20Loop's%20construction%20began.%20walkers%20joggers%20and%20equestrians.)

The riverine smell of the path was unlike many other places I have recently visited. It took me aback to see so many trees. The Sonoran desert is a lush desert, and ever so much more lush next to the river.

I met two men on the bikeway, visiting Canadians. One told me of his cross-country trip from BC to Oxford, MS, aborted because of "personal reasons." He recommended I travel south to Bisbee and Douglas, citing the natural beauty and the historical significance of these places.

I've now figured out that I must push eastward quickly instead. I will sacrifice tourism to the need to make headway towards Florida. I'm already into January, easily, for my trip's end. I hope that two or three hard days along or on I-10 will bring me to Lordsburg, NM to rejoin the ACA route.

In the evening, went out with Kevin, Kristin, and L(?). We started on his roof, proceeded to a pizzeria. It was a delicious deep-dish Chicago pie, my portion of which I consumed with great glee. We went out later to a movie at The Loft. The Loft hosts a film series, Mondo Mondays, selected entirely from movies that are simply horrible. In this case, we saw Laserman, a slightly indescribable late-1970s alien horror film that caused me to giggle. The audience in Mondo Mondays is invited to comment aloud on the film in a way reminiscent of Rocky Horror Picture Show or MST3K.

Slept at Kevin's, in his spare room, full of LPs and lapidary equipment. He has worked as a high school chemistry teacher for twenty years now. It is funny to think of us then, in high school, now that we are old.

Tuesday — Day off in Tucson; fixed phone, fixed bike light, climbed sentinel peak, drank with Kevin. Discussion about his nephew's biological father having been busted for child porn. Interested in transportation to Tucson. Long visit to AZ historical museum next to U of A.

Wednesday--Started out sleeting and raining, which confounded my expectations for the desert. Very slow start to the day. Got to a KOA at Benson, about 40 miles riding. Would have liked to have to have visited the mini time machine museum, full of miniatures, but felt pressed to get on down the road. <https://theminitimemachine.org/> Instead,took a big second breakfast that included a burrito qualitatively different than a socal burrito, also coffee and a cheese/ham/egg croissant. Most of the day was on the freeway; surprisingly pleasant despite being five feet from certain death. Last descent of the day into Benson was particularly gorgeous.

Thursday— Day started with packing to go. Instead, a woman, a Canadian,whose name I don't recall, identified herself as having toured on both the Southern Tier and the Transam. We chatted, and then she pointed out that I had a flat.

I pulled the tube, and patched it effectively. But upon mounting tube and tire, I knew I had made a pinch flat. Then I did about the same with the spare tire I had. I felt anger, shame, and embarrassment that I cannot even change my own tire. This is such a basic skill. A man named David volunteered to drive me to a bike store in Sierra Vista. They didn't have the right size of tube, nor did they have the patience to teach right then. They jerry-rigged everything using the wrong tube, as best they could, and filled it with slime. It is lumpy and uneven. I made calls to the bike shop in Silver City, NM, about three or four day's riding off; Martin agreed he would coach me.

David, who drove me, spent 20+ years working for a fencing concern with locations in Olympia,

WA and Fairbanks, AK. He took early retirement because of some health issues. He will stay with his wife for the winter season in the Benson KOA.

In the evening, looked around town for signs of history. I visited a woman who has reopened a storefront, formerly a mercantile store, as an antiques and candy store. She says she is trying to renovate a former railroad hotel that is on the National Register, but is being hampered by city regulations. (says that a licensed contractor is needed, but no licensed contractor will agree to do the work.) (253 Third St, Benson; owner's phone number, per sign in the yard 520 631 5507) I visited the former hotel, which looks promising, but is in shambles. A woman in the store at the same time was the first person I've seen to openly carry a firearm; I thought she was a security guard. She had a pistol on her belt in a holster. She talked at great lengths about laws that allow or prohibit the open carry of firearms.

I gave an Amtrak representative some grief over the phone. It took ten minutes to speak to her, as I had to pursue the information I was looking for through the various inane voice prompts. But neither their website nor the voice prompts could tell me a simple bit of information: how many times a week does a passenger train pass through Benson? After insisting that she needed to know where I would like to travel to in order to tell me this information, the representative did relent. She said that there were eastbound trains on three days, westbound trains on three days, and two days, Wednesday and Friday, if I recall, with no trains at all. I asked her to tell me on which day or days there are scheduled both eastbound and westbound trains. The line went quiet, and she spoke no more. My repeated queries of "Are you still there?" were met with silence. While the call had not been disconnected, I understood that she had ended the call out of pique. My ongoing sadness for the state of passenger rail in my country was lessened neither by the service I was provided nor the information that the train did not come on a regular and predictable schedule to this town that once prospered especially because of rail transportation.

Tomorrow, I hope to make many miles. It is some 117 miles to Lordsburg on I-10. Google maps will not have me go all the way on the interstate, but rather puts me on some odd packed sand roads starting just before the NM border. I take this as a sign that NM doesn't explicitly allow bicyclists on the interstate shoulders. The google route is equally untenable, regardless of NM laws. Tomorrow, however, I just hope to get near to Bowie, sixty miles from here, early enough to find a campsite, despite no services really showing up on the map. This is going to be a challenge.

## Friday, November 8, 2019. Benson, AZ to Bowie, AZ

About 51 miles.

I got up before 6. I had taken care to have left as little of my camp unpacked as possible. I slept in the clothes I would leave in. This meant I only had to pack up the tent, sleeping bag, air pillow, and air mattress. I biked back into downtown to the Horseshoe Cafe, arriving around seven. I ordered coffee, two eggs scrambled with *chorizo*, homemade salsa, and hash browns.

To the left of where I sat was a full bar. I inquired as to whether there were any hours in this jurisdiction in which a person mayn't buy liquor by the glass. My server said no, and that bloody mary cocktails were, in fact, popular even at this early hour. If I am not mistaken, one may not purchase a drink in my more-conservative state until at least ten in the morning. I was somewhat amazed to think that I could order a whiskey on the rocks right then, even being, as I am, fairly temperate.

I sat in the Horseshoe for an hour while I waited for the sun to warm the air. I have two gloves, but they are both right-handed, and, in any case, they were somewhere far down in my bags. I had experienced great discomfort in my fingers even in the mere two miles from camp to the restaurant. I ate and consumed coffee as much to be out of the cold as I did out of any hunger. My hunger was lessened by the day off, and the many things I had eaten on that day off, such as a whole jar of macadamia nuts. I truly am an Obeast.

I called the NM transportation department. The central office referred me to the "District One" office. Someone in that office called me back. She confirmed that it is legal to ride the expressway to Lordsburg, but that the shoulders are narrow. She specified that there is a fifteen-foot "buffer zone" from the shoulder to the edge of the roadway, but that this is made of crushed pavement not completely suitable for riding. She didn't seem to believe that US70 from Safford was much better. She did, however, warn me that dust storms along I-10 are a common impediment to forward progress.

I-10 was fine. I took my first break in a rest area called "Texas Canyon." At about 4500 feet, and 100 miles from the NM border, the scenery had started to change. There were grasses, broadleaf trees, and flowers in a color other than yellow. I had seen little of any of this since Imperial County. There were also these fascinating rock formations that I have few words to describe. My camera took that moment to shit out, so I don't have a picture either. I think the view, however, is one of my favorites so far.

Traffic was light on this road for an Interstate. The shoulders were pleasant. I did get my first catcalled harassment. A man leaned out from the passenger window of a white mustang sports sedan to shout "HEY! GET OUT OF THE ROAD!" It was odd that the mustang was traveling in the far lane from me. No matter what a person on a bicycle does, there will always be at least one person in a car ready to yell nonsense at him or her.

A warmshowers host from Silver City texted me to say he would host me. He also confirmed what I thought, based on his experience, that going up 191 to Safford was not a better idea than chancing the NM I-10 shoulders. That is why I did not go north to Safford, but continued to Bowie.

Otherwise, visited a museum in Wilcox. Am camped in an RV park in Bowie. I need to go to bed now.

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I stayed in an RV park attached to a business, Rafter G's beef jerky. Kathy Klump at the museum in Wilcox had said, "Oh, Bowie? They are going to be very happy to have you." I asked the owner of the RV park, beef jerky stand, and restaurant, "Is there some sort of rivalry?" He smiled and said, "We are a little smaller than them." The nearby cashier chimed in, "Don't we only have 300 people." "Three hundred, right," said the entrepreneur, "and Wilcox has two thousand."

When asked why he started a beef jerky stand, RV, and restaurant, the man said he saw that there was a highway, and thought it might be a good idea.

In the Main Street Market, the cashier replies when asked about where people work "here, or in the pecan orchards." Indeed, there were many pecan orchards in addition to the rangelands. Hence, the Rafter G restaurant offered fresh pecan pie.

## 9 November 2019 Bowie, AZ to Lordsburg, NM (Lordsburg KOA)

*approximately 50 miles, net elevation gain about 486'*

This terrain was more in line with what I had in mind when I thought about touring. The pavement was mostly smooth. The grades were gradual, given that the standard for the interstate system as a whole is six percent or less. Despite the instant death constantly offered by motorized traffic four feet away from me, the views of the mountains and valley sinks were ideal.

In San Simon, I took the business loop away from the interstate. I visited the so-called Main Street Market, which appeared to be the largest grocer and hardware store for many miles. They sold everything one might want to eat. The selection of sundries in this town that the census said was populated by only 165 people solidified my recent thought that I should no longer mail packages of food to myself. I am considering mailing all the food along with the

cooking kit to Del Rio, TX so that I can see if the weight savings help me move faster and more joyously across my route.

I stopped at a disused weigh station just past San Simon. It was a pleasant break from a constant headwind I had been experiencing. I did my physical therapy stretches, snacked on the green chili jerk from Rafter G, and read some of *Catfish and Mandala*, a novel about a Vietnam-American traveling the world on a bike that I'm about one quarter into. I spent a quarter hour or half an hour idly in this way.

Since Tucson, there has been a basin with a town or several towns, followed by a climb and descent into a basin. The landscape changes in a nuanced way with each climb and descent. After the weigh station, I ascended a grade to a rest area, the last one in Arizona. Several other rest areas in this state have been located similarly in the rocky terrain between the otherwise more salable flatlands.

In 1976, the AZ Department of Transportation dedicated the last eastbound I-10 rest area to Percy Jones, Jr., an engineer born in 1888 and living at the time of the dedication. They have not yet added a date of death to the dedication plaque, meaning that Mr. Jones' achievements in engineering have been surpassed by his attainment, at 121 years old, of immortality. It may not be Mr. Jones' fault that I could not find an electrical outlet to charge my phone, which was starting to die, itself.

Half a mile eastward from the rest area, at approximately 4050', I entered New Mexico. "Arizona, te domine!" I shouted aloud. I took a picture of the "Welcome to New Mexico" sign. Descending on the other side, I came to a long flat that differed from the previous ones in that there was water in the basins and washes. Additionally, in contrast to much of my travel through what is called desert up to this point, there was a cover of clouds. The sweat that poured down my face indicated a humidity I have not recently experienced.

Though I got off to a good start, I was anxious and frustrated by day's end. At Rafter G's RV park, there was not a place to plug in my batteries or recharge my phone. My phone kept dying and my first backup battery was not charged. The hub dynamo only charges the phone or battery if I'm consistently traveling at ten miles an hour or more. If I descend, the phone may come alive ever so briefly, only to descend into electronic coma when the terrain changes. Meanwhile, I discovered that I had left my second backup battery at some prior stop. I counted the miles using the highway mileposts, and cursed not knowing how late it might be before I arrived.

I did not know if there was a significant climb between the state line and before reaching Lordsburg. Google maps on my phone does not show elevation profiles for driving directions, and would not route me on the highway into New Mexico via bicycle directions. Instead, it wanted me to take sand tracks, one actually labeled "Old Butterfield Stage," out of San Simon.

As a result, I did not have a constant estimate of my forward progress against elevation gain and headwind.

I posted on Facebook to see if someone else might look for the elevation at the state line and the highest elevation between Lordsburg, at 4249'. It was only the next day that I saw a friend, James, had relied on USGS topographical maps to find an answer. James wrote that "between the state line and Lordsburg, [one] bounces up and down between [the elevation at the state line] and 4,350', running along the shoulders of mesas." Despite not having the specific figures, my tired body could tell that I was ascending and descending instead of my preferred straight descent or level ride.

When I did get to the sign outside of town that said the next three exits were for Lordsburg, it was past sunset, and dark was falling quickly. I had seen billboards for Kranberry Family Restaurant which said that RVs and trucks could park on their lot. I called the restaurant to find out if I might camp there. A manager said that I might be able to, but there was no water or electricity. I decided I'd dine there anyway. I left the highway at the first exit and biked two miles through town, noting many vacant lots and possible stealth camping spots, including ones near the \$10 showers at the truck stop. I cursed myself for not having a better plan for my day.

In the darkness, going the opposite way through town, I saw a man on a bike with full panniers like mine. I shouted out "hey," but did not stop or chase him down. Aside from the delirious man in the Midway Mountains who was pushing a nonservicable bicycle, this man was the first bicycle tourist I'd seen.

In the restaurant, I was seated in a booth next to an electrical outlet. I charged my phone. I began to look for a hotel, a warm, clean room with electricity, hot water, and proximity to laundry facilities being a possible balm for my frustration even at a cost to my budget.

I was grateful for all-you-can-eat soup and salad bar. Even though it was merely the standard iceberg lettuce mix sold bagged by foodservice supply companies, it was a fresh taste different than jerky or convenience store junk food. Meanwhile, a woman came into the restaurant and introduced herself as Emma. She had seen my bicycle out front, and identified me in the restaurant as its likely owner.

Emma explained that she, too, was a bicycle traveler. She had started in Contra Costa County, east of San Francisco, proceeded down the central valley, and followed the same path as I had since Slab City. She found the similarities of our route to be uncanny, and was impressed by the coincidence by which she had sat at the same booth, charging her phone, just an hour earlier. Emma had settled into the KOA nearby, and was on her way to the Circle K across the street from the restaurant when she spied my bike.

In celebration of meeting my first person who is a bicycle tourer in a style that is similar to mine, I accepted her offer to share a site in the KOA. ( Note that my encounter with her was the

second encounter in the evening with a bicycle tourist, but the other guy I'd just called out to across the street in the dark)

I paid the extra \$3 for electric. Otherwise, my lodging was free to me. I washed clothes, I took a shower, and attempted to charge my electronic devices.

Emma: West Point graduate, Army helicopter pilot, mid-40s, current reservist. Most recently worked as a financial advisor and then as a self-employed day trader. Headed towards family in the middle of Texas. Is not following the ACA map, but rather is focused on efficient, direct routes. Uses a fully-suspended mountain bike with rear panniers. Wears a large internal-frame backpack.

Emma's shit weighed a lot less. She had given up on a sleeping pad. She carried no food. Seeing her do it her way reminded me that there is not a right way to do it, and deepened my conviction that carrying a bunch of food and heavy food-preparation equipment may be the wrong way for me.

## 10 November 2019 Lordsburg, NM to Silver City

The only thing open at 7AM on a Sunday in Lordsburg was the McDonalds. Emma and I ordered breakfast. The night before, I unwisely attempted to trim my toenails by chewing them with my mouth. I have used this dubious practice for years, but Saturday night, I injured my top right incisor. This is the same tooth that was drilled and filled when I was primary-school-aged after I had fallen on my face from the top bunk at a church sleepover weekend hosted at a summer camp. It felt as if the toenail had ended up lodged in the interstices between gum and tooth, but since the tooth itself also would move, I suspect I may have broken the tooth.

I tore my shitty McDonald's burritos in pieces in order to gingerly stuff my face. I sat in McDonalds for an hour. Emma excused herself, as she would be continuing on the interstate highway while I departed northward. I discarded most of the food in my bags, knowing that I have a food-drop package waiting in Silver City. (I also left a copy of the book, "A Southwestern City," that I had bought at the museum in Willcox. I can order it via interlibrary loan someday, or ask the museum to forward me a copy.)

I stopped in at Dollar General, which opened at 7. I bought a tuna fish with crackers kit and mixed nuts for snacks. I then started out northward. At first, I made good progress. I passed a heterosexual couple with full panniers, the male member of which I suspected of being the man I'd passed the night before. My conversation with Emma had fully sated me, so I preferred to fly by at ten miles an hour instead of joining them in their break. They did not pass me later on, which leads me to believe they may have continued west on US70 when I turned east on NM90.

As on the day before, my journey started well, but became increasingly stressful due to weariness and equipment failure as the day progressed. After about eight miles, the climb to the Continental Divide began. At nine miles, I stopped at the gate to a ranch for a break. I read the novel I'm working on, and gingerly brushed my teeth.

I noted that my effort at charging my battery had not been successful. It had been plugged in, but had not charged. Google maps continued its unfortunate trend of giving bicycle directions along sandy mountain backroads when the paved road would better serve; the other app I use, Ride With GPS, appeared to follow suit.

Nonetheless, I noted that my journey of 42 miles was well underway. I did not fret.

At ten miles, I encountered a CDT thru hiker walking towards Lordsburg. I asked him if he would stop and talk for a moment, and he begrudgingly obliged. He seemed uninterested. He confirmed he was traveling southbound, and that the snow would make a northbound hike at this late date in the year impractical. He did not accept my offer to take freeze-dried meals, and he did not laugh at my offer of "special prosthetic legs developed by the VA for thru hikers to use on days on which they feel demotivated." I told him that the cheapest hotels in town were the I-10 and the Budget Hotel, advice for which he thanked me. He pointed out that there were antelope bounding across the street, my first sighting in the wild of such an animal, ever.

One mile later, I encountered two other hikers. The first, a man, was excited at my announcement that he had about ten miles into town and his fellow hiker was about a mile ahead. The second, a woman, was wearing earbuds, but returned my greetings. Because of my experience with the first hiker, I did not offer these two hikers food or jokes.

The hikers were all in their twenties, from my estimation. I thought about a woman, Sara Boehm, I'd met in 2009. We were working at an environmental education center for children in Eatonton, GA. I was fired soon after I started because I was not very good at teaching, but also because I clashed with the other workers about certain social issues of importance to me.

I had chosen to work at the environmental education center because I believed that environmental educators were necessarily Left environmentalists like me. Instead, I found these environmental educators were the wrong sort of outdoorspeople, the ones who like four-wheeling, camo, drinking cheap beer, and telling faggot jokes. They found me condescending. One even told me to "go back North where you came from with your funny beard and telling us what to do."

Sara had just finished her thru-hike of the AT, during which she had met her partner. We were in our early 20s. Sara was kind to me, much in contrast to some of the other staffers. She glowed with health. I found her exceptionally attractive and enjoyable to talk to. The other workers whom I deemed to be the correct sorts of outdoorspeople left or were fired until it was just Sara.

The end of my time at Rock Eagle 4-H in Eatonton, GA came about because of complaints from the schoolteachers who brought their classes to us. But I did not help the situation when I responded to faggot jokes with breeder jokes, or pushed the administrators at this center, which was received grants from petroleum companies, to include in my lessons information about human-caused climate change. I suspect that the straw that broke the camel's back occurred when I gave the wrong reply to a sixth-grade girl who asked me, "Mr. Kappus, do you have a girlfriend?" I was reprimanded for saying "I don't know how you know whether I would have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, but I don't feel comfortable discussing this with you." I was instructed that the correct answer was "Yes; her name is Sue."

In any case, seeing the three hikers, one unsocial man about fifteen minutes ahead of a man and a woman, all about the same age, reminded me of Sara, who glowed with health and was so in love with her partner whom she met on the AT. I wondered if any of them had fucked each other. I had pornographic thoughts about these young people, gloriously fucking in the wilderness. I thought about the woman on top of the second man. I thought about the risks a heterosexual woman would face in being sexual with a man on the trail. Prurience aside, I wondered what sort of social connections or conflicts these three shared after thousands of miles of foot travel.

Continuing ever upwards, I was fine until about the time I reached the continental divide in the early afternoon. The scenery in the Gila National Forest was exceptional. I was glad to be away from the noise of the interstate. However, once I achieved the heights of my journey, I was unhappy to lose and regain elevation over and over. There is only a net difference of some 1600' between Lordsburg and Silver City, but I lost and gained another 1000'. My progress was slow. My joy at being away from the interstate was tempered by the severe grades, especially the grade around the Tyrone mine after I left the National Forest.

After the particularly severe climb next to the copper mine, I took a break at the Tyrone post office. According to Wikipedia, this instance of Tyrone was developed in about 1969, when the Phelps Dodge Corporation destroyed the original town of Tyrone to extract copper from the ground under its foundations. The original Tyrone, again, according to Wikipedia, was an elaborately planned company town built in 1915. I sat in the lobby of the new Tyrone post office, reading a book, hoping my phone would charge and that no one would mind my vagrancy enough to call the cops.

It was hard for me to goad myself into the last five miles of my journey. These included another severe climb out of new Tyrone. It did help that I had a warmshowers host, Greg, waiting for me. Beer was consumed. I ate a shitton of cous cous with reconstituted chicken ratatouille. I slept.

Lodging notes: Greg is a traveler with no particular income. He is helping his friend, a frame builder name Cjell Mone (Shell Money) with the business. They occupy the old post office. They pay rent of \$250 a month. I'm staying for free. The bed is fine and free. I hope to schedule a

dental appointment, pick up packages on Tuesday (Monday is Veterans day) and address tire-puncture incompetence with a tutorial from Martin at Gila Hike and Bike.

## 11 November 2019 in Tranquil Buzz Coffee House, Silver City

When I conceptualized this trip, I had in mind a Christmastime finish. It has become apparent that my tour is not going to fit into the time period I had in mind. I have not progressed eastward as fast as I might. I have suffered setbacks, such as being sick, being unable to fix a puncture, and, just now, breaking a tooth. Finally, there is the ACA route, which rarely takes the flattest and most direct route. For all these reasons, I am currently re-evaluating my estimates of finishing the trip before New Years. This process of re-evaluation is part of learning to execute a long-distance bike tour. I believe that no abstract planning could have substituted for the experience I now have.

The most brutally efficient route to El Paso was to stay on I-10; the most direct route not on the interstate was state route 9 along the border. I'm glad I came up this way, even though it is an extravagant use of time. If I go through Gila Cliff Dwellings, it'll be three days longer than my already frivolous use of time. I don't know which tradeoff I will regret more, and there is no way to find out, given that I can't do both and compare.

Other notes: coffeeshop full of old people, made appointment for 3:30 Tuesday. Still haven't showered because shower/toilet arrangement in old post office basement is awkward.

12 November 2019 Silver City

Today I visited the post office, the historical museum, the dentist, and the laundromat.

At the post office, I retrieved the cooking pot lid that I left at Kevin's; he mailed it to me general delivery. I got my own maildrop box. I brought with me all the cooking items, a fleece, the last 6L dromedary container, a collapsible water bucket, and several other items. I divided everything into two packages: one to myself in Nashville, full of things I am not, henceforth, going to carry, and one to myself via general delivery in El Paso, full of cooking kit that I'm going to experiment traveling without. I only took back the granola and mac and cheese from what I sent myself. On the whole, this will save me ten pounds or so.

At the historical museum, I was educated about how this area was settled. People came because of the discovery of ore. Then they were enticed to stay by homesteading programs, and even incentives for settlers to have children. Ranching and mining continue to be the

mainstays of the local economy. While Silver City was founded because of silver, mining for copper has been the most enduring form of resource extraction here.

I had a good conversation with Erika, 31, in which we discussed vocation, livelihood, and risk. She was building a specialized wheel for her boyfriend's, Cjell Mone's, cycle business. The wheel is built around an improved coaster brake: there are more bearings, the bearings are contained differently in their race, the mechanism pushes more grease into the bearings, and there is a large heatsink. Cjell's business is all oriented towards downhill mountain biking on single-speed bikes with coaster brakes, a niche operation if there ever was one. Cjell and Erika are a romantically-involved couple who just finished hiking half the CDT southbound, giving up due to knee problems Erika had, and finishing the Continental Divide up to Silver City by bicycle.

Erika is a fine art painter. She's worked at the local bike shop, but claims she was passed over for a management role because of her gender. She wonders if living in a van, hiking, or living in the basement of the former post office are sustainable ways forward for herself. Sometimes, she has found herself looking at apartments.

Greg is here. He is from the same Minnesota town as Cjell. He practices Kung Fu, writes, and drinks. He's traveled all over the US. He is socially anxious. He doesn't leave the post office often, which may have to do with anxiety, or may have to do with not having any income.

I expected the trip to the dentist to be horribly painful and expensive. The dentist, Caytlyn Foy Bonura, a sole practitioner several years my junior, confirmed via examination and x-ray imaging that tooth number 8, which I had busted as a child, was now cracked through the back. The ideal solution would have been a crown, but a crown requires at least two visits spread two weeks apart. The delay is required for the dentist to send information to a lab, the lab to make the crown, and the crown to be returned. Instead, we agreed she'd epoxy it back together in hopes that I would work out a way to get a crown before it broke again. She only charged me \$50!

In the evening, I washed all my clothes. I made a firm decision against biking to Gila Monument. I calculated that if I keep pushing, I can do the entire ACA route by the New Year, but that I need to avoid delays and detours as much as possible.

## 13 November 2019 Travel from Silver City to Upper Gallinas campground, Gila NF, about 35 miles

## 14 November 2019 Travel from Upper Gallinas to Caballo Lake State Park about 42 miles

## 15 November 2019 Travel from Caballo Lake State Park to house of Koni and Dan, Las Cruces 55 miles

Written at US90 Picnic Area north of Valentine TX on 21 November 2019

I stayed with Holly Grimes' friend Koni. She is a painter. They offered a shower, but not laundry. I was concerned that I smelled bad. Koni and Dan have a two acre parcel with pecan trees. Dan explained, briefly, the process of cleaning out the canals to get irrigation. The water is from Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID), to which they pay an annual fee. They ultimately just drilled a well, however, since the canals are a pain in the ass.

Dan has a professional job for the state university system in which he, in a manner not unlike someone who controls the flow into different canals, administers data networks for NM schools and universities. He explained the great difficulty that New Mexico educational institutions, especially those in rural places, face with getting Internet access. He notes that all the largest providers have fiber trunks that transit the state, but that these companies are not uniformly willing to help get schools access. Every company with a fiber line has multiple termination points in the state where repeaters have been installed between lengths of fiber trunk, but they rarely will allow his organization to tap into those points, even when they are but a short distance from a rural school in great need of access.

## 16 November 2019 Travel from Las Cruces to El Paso about 55 miles

Written 21 November 2019: The first part of this was pleasant. I biked down the Mesilla Valley. I was passed by any number of recreational cyclists. I crossed over into Texas at a point only marked by a sign from NM DOT that read "State maintenance ends." I will miss NM. It's been a pleasant state to travel through. It's so pretty. Unlike AZ, I don't feel like the state was trying to

fuck with me.

Crossing into the outer edges of El Paso, I took a long journey through the dewatered Rio Grande course. It was easy, and slightly downhill. I was a bit lost on my way to Mesa Ave, if I recall, where I was to cross over from the riverbed into the city.

I saw this breathtaking sight of a man on horseback riding down the Rio Grande. He didn't return my pleasantries. He looked like a real, bona fide, charro.

Getting a bit lost, I went by some malls and some frontage roads that scared the living shit out of me. I finally arrived back on the ACA route at the Whole Foods on Mesa. I took a break and picked dinner off the hot bar. I got a beer and sat at the bar next to two women who were celebrating their engagement. I gave them a tipsy speech about how far we've come as a country towards acceptance, and I congratulated them, leaving quickly because I felt teary about the damn thing.

Even arriving on Mesa did not stop me from feeling fear. It's a fast four lane divided road. It was not safe, in my estimation, for me to take a lane. There was too much traffic moving much too quickly. In my direction of travel, I was ascending as often as descending. I took the sidewalk sometimes, which is unusual for me. On the whole, I came to a quick conclusion that El Paso has not developed itself with bicycle transportation in mind.

## 17 November 2019 Zero day in El Paso, TX

staying at the Gardner Hotel, waiting for the Post Office to open

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Yelp review of Gardner Hotel in El Paso, TX:

In reading some of the reviews here, I've come to the conclusion that some people are just whiners who complain when they get what they ask for. You pay \$65ish for a hotel room downtown in one of the country's largest cities and are sad it doesn't look like the Holiday Inn? You pay \$25ish to stay in a shared hostel room, and you don't like the air conditioning? Get the hell out of here!

This is cheap and interesting housing for travelers. In a world where all of us must make compromises, this is the right set of compromises for me. I'm on a cross-country bike trip from San Diego, California to San Augustine, Florida. I've camped in National Forests and on remote BLM lands. I've stayed in RV parks full of migrant workers or snowbirds. Sure, the paint in some places looks like it needs touch up, I'm not confident about the fire protection system, and the

nearby club shakes the place with its booming bass dance music until really late. The elevator appears permabusted, so I had to walk my bicycle down some gnarly stairs after a long day of pedaling.

There probably isn't any car parking, but travelers adventurous enough to stay here might be arriving by bus, bike, foot, thumb, or rail. You people who have to have a place for your late-model SUV are out of place anyway. Go choose again.

At this price, why complain? It's fascinating, fun, in the center of downtown right next to San Jacinto Plaza, and has pizza and beer right next door. The staff are solicitous and helpful. The prices are, again, cheap. The bass boom is muffled enough to sleep through. Everything is old, but clean.

Jeez, Louise. It's amazing some of you people made it to adulthood. Which one of you still sucks your thumb? Your dentist wants you to stop, you know, because it's not helping your overbite.

## 18 November 2019 Accidental second day off in El Paso

I sent packages to myself from Silver City to the downtown El Paso post office with zip code 79901. I intended to pick these up early and be on my way. Unfortunately, the downtown office doesn't offer general delivery. Instead, I had to take an uber out to the post office near the airport. By the time I returned downtown and had some lunch, it was too late to bike the 55 miles to Fort Hancock, my next stop, without the possibility of darkness.

I made a decision to stay another night. My stuff had been cleared out of the room; I had to take it back up there.

I spent the afternoon visiting Chamizal National Memorial. I learned how arbitrary, in some ways, the location of the border actually is. I walked back from the park through some crappy neighborhoods, including Segundo Barrio, in hopes of seeing some of the city's famed murals. I fell in love with one called "Twin Sisters," which represents El Paso and Juarez as young twin women.

On this walk, I found the only redeeming features that I could see about this city. There were the murals, for one. I also discovered a teeming commercial district on El Paso Street. This district was full of import shops. It reminded me of market areas I've visited in Mexico. It was all cheap,

knock-off stuff, especially handbags, clothing, and shoes. There were crowds of people, including groups headed southward to the border crossing.

Otherwise, I can't say that El Paso spoke to me. It doesn't feel attractive in any way. I wouldn't choose to live here.

I note that the loud music that permeated the hotel did not recur on a Monday night.

## 19 November 2019 Ft. Hancock

Written in Community Church, Ft. Hancock

Miles today: about 55

I'm lodged at a protestant church that uses a Methodist hymnal (Tabernacle Press) and has some United Methodist symbols around. It has a crown and cross symbol on the pulpit that looked pentecostal or evangelical. don't feel like writing, for some reason.

I thought when I left the hotel this morning that I might push it all the way to a truck stop in Esperanza. The truck stop, at the intersection of county road 34 and I-10, offers laundry, food, and showers. It also allows tent camping on the edges of its property. Indeed, it was a pleasant enough ride, with downhill or flat grades, that had I been more persistent, I might have arrived at that point, some seventy miles from my origin.

Instead, I stopped for breakfast at National Bakery on Stanton. The owner said he'd been there for forty years. I ordered coffee, a pan concha with chocolate, and a raisin roll without raisins. The owner stood with me while I ate. He explained that he didn't really offer seating for his customers. The half dozen women who were sitting were waiting for their shifts to start at various retail establishments. I was putting him in a bind because he didn't want me to disrupt his regulars, who all knew Spanish, and were having a conversation about things I'd know little about.

I departed easterly. With some exceptions, the route was reasonably well adapted for bicycles. In some places, there were even bike lanes. Someplace along Delta, I stopped for second breakfast, namely a subpar breakfast burrito. The burrito was just ham, eggs, and refried beans wrapped loosely in a flour tortilla.

While eating second breakfast, I called my contact in Fort Hancock to see if I could arrange housing. Yesterday, I had texted with Jerry, who often has facilitated bicyclist accomodations at the Catholic Church here. I got his number from the blog of an earlier traveler. I also left a

message, which went unreturned, with the parish office. Jerry said he would not be available, but that I should contact Linda. I contacted Linda, and she cursorily said "Oh, yeah, that's fine: I'll leave the back door open for you." I specified that if I was going fast enough to reach the truck stop at the intersection of County Road 35 and I10 near Esperanza, I would pass Fort Hancock without spending the night. She said she was fine with that possibility. I promised to be in touch to let her know. I continued eastward.

A more frustrating bicycling situation emerged along State 20. On that road, two lanes each direction, I took a lane. Several times, cars did not want to go around or use the other lane; they honked, and I flipped them off. I should probably stop doing that. The long eastern shoulder of the El Paso urbanization was a sad collection of pawn shops, used auto dealers, and run-down lodgings. It spread for miles. I was grateful that the traffic volume was light, at least.

In Fabens, I stopped to write and send some postcards. I bought a Mexican-import coke in a glass bottle, which I drank on the curb at the convenience store. Departing Fabens, the scenery became rural. Fewer and fewer vehicles passed me. I could listen to a podcast aloud, no earphones, and only be interrupted by a passing car every four or five minutes.

When I arrived in Fort Hancock, I looked for the Catholic Church. I called Linda, but all I heard was an announcement that her voicemail had not yet been set up. I walked to the back, and tried the first of two rear doors. The outer security door was unlocked. I opened it. I knocked on the inner wooden door. Hearing no response, I opened that door and walked in.

I was interrupted by a woman, Sylvia, who asked if I was "Don." It turned out that she is a nun who administers the parish, Sister of the Precious Blood (!). After a process, which I don't have enough energy to write about, Sylvia took me to Linda's church, where I'm actually lodged. Linda's associate Emma came and unlocked the back door. It occurs to me that this could have gone incredibly wrong had I not left the message, which received no response, in the parish office, or if Sylvia was not more level-headed.

I don't know that I like accepting hospitality from people. They have expectations. It's a two way street in which I'm supposed to play a certain part. Everything has a cost. If it's not monetized, there's still an exchange of sorts. In the case of the friend of a family friend, the exchange involved weaving a new social connection between strangers. In the case of the religious people, they want to know they are doing good in the world. At it's worst, these sorts of exchanges can require me to be more social or more religiously pious than I might prefer on any particular evening.

That said, I'm glad to be indoors as otherwise I'd be rained on. This is the first rainy night of my trip.

I can't write any more because it's too late and I must sleep.

## 20 November 2019 from Ft Hancock to Sierra Blanca

about 35 miles. Cut day short because I didn't want to bike to Van Horn in the dark. Stayed in an old hotel, a motor court, from 1938. Owners, a CA retired couple, are enthusiastic about renovation and having a historic property. They are well-intentioned, but the room was not really worth the 49.99 I paid. No laundry, poor electric, highway noise, slow-draining shower. I just hung out and read things online, especially Joy Santee's journal from many years ago.

This was another day like I might have dreamed when I planned. My route on 22 and then most especially Texas Farm to Market 192 was rural and scenic. The grades were mild. There were many farms and ranches. I observed goats that had escaped their fencing. I saw men standing about listening to an owner complain about the state of the irrigation canal. Large birds the size of cranes or gulls took off in front of me; flocks of them occupied several man-made irrigation reservoirs along my way. Aside from farm traffic and machinery, the roads I took were empty for most of the day.

Having not eaten in Ft. Hancock anything but a Cliff's Bar, I was anxious to get to the intersection of the route and I-10, and the truck stop there. I had considered biking all the way to this point, originally; in favor of this plan was the fact they'd let me camp on the land surrounding their establishment, that they have showers. That one may camp on the edge of their property is no great gift, for there is so much empty land in the vicinity that this is barely an act of generosity. Their showers looked unwelcoming and dirty. The food was nothing special either, though it did make a difference on this day.

For the first miles of I-10, Texas has maintained the earlier US80 alongside the expressway. It was a lovely surprise, and so much more pleasant than I expected, especially after my I-10 experience in Arizona.

## 21 November 2019 Sierra Blanca to US90 Picnic Area north of Valentine, TX

55 miles

This campsite is shitty, but aside from jumping into some rancher's field, it's the best I can do. I am nervous that I will be abused by law enforcement or a gang of bullies. I'm having images of

a bunch of high school kids riding out here and harassing me, or a gang of locals like what is portrayed in *Deliverance*. “Squeal!” they might command: “Squeal like a pig!” Because of how sparsely-populated this area is, both outcomes are unlikely. There aren’t enough law enforcement to care, and a gang implies two people, which is higher than the average population density per square mile [?]. On the downside, any attack or harassment would go unchecked for many of the same reasons.

Texas is big and empty. For the first time today, I almost ran out of food. I was hungry in the morning after the two-bit breakfast (Jimmy Dean microwave ham and egg biscuit, coffee, a shelf-stable pastry) at the hotel. I didn’t stop at the restaurant in Sierra Blanca. I forced myself to stop somewhere shortly after Sierra Blanca to boil some oatmeal. Then, because I wasn’t paying attention to how many miles to Van Horn, I ended up stopping again to rehydrate my own freeze-dried stew. This was all the food I had on me. I was glad I brought a stove.

The railroad I’ve been following, originally the Southern Pacific, since my first days in Arizona, finally met the Texas and New Orleans Railroad at Sierra Blanca in 1881. The Southern Pacific, now a part of Union Pacific, is the railway that was the reason d’être for many different towns along my route, or a reason for their booming. Tucson was a tiny town before it arrived. Willcox did not exist. The Southern Pacific connected to the American Midwest through Kansas when it was joined at Deming, and to New Orleans here. Wikipedia calls it the second intercontinental railroad; all of it is now owned by Union Pacific.

Sierra Blanca is a shitty, bleak town now, full of abandoned hotels, homes, gas stations, and dreams. No one stops here anymore. The idealistic, but unskilled, California transplants I met are the only ones operating hospitality here. It probably would be forgotten if it weren’t the county seat, a county seat that boasts “Texas’ only adobe courthouse.”

Tomorrow, Marfa.

## 22 November Picnic area north of Valentine, TX to Marfa, TX

About 55 miles

## Marfa Prada

Marfa Prada is a commentary on the town of Marfa's relationship with its environs. There are many desperately poor towns along the rail and I-10. The desert and its towns are full of decaying things that used to be buildings and dreams. A luxury store in the midst of this is a comment on place and being out-of-place.

The town of Marfa itself, about thirty miles south on the highway from Marfa Prada, is an odd Twilight Zone version of the standard decaying desert town. A monied New York artist named Judd bought a chunk of real estate here for his collection a few decades back. He created a foundation that uses a vast estate of buildings, formerly a military installation, to showcase the life works of several influential artists. Now Marfa, which time would have otherwise forgotten, looks like a bit of New York or LA transported to the middle of the desert, complete with yoga studios, coffee shops, unreasonable real estate prices, and farm-to-table restaurants.

The artists involved in this art-prank appear to be commenting on the contrast between Marfa and the usual desert oblivion that is slowly overtaking most desert towns, as well on the great number of New York City and California emigres who have settled in Marfa. Part of the joke is that Marfa Prada is not in Marfa, but just north of Valentine. Valentine is a mostly-derelict town that was important as a coaling station for the railroad until the railroad changed to diesel locomotives.

## 23 November 2019 Day off in Marfa

Went on the full tour of Chinati Foundation. Installation art with Mrss. Judd, Flavin, and others. Four hour tour. Full notes in paper notebook. I appreciate the work and the intent, but find the severe formalism, symmetry, and emptiness to be cold and unappealing. They also are of a particular time which now seems past. I'm imagining a label for the whole, such as "Gallery of Boomer Art" or "Institute for the Preservation of the Second Half of the 20th Century." Works that are new no longer look so today. Institution's emphasis is on preservation in place instead of evolving process, cf contrast with Jesus Mountain and East Jesus.

Reminders: adobe tax, holy man or homeless, laundry, barista who said Van Horn's only activities were getting drunk or pregnant, obvious fancy bicoastal people. Couldn't take many

photos at Chinati because works are meant to be experienced in their totality. Casually wanting to touch all the thirty-something women's buttocks and make them cum, even though it isn't entirely clear that this is conventional sexual desire.

I took the full four hour tour of the Chinati Foundation grounds. By my count, this included thirteen artists, many of them with innumerable multiple works. The bulk of these works are, formally, untitled.

I met our tour guide John and about six other tourists. I was the only unaccompanied person. The remaining people included a recent art school grad and his girlfriend, two women from Austin, a Briton and her boyfriend.

I assume that the Austin women were dating, but unlike the other pairs, their behavior and words did not announce their relationship. One of them was blond, and running to fat. All tour long, I wanted to grab her fat buttocks, enclosed in medium-form-fitting black jeans; I dreamed of her spread in front of me so I could pleasure her. At first, I didn't even notice her face, but just her hips inside her jeans and her tits inside her shirt. As the day progressed, I examined better her careful application of makeup, and the freckles on her face.

The Brit and her French boyfriend were pleasant. They spoke with me about how the Brit's accent came to be more neutral than her native Leeds sound. The French man engaged me in a conversation about my bicycle and how well the hub dynamo worked. He had heard of a hub dynamo that does not need to be plugged into the wire, but instead works via induction with a magnet on the fork. This has the advantage that when removing the wheel, there is nothing to connect or disconnect. He did not know, however, the word "induction," for his English was imperfect. He named any number of suppliers of bicycle parts and frames he was familiar with in the US, but I knew none of them.

Finally, there was art school graduate and his girlfriend. He was exceptionally tall. Meanwhile, she was of usual stature for a woman. She wore dangling gold earrings. Her hair was evenly cut short, as if recently shaved. I attempted to engage the young man about his art. I made jokes about the distant day that he, like the artists featured, might be famous, rich, and/or powerful. My parting words to him, referring to the age and prominence of artist Robert Irwin, were "I hope you are rich and powerful when you are 91." It seemed like a nice thing to say.

Everyone was dressed informally. The Brit had trousers that had been cut off with jagged edges at the ankle. The Frenchman wore culottes. Both of the other men wore ballcaps. I'd be at a loss, aside from the black jeans mentioned above, to identify how the others dressed.

We met John, our guide, at the Chinati foundation headquarters building. This is also a visitor's center and gift shop. John appeared to be in his late fifties or early sixties. In conversation as the day went on, he explained that he and his wife moved from LA in retirement. "You can either pay to live in a place like LA and never leave," he said, "or you can live in a place like this, pay

less, and be able to travel." Being a docent with Chinati put his art education to work. I wanted to talk with John about art and the specific artworks on display, while he was anxious to talk with me about my tour.

Among guests and our guide can be observed a definite pattern inasmuch as we are all outsiders to the desert. At breakfast at the coffeeshop called "Frama," whose name is an anagram of "Marfa," and which is connected to the Tumbleweed Laundry where I was washing my clothes, the barista explained that during her adolescence in Marfa, the social groups in town were easily distinguishable. There were "Chiantists," "los Chianti, or "the Chianti people," and then there were all the other people in town. She claims that this division is not as noticeable, but I have my doubts. My eye easily distinguishes the people from the large coastal cities, and even stylish Texas metropolitan areas, from the others who are present here. The fact that Chianti has existed in some form since before my barista, age 26, was born leads me to think that there have long been these different groups, and that she has merely become more tolerant with exposure.

In any case, we outsiders walked through the art installations, all of which were made by outsiders of one sort or another. The instigator of the entire project, Donald Judd, moved here from New York. With few exceptions, the artists came from LA and New York. In most cases, the works themselves were designed in those large coastal cities. These, like John and my fellow tourists, were imported to the desert from the metropole.

Whether literally made of aluminum, reclaimed steel automobile parts, concrete, paint, or fluorescent tubes, these works and the institution that maintains them on display are more abstractly constructed of power. Donald Judd was able to move from New York and buy extensive land because of arbitrage, the difference in pricing between New York and the hopelessly economically depressed desert community he picked at whim.

I might argue, if I were especially critical, that this is the second colonization of the desert. The people who moved here more than a century ago to take the land from the Mexicans and indigenous, those who came with the railroads, those who came with the hopes of mining, or those with a plan to homestead a ranch, were the first wave. The metropolitan people, with their nonrepresentational art that I have seen today, and whose bar in which I now sit, drinking \$8 cocktails and a \$19 charcuterie plate, are the second wave of aliens to immigrate here. As in all colonization, this is about power.

My host this morning at breakfast told me of a local controversy about taxes. The City of Marfa, in its wisdom, decided that all buildings made of adobe would be taxed at a higher milage [sp?] rate. The city claimed that adobe buildings were harder to maintain, and had a higher cost to municipal fire services [check this claim?] Meanwhile, social justice advocates claimed that a tax on adobe buildings was merely a veiled attempt to rid the town of longer-term residents, who tended to be poorer and Hispanic. There are posters up all around town opposing this tax: they say "Save the Adobe!"

In any case, these contrasts make Marfa into an odd place. Because I imagine myself as a member of the metropole, and as an aspirant to the class of people who drink fancy cocktails, eat only organic, and know about cultural theory, I like Marfa. I feel at home here, even despite my critical intellectual vantage that reminds me about power and its effects.

As for the works, and the tour itself, I can say that I developed an appreciation for the style of art displayed. I found the great amount of content to be a bit overwhelming. We spent four and a half hours together as a group, with a two hour lunch break at about the halfway mark.

In the early 1900s [?], the US Cavalry established a base here in Marfa. Over time, this military installation changed in its main uses, to include being a prisoner of war camp. It acquired the name Fort Davis [?]. After WWII [?], the base was decommissioned.

Donald Judd [b ? where ?] first observed the sparse beauty of the desert during his tour with the Army [?], when he visited nearby Van Horn. After his service, and after additional education [?], he became a successful art critic in NYC, and, to a lesser extent, artist in his own right. He came to know the leading artists and patrons in the 1960s NYC art world. At some point [?], he bought a multistory building [called what?] that had been acquired by the city for a roads project, but not demolished. He filled this with his creations.

Judd believed that museums were exceedingly limiting for the sort of art he wished to create. Museums, in his view, offered a mishmash of small aesthetic experiences from multiple artists, delineated by galleries or exhibits. By contrast, Judd wished to make large-scale art that was designed specifically for the site in which it would be viewed. He wanted an environment where a great range of works from any single artist's oeuvre [sp?] could be displayed in the context of the artist's overall lifetime of production.

While Judd rejected the terms "minimalist" and "sculpture" with equal vehemence, a casual nonacademic viewer might use these as easy shorthands for what he did create. His works emphasized

The phrase used by docent John that most illuminated Judd's work for me was his statement that Judd was a "literalist." By saying this, we mean that Judd's works are not representative of something else. They are not symbols. There is not a reference to something else. They do not signify some sort of meaning beyond what is seen, observed, or felt by the particular observer. A concrete box, divided internally in various ways, is a concrete box. A series of aluminum rectangles in a former munitions warehouse, of equal dimensions and varied in ways similar to the previously-fabricated series of concrete boxes, is a series of aluminum rectangles in a former munitions warehouse. In his life, Judd gave 'this is not a pipe' a run for the money.

Without symbolism or messaging, what is left is form, shape, shadow, and interaction with context. There are 52 rectangular polished aluminum box-shaped forms in one former

warehouse, and their arrangement contrasts in nuanced ways with the 48 [?] in the other nearly-identical warehouse to the north. Walking astride these two buildings, which are transparent because of the great amount of glass used in the walls on both sides, one can see the identically-dimensioned concrete rectilinear forms in the other, earlier, untitled installation on the grounds beyond these warehouses.

The effect can be sublime. Enjoyment benefits from careful observation of patterns, light, and shadow. For example, in the munitions hanger, each box occupied one of the rectangular sections of floor that was created long before the aluminum boxes were fabricated. The grid in the structure of the ceiling mirrored the floor with symmetry. In the morning sun, only the first line of boxes closest to the eastern window generated an even series of shadows, but the last rank furthest from the eastern window generated none. At another time, the observer would see something else entirely.

After observing these varied, but purposively repetitious, polished aluminum forms in their context, John led us to the next large-scale installation, Dan Flavin's untitled work that is referred to as "The Marfa Project." Neither Judd nor Flavin lived to see this project, conceived in approximately 1980, be installed in 2000.

I cannot say that I simply like the works. I have an appreciation for the works. This style of high modernism is, in my opinion, no longer the contemporary zeitgeist. It has been replaced in some places, to some extent, by irony, symbolism, and message. Other art I have seen recently doesn't try for aesthetic purity in quite the same way.

I kept wondering what these artists would do if a family of two adults and two toddlers moved into their installations to live. When considered this way, the clean lines, neatness, and great open space of these seem oppressively inhuman. It is fine that I can perceive shadow and light, observe symmetry in a layout of objects, and appreciate negative space. But the purity of these displays is so unlike real life that it seems to leave little space for the messiness of actual living beings.

I feel the same way about modernist buildings. Looking at a Pei or a Portman, I want to know where the face of the building is. How does this building speak to me?

Bottom line: technically impressive, a bit overwhelming, and devoid of human warmth. I hold that a former military base converted into a great many different displays of art cannot be taken as "literalism" in the manner our tour guide explained the term. The work here exists in a context. It has precedents and descendants, which are necessarily referenced. Moreover, claims by Judd or fellow travelers that any of the displays are free of reference or symbolism ring hollow because we know that a vast military installation filled with art objects symbolizes, above all, money and power.

## 24 November 2019 Marfa to Marathon

Marfa should be the last high desert stop on my tour. Unless I am mistaken, I will reach Saint Augustine without ascending above 3000' again. This is welcome news because the elevation makes the mornings so cold that I do not obtain a good rate of forward progress until ten or later in the day. I suppose it would have been possible to prepare better. For example, I could have kept the lobsterclaw gloves with me, or the Bar Mitts, since it is my hands that feel most uncomfortable in these near-freezing mornings.

Despite the cold, I hustled to take down camp. I was able to bike away about forty minutes after I deflated my sleeping matt, my usual first step in breaking camp. I was helped somewhat by a warm space, the communal bathroom, that I could visit to do some of the work of organizing bags and working closures. Without this space, my hands might not have done the work, despite gloves.

I forced myself to leave Marfa somewhat reluctantly. It was like visiting a city with the very best consumption and entertainment possibilities, but fewer of the hassles. Every imaginable fine thing is within biking distance. The night before my departure, I went to a bar called "Capri," where I sat for hours writing. I bought two Old Fashioned cocktails and a charcuterie board, spending almost fifty dollars in the process. There was so much more to see: artists' spaces, galleries, restaurants. That same night on my way to Capri, I stopped at another bar with mariachis playing so sweetly in its outdoor courtyard. I would live that night over and over if I could. For this and other reasons, Marfa is one of three places I've seen so far on my trip to which I'd gratefully locate, the other two being Ocean Beach in San Diego and Silver City in New Mexico, if I had the means.

I managed to lose my rain jacket while in Marfa. Before departing, I went to the coffee house/laundry place [name?] to inquire if I left it there. The barista, who commented about the Chiantists in her high school, agreed with me that it was not there. I then continued on to look for a bakery/restaurant called "Aster."

I had a difficult time finding the restaurant, especially as my phone does not have data service in these parts. I asked two people whom I saw on the street where the restaurant might be. The first, a woman, replied that she was also from out of town, was also looking for the same restaurant, and was equally lost. She also told me that she had just been in the restaurant bathroom a moment ago when she found out she was pregnant, and was out walking for a moment to get over the shock.

This was an unexpected conversation for so early on a cold morning. I told her "Congratulations, if that's what you're after. If not, there are solutions." Departing her company, I felt like this

answer was a bit crass or unfeeling. I then inquired with the man who directed me, explaining that the restaurant I sought was tucked in behind the Paisano Hotel a block away, and easy to miss.

In the restaurant, I attempted to banter with the woman behind the counter, but failed. My jokes fell flat, and my questions about the food seemed to impugn the very integrity of the restaurant's mission. In my defense, I was so taken aback by the food, which would not be out of place in a major metropolitan area, that I was almost incredulous. I asked where the bagels came from; the woman mentioned that of course they made their own bagels. I wondered aloud where such fine looking croissants were made, and the woman seemed almost offended that I would even doubt that they could produce such items.

Their breakfast menu revolved principally around variations on eggs benedict, on the one hand, and a dish called "roshti"[sp?] that was said to have been brought from Switzerland by the restaurant's founder. The roshti, I came to understand, were potato pancakes with toppings. I did not risk the further offense that asking if they made their own bechamel sauce might have provoked. I ordered coffee and a salmon roshti, to be served with a side of microgreens. I paid at least twenty dollars for this, if I recall correctly [?].

I noted that the young woman who addressed me about her pregnancy sat at a table next to an older couple. I estimated that the young woman was in her late teens or early twenties, and took a guess that these were her parents. As I felt that my answer to her earlier disclosure was somewhat dismissive, but did not want to intrude in whatever family drama might have come from her telling her parents she was pregnant, I retrieved a postcard from my bicycle, and wrote "I'm Dan. My earlier answer seemed a bit harsh to me. If you need a listening ear, feel free to write to me on Instagram: @dankappus." I then put the card in front of her, text down,

Almost coincidentally, the man and woman couple departed. I explained my uncertainty with my words to the woman, who introduced herself as Emma. She thanked me for the offer of help, and assured me that those were not her parents, but just some people she had met who had agreed to help her.

I sat at another table, and my roshti was delivered to me. It had an intricate sauce, greens, and salmon on a base of grated potatoes. The potatoes were most reminiscent of hash browns, but this place was far too classy and expensive to have anything to do with Waffle House. When I finished my plate, I decided I would buy one of the chocolate croissants.

Emma came to an adjacent table. We spoke at some length while I consumed coffee and started to eat the croissant. As I have suffered problems with my right incisor, which was epoxied back together in Silver City, I attempted to cut the croissant into small enough pieces that I would not put pressure on that tooth. But upon chewing even the first piece so produced, I pushed it towards the roof of my mouth and towards the front, and immediately knew that I had

cracked the tooth again. I walked from my table to the serving bar, grabbed a napkin, and spit out that bit of croissant.

It was more like nutella, actually. It wasn't a hard chocolate. The pastry crust was perfect. It boggles my mind how something so cosmopolitan arrived in the middle of the desert. It might as well have been a spaceship full of bicoastal aliens. I enjoyed the pastry, imagined in New York, that broke my fragile tooth in Marfa.

Emma, hair unkempt, tattoo just below her left eye, told me that she really needed to turn her life around. She doubted she'd be able to travel back to the Dallas area, where she had family. She said a number of times that she had found out how far along she was. She believed it was her old ex from back in the small town she was from who had impregnated her, which led her to believe she was months and months pregnant. She didn't make a lot of sense. I advised her to see a doctor, and wondered if the whole thing was a scam for money or attention from this traveler of a kid.

I left the restaurant and headed on out of town, seeing yet more things along the way, such as bars, clubs, art installations, and venues, that I'd like to explore.

Arrived early (eg before dusk) at Marathon Motel and RV park on the outskirts of town. About 57 miles, easy, mostly downhill, surrounded by postcard-perfect scenery.

## 25 November 2019 Marathon to Sanderson

55 miles or so.

I spent the first half of the day working on a difficult problem. How should I get a dentist to fix my tooth? What service would I want that dentist to perform? Where should I look for a dentist?

I had posted on Facebook admitting to everyone I was overwhelmed with these choices and pissed off about the necessity of making such choices. I find it especially difficult to research dental practices and communicate with them in this rural area. I do not have data service on my phone here because there are too few people for the cellphone service provider Sprint to spend their resources here. I sometimes have access to the Internet at the beginning and end of my day if access is available through the place I am lodged, but this is not when workers in dental practices are available to speak to me.

In a more populated place, I could go to coffee shops and libraries in the middle of my day, but in this sparsely-populated countryside, my days are designed to begin at one place where there

are services and end at the next place where there might be services. In between lie stretches of fifty or sixty miles without as much as a gas station open to the public. There may be a ranch house or innumerable railroad shacks, but none of these offer Internet access and a latte. In theory, I could plan my days so that I started and ended them in the vast Texas emptiness. I could do laundry, take a shower, and use the Internet during the middle of the day when passing through town. Unfortunately, if I did this, I would likely be trespassing on a rancher's land for camping. For all these reasons and more, I start my day in one town, traverse a great open space, and reach another town by nightfall, leaving little time in the day to research services like a dentist.

I'm playing a game which is the first Intercontinental Obeast Bike Race. The main rule is I must cross the country from San Diego, CA to San Augustine, FL by creating a continuous path via bicycle. I can leave the path and come back just so long as I come back to the same place. I am still within the IOBR rules if I backtrack. I could change the rules at whim, but I am the sort of person who, having made up a game, would like to win fairly without cheating.

It was no help today that the RV park where I was staying, Marathon Hotel, did not have Internet access available to me during most of my stay. Their WiFi service stopped working sometime around 9PM, and was not functioning in the morning. In the evening, I made a large fire in their courtyard fireplace. I sat by it and wrote. I reckoned that the reason I could not use their WiFi as I sat next to the fire was the distance from the tent area, but when I returned at a late hour to my tent, it did not work there, either. In the morning, I checked with the front desk worker, who shrugged, and in an unidentifiable foreign accent said "Yes, I know, someone else said so, too. Nothing I can do."

I stalled a bit waiting for it to get warm. I had considered making a hundred-mile trip to Langtry directly, given the steady descending grade from Alpine all the way to that village. Time passed. It really wasn't that cold, but I couldn't figure out what to do. Should I go find Internet access in town?

My Facebook plea for shopping help caused a Facebook friend, someone I am acquainted with from contra dancing, to call me. As I was taking down my tent, my phone rang with a Texas number that turned out to be Nana. I sat with my feet outside the tent and my ass seated inside, talking to Nana.

Nana, it turns out, is a retired dentist and public health worker. One role she had was visiting all manner of dentists throughout Texas and Mexico on behalf of a government agency. With Nana, I clarified that I probably should get a temporary crown. Nana offered to call the dentist I'd seen back in Silver City, Dr. Bonura, to get some details. Nana's phone call calmed me a bit. It was good to talk out my anxiety and feel like someone was on my side.

After I broke camp, I proceeded to downtown Marathon. The central part of this town consists principally of a block facing out on the main street. This block is dominated by the early-1900s

[?] Gage Hotel, its White Buffalo hotel restaurant and bar, and a coffee shop cum gift shop housed in a building in the same style as the hotel itself. Around the corner from this block is the only grocery store in town, called "The French Grocery." There are signs for churches and a library further back from the main road, but I did not explore these. Additional businesses, plainer than those in the Gage complex, spread out east along the main drag. The businesses closer to the Gage complex are more similar in style to the galleries and finer consumption choices found in Marfa, while those down the street are more homespun

I spent a lot of time freaking out about dental care. Dealing with ambiguity is difficult for me. I couldn't tell if the dentist fifty miles back in Alpine would see me, if she would provide me a temporary crown, or what could be arranged. Dentists in Del Rio were easier to pin down: they were not working past Wednesday. After the fact, I thought about hitchhiking to Del Rio. Instead, I made an appointment in Fredricksburg to have a permanent crown placed, which isn't even the service I want, when I arrive in that city next week.

I traveled through some of the most breathtaking scenery of my entire journey. I committed some of this to Instagram. I committed myself to return and explore some more. Even more pleasantly, my route on US90 was a steady downhill, yielding ten miles an hour or more on average.

I met my first transcontinental cyclist on the road. Shawn was going eastbound as slowly up the hill as I was going down, and he was fighting a wind. We didn't talk much, just a high-five. I advised him that Marfa was worthwhile. He bade me enjoy my tailwind.

Staying tonight in a casita owned by a retired federal public defender. It's covered in artwork portraying the Virgin of Guadalupe.

## 26 November 2019 Sanderson to Langtry

60.7 miles

[written Wed 28 Nov in Comstock]

I was overtaken on the road by Liz, my warmshowers host. She invited me to a party outside Brackettville if I'd get there by Saturday. I made a second appointment with another dentist, also for Fredricksburg. I hope to go there and plead for a temporary on the day before I go to the clinic that only does permanents. Meanwhile, several people have advised me to find a dentist in Ciudad Acuna on the other side of the border.

I spoke with Oscar in Dryden. His father operated a store there for many years until a semi truck plowed through the awning of the hundred-year-old building. When I encountered him, he was attempting more work on the space. I asked if I could have some water, and he insisted that I take four plastic bottles of water. I thought that was unusually generous, but he did insist.

He told me about the many Southern Tier riders who used to stop at the store. He mentioned, specifically, one group of beautiful Danish women. When I asked how he ended up living in Dryden, he explained that when his dad, the storekeeper, was alive, he, Oscar, had his driver's license suspended for DUI. When he told his father about his legal woes, his father took him to Dryden to run the store, and left him there.

Oscar complains that it is hard to find tradespeople to fix the building. He's been trying to get it back together for some years. He contracted a builder from a far-away city. The builder constructed front pillars to the store, but then got in an argument with Oscar and would not return. Oscar hired a building inspector, who told Oscar that the replacement masonry front pillars were not structurally sound as built. I have heard this complaint about the difficulty of finding competent contractors several times from people I've spoken to in rural cities along my route.

I wondered if Oscar's generosity was a result of guilt. Perhaps he hurt a bicyclist when he was drunk and driving. I thought about this after I left Dryden, so I didn't get to ask.

I had left Sanderson fairly late after lounging, cooking breakfast, and making a trip to the convenience store to buy more toilet paper. As a result, even though the miles went fast, I found myself arriving in Langtry after dark. At the top of the last hill, in front of the irregularly-open general store and tourist depot there, I saw the same Border Patrol truck that had passed me a few times before.

I gestured to the driver. He got out and conversed with me. I needed to know where the camping in the community park was. He wasn't entirely sure, but he pointed me in the right direction. Because I noticed what I thought was a dental problem with his lower jaw, but now understand might have merely been chewing tobacco, I asked him where he gets his dental work done. He pulled out his phone to show me where in Ciudad Acuna his dentist, DeLaGarza, has an office. He explained also that there are many, many dentists in Ciudad Acuna, such that even one of his own dentist's sons also has a practice in the town.

I biked in the direction the border patrol agent indicated. This turned out to be a spur from the highway that led to the actual small town of Langtry. In its center was a surprisingly-solid tourist information center and museum dedicated to Roy Bean, the area's first, and infamous, Justice of the Peace. The tourist information center had signs identifying it as a wifi hotspot. There were flags out front, and the whole complex was well-lit.

The first thing I did was to connect to the Internet access that was offered. Then I noticed a man sitting in a car in front of the building. I assumed he was doing this in order to access the Internet. I gestured, and the man rolled down his window. Upon inquiring if he was from the area, he responded that he lives in Langtry. He directed me to the community center, which turned out to be the former schoolhouse, and tried to explain what part of the grounds would be best for camping.

I rode my bike in the direction the man in the car gave. In the dark, his description of a large white building was not entirely adequate. However, careful examination revealed a sign that identified one large building as the community center. I looked around a bit for the softest, most level, and least lighted part of the lot. I ended up behind the building. There was a man there talking in Spanish on his phone; I worried that I was getting in his way or that he would interfere with me. I was a bit scared, in fact, but the stranger departed soon.

I left my bike leaned up against some former playground equipment behind the building. I liked this site because it was between the community center and an outbuilding that I guessed contained a well. This put me out of view for most people. Beyond the outbuilding, however, I could see one small house, well-lit. I felt like this was the safest place, though I felt uncertain about my choice to camp here, and wished I had arrived before dark to check everything out.

At about this time, the car I had seen at the visitor's center pulled into the drive of the house behind the outbuilding. I found that reassuring because if the man who directed me to camp here was the lot's neighbor, that would be one less person to object to my presence.

Before I set up a tent, I needed food. I sat in a slowly-decaying folding chair next to the stoop of the building, upon which I sat my stove. At first, I could not find my spoon. I thought I would have to stir the pot with a stick and eat with my hands. I was a bit panicked because the issue with the front tooth already makes it hard to eat. I searched my things until I did find the spoon, which allowed me to eat my Knorr's™ Rice Side, Beef Flavor more gingerly than I would otherwise have done. I should mention that my only other option for food was a pack of Zataran's beans and rice. As there had been neither restaurants nor stores since Sanderson, and Sanderson's options were limited, I was at the end of my tolerance for hunger at the very moment food was ready.

I then set up a tent, sleeping mat, and sleeping bag. I made sure everything was consolidated just in case it rained. Then I went back to the visitor's center.

Long conversation with the same Border Patrol guy, who gave me cookies, banana. He was grateful for the VA, for whom I used to work, for identifying his service-related TBI. He says that in the particular Border Patrol segment he is in, there is only one agent. He detailed how the last traveler he spotted hanging around in the visitor's center after dark using wifi he had felt obliged to detain because that traveler wouldn't identify why he was there or what he was doing. Sometimes he is the first responder for local law enforcement issues that might be handled by

the Sheriff, but the Sheriff takes a long time to arrive. We leveled heart to heart as government employees. Kum Ba Ya moment even though I think immigration enforcement is shyte.

## 27 November 2019 Langry to Comstock

Only 28.5 miles.

I didn't start until late. It rained in the morning, and I misplaced my rain jacket back in Marfa. It is cold. Additionally, the REI inflatable "Flash" sleeping pad I have kept deflating during the night. I woke up several times to inflate it again. I do not know why this is happening. Indeed, this is the second such sleeping pad with which I've experienced this problem, as I returned the first for a similar apparent malfunction when I was in Tempe. This one, which no longer works, appears to have developed the same problem, either through abuse, poor construction, or my ignorance of the proper way to use the thing.

I procrastinated by going to the visitor's center. It displays exhibits about an uneducated man, Roy Bean, who dispensed rough justice here. His barroom, which also served as court, and his house have been preserved here. It made me glad for the rule of law. Langry was founded after the railroad finally crossed the Pecos River. I'm having a hard time keeping track of which railroads are which, but apparently some of the rail line I've been following all this time ended up here to much celebration. Crossing the Pecos was a technical and political achievement. The railroad used to run along the spur I took into town.

I felt awkward in the museum. I don't have clean clothes, and I needed a shower. I think I pissed on myself a little bit while I slept. I importuned on the workers, two women, with my stories and information. I think they might have preferred not to have talked to me.

The tooth is bothersome. I have to eat gingerly. I see that it has dropped lower than its twin tooth to the right. It wiggles, and from time to time while eating or moving my tongue, I will push against it and cause myself to wince. I do not know what the solution is. I worry that it may fall apart or fall out before I get treatment. It limits my food options, and makes toothbrushing difficult.

I picked up general delivery today at the post office, which is so quaint and small. The woman clerk did not have the equipment to accept a credit card for the postage for my bounce box. She did not have a computer terminal to give me tracking information. I sent the package on to Navasota after she called that post office to make sure it was going to the right place.

Caitlin sent me some lovely treats.

I didn't leave Langtry until noon.

Today I crossed the Pecos myself, and so much rugged limestone that time has made into canyons and mountains. I meant to go all the way to Del Rio so I could stay in a hotel, buy a rain jacket, and perhaps cross the border. My poor time management, my bad mood, and the hilly terrain, caused me to give up on further forward motion. The bartender helped me make reservations while I ate the grilled chicken plate they served me at the bar across the street.

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## Morning of 11/28/2019 at Comstock Hotel

It's Thanksgiving Day. I'm trying to summon all the gratitude I can in order to get my ass out of here to the next stop. I have planned an ambitious day to Brackettville, even though it's almost 62 miles away.

In the classic first-person-shooter video game *Doom*, released in 1993, the player character's health is represented by a percentage bar from 0 to 100. For every hit that the character takes, his health is reduced. At zero percent, the character is dead.

I played *Doom* for hours and hours when I was a college student. Based on this important academic experience, I can say that as a player character in the game of my own choosing, my health bar is not at 100% today. The tooth itself takes off 10% because it is distracting, and because it makes stuffing my face with calories more difficult. Then there is the stress regarding how to address the tooth problem, which is probably worth 5% health. There is the sleeping mat problem, which will limit my sleep, cause me some stress, and is probably worth another five percent. I'm stressed out because I don't have a raincoat, which takes only a little bit of health away, but could be absolutely fatal if not addressed soon. I'm missing a charger, the part that plugs into the wall, for my various electronic devices; not having reliable access to electronic information about my routing subjects me to more risks and reduces my morale. Finally, I only went to bed at 12:30AM this morning. I'd say I'm at 65%, and definitely struggling with this level of the game.

I'm hoping that by hustling along to the WalMart in Del Rio and onward to the RV park in Brackettville, I can improve my situation. If I can get to WalMart, I can buy a raincoat, charger, and maybe even a cheap sleeping pad. I may be able to stay with Liz, the warmshowers host, who has promised a fete, if I get to Brackettville today or tomorrow. Beyond Brackettville are the dentists of Fredricksburg, two of whose practices I have appointments with that could be moved as early as Monday. And finally, down the road apiece, is Austin, where I anticipate taking a mini-vacation from my vacation, wherein I will visit Zen Center and socialize with friends.

The downside risk is that I've not planned reasonably short days for my low energy and morale. If I fail to make my objectives, or have to change the plan, I may feel worse.

I decided that I would not go into Ciudad Acuña for dental work. For this front tooth, I want US care standards and US accountability. I can easily imagine regretting this decision if either of the Fredricksburg dentists are able to fix me up without delaying my trip.

I think my decision to move forward instead of spending a day in Del Rio toying with Mexican dentists shows an overall preference for forward progress over uncertain possibilities. I feel as I felt when I decided not to go back to Alpine for treatment. I can control moving forward on my route. I may still have a dental problem, but at least I am further towards my goal. Eastward progress is certainty, while dentists are mere possibilities.

## 28 November 2019 Comstock to Del Rio (Thanksgiving Day)

30.4 miles (to Executive Inn Del Rio)

Well, that kinda sucked. I didn't leave Comstock until eleven in the morning. It was about fifty degrees Farenheit out. I was obliged to ride into a fifteen to twenty mile an hour headwind.

While there was an overall net loss of elevation, there were many hills and plenty of climbing. For about a quarter of my ride, the wind pushed a gentle rain at me. On top of these impediments, Valverde County saw fit to use the coarsest and least suitable surfacing for its road shoulders from Comstock to the Amistad reservoir (Governor's Landing Bridge). I only made five miles headway the first hour; my average for the entire trip was not much better.

If I had left in a timely fashion, I could have reached Brackettville. Having left late, I did the best I could. Once in town, I went to Wal Mart. I considered, but did not buy, a foam camping mattress. I did buy USB wall charging blocks and a rain jacket. The store was full of people queuing for Thanksgiving sale items that were to be available starting at six. For example, a line of people waiting for a deal on a large-screen television filled most of the frozen goods aisles. It looked like a good place to get beaten by an angry horde. A handful of strategically-placed Sheriff's deputies watched over the consumerist ritual.

I ordered an apple pie and a hot chocolate in McDonald's attached to Walmart. I called the hotels listed on the ACA map. The last one I called, Whispering Palms, was the only one without a national brand. At \$65, it was also the cheapest. A man with an unidentifiable foreign accent said "It is okay. You come here. We take care of you. Sixty-five dollars."

I went back into the mob and selected a frozen dinner, two frozen breakfasts, a tray of proscuitto wrapped cheese, and an apple. I paid for my merchandise, tied them to my bicycle, and started southward on US90, which is called Veteran's Avenue. I had one and a half miles to go. There were so many hotels along my way, however, that I figured I should inquire about their prices, as well.

In the first one I went in, branded Executive Inn, an older Indian lady told me the room would be \$65. I immediately committed to staying the night. When I asked if it was her business, she affirmed that she and her husband owned the joint. I complimented her on owning a hotel. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "It is okay, I guess."

She directed me to room 102, nearest the office. I went in there, took off my shoes and outer layers, and started to recline on the bed. Just then, there was a knock on the door, which I answered. The woman from the front desk was frantically telling me I needed to leave the room. "My husband rented this room already. I did not look in computer to see if it available before I rent it to you." I was a bit taken aback, and even more so when she didn't help take all my things to the new room across the parking lot. Instead, she stood next to the office, yelling for me to go this way or that way. "No, in the center of the building." She wasn't malicious. I think she believed she had good rapport with me. The motel still beats camping.

## 11/29/2019 Del Rio to Fort Clark Springs

33 miles

This was a disappointing day.

If I had left the hotel soon after daybreak, as would have been wise, I would be housed by lawyer Liz from Alpine at her sister's house in Montell. Instead, I left Del Rio around ten, slowly, and only arrived in Brackettville around one thirty. The imperfect chipseal surfacing, some wind, and rain were impediments to speedy progress. I would have needed to have been in Brackettville, my decision point, by noon in order to continue forty miles further to Montell.

In some foreshadowing of my regrettable but all-too-common decision to delay, I did make arrangements with Liz to arrive tomorrow instead of today. But had I gotten up and started, I could have gone for seventy miles. There was no place I could discern in between Brackettville and Montell to bail out. I could not, in good conscience, commit to biking past dark.

Adding to my dissatisfaction with my progress, I found out that I have spent \$8000 this month, despite being out of town. About \$2000 of this was paid out to the lawyer who drafted a will and wrote a lease for my sublessor. Another \$500 went for a year's supply of contacts. And another \$1000 went to pay for a year of homeowner's insurance.

The slow progress today and my financial prodigiousness made me feel like I'm not actually succeeding at this trip. I'm not moving across the country with any particular deftness. I'm not managing to save enough money so that I could live within the returns on investments from my mother's estate. I feel like a fraud. Instead of being a noble adventurer, I am a shiftless bum who has neither a career nor prospects for a job.

I thought about Austin, which is about the halfway point. I thought I'd take a break there. I wondered if I could sit in on some of Rohatsu sesshin at Austin Zen Center, which will start Friday. I wondered if I could do it even though I don't know a damn thing about oriyoki meals anymore. I thought about hurrying to Austin to sit for Rohatsu, and not being able to eat because of a conflict between oryoki and a broken front tooth.

I thought about San Francisco Zen Center. I contemplated if a year of service and learning there would be helpful. A full summer at SFZC and two practice periods, one at Tassajara, was my original goal. I remembered that my lack of money kept me from staying at Green Gulch, and my fear of opportunity costs kept me from spending the time at Tassajara that summer to earn practice credits. In my mind, I went over how my mediocre experience at Deep Springs Temple in Sewickley reinforced my conclusion that being a part of the paid labor marketplace was an easier way to belong to the world than being a religious practitioner who lived based on donations, pity, or kindness.

I wondered if I will ever have a job I care about. Some of the possibilities that came up as I biked through my sense of being a bum and a fraud included going back to school for accounting, law, or social work. I pondered Zen Center as a prerequisite to the deep listening of individual practice social work. I recently saw ads looking for people to lead treks and outdoor adventures, and remembered I had wanted to do this as a younger adult. I can see that there are possibilities, and the money means I don't have to be panicked about it.

In general, when I start feeling like a fraud or a bum, or like I don't belong, I start thinking about jobs. This is the pattern on which I comment here. I don't see how what I'm doing fits into the life of society or community. In this case, my doubts spring from not doing what I'm doing as well as I would like.

The tooth has stopped worrying me. If I'm careful when I eat and when I say certain words, I don't notice. It's gone from an emergency to a problem I'll have to take care of soon.

Other notes: weird interaction about advising a 12 year old girl to raise her bike seat, feeling somewhat threatened in a campground as a single weird man, the barbecue joint does not serve cornbread nor does it serve greens. Conversation with Mike about his Texas life. Conversation with RV center manager about his many years in aviation repair.

## 30 November Fort Clark Springs to Montell

Approximately 40 miles.

Liz Rogers, the attorney from Alpine who also hosted me in Sanderson, feted me with beer, Thanksgiving leftovers, and conversation at her family home. Her sister, Alice, lives in one of the houses on the property. Liz's is maintained for her, though she has several houses.

In fact, the Rogers' share a ranch near Sanderson, as well.

Liz defended the Presidio County DA when that DA was picked up by Border Patrol for helping critically-ill illegal entrants to the US. As a result of Liz's zealous defense, or because humanitarian aid is a right, there was not an indictment.

I really needed this warm place to be, with a fire, laundry, and shower. It turned my mood around. I am so impressed by Liz.

## 1 December 2019 Montell to Lost Maples State Park

~49 miles

Yesterday, I noticed that I was no longer in the desert. Some of the waterways had water in them. Trees, some deciduous, grew in groves. Today, the changes continued. There are many trees in these hills, and rivers. There are cactii and yucca, but fewer. This was a day of climbing steeply over many hours, only to lose the elevation quickly in thrilling descents that impelled me to forty miles an hour or more over curvy mountainous roads.

Tonight, I am staying in a campground at Lost Maples State Natural Area. Deciduous trees whose leaves turn colors and fall away are rare in this part of Texas. The busy time to visit this one plot where there are acres of such trees just ended.

I listened to a This American Life episode called "Ten Sessions." In this podcast, the narrator-reporter attends ten sessions of intensive therapy about the sexual assault she suffered when she was 13. This got me thinking about traumas in the past years. The girlfriend I was in an abusive relationship with. The parents getting sick and dying. The mere move from San Francisco. The graduate school fiasco. I've considered how those failures from 2006-2009 conditioned my response to bullying at work from 2009-2014. I'm wondering if there's some part of me that would benefit from processing these difficult things with a professional.

## 2 December 2019 Lost Maples to Hunt, TX

~35 miles

I elected to stay with warmshowers hosts Lou and Linda instead of going further. I had made arrangements with Lou and Linda while believing that they were closer to Kerrville. I was disappointed with my mileage.

It was below freezing in Lost Maples. I was warm enough under my smelly backpacking quilt, but I was repeatedly awoken when the camping mattress lost all its air. The air mattress is an important part of the sleeping system. It insulates me from the cold of the ground, just as the backpacking quilt, so in need of a wash, insulates me from the cold air. I did not sleep as well as I might have wished.

In the morning, I was slow to depart because of the cold. It is hard to break camp when it is below freezing. It is even harder when it is so cold to ride forward. In the simple gloves I have, my fingers tend to freeze. I continually went into the bathroom at camp to warm my hands under the hot-air dryer that was provided in lieu of paper towels. Instead of leaving quickly, I lingered in the park visitor's center, which offered warmth and access to the Internet.

The most gorgeous parts of the day were spent in the canyon created by the Guadalupe River.

## 3 December 2019 Hunt, TX to Jefferson City, TX

Lou and Linda, my warmshowers hosts, trade hospitality for intangibles. They are in their 70s. Lou designed and built the home they live in, which includes a guest house. Everything is well decorated, almost as if it were a bed and breakfast. Lou traveled from Seattle to LA via bicycle several years ago, and has taken some other long rides. By hosting, they get to showcase their property. They receive visitors who broaden the crowd they interact with. It gives them meaning and a project to work on. In some cases, like how this morning I helped Lou put his camper top on his truck, these guests can provide some concrete help, as well.

I liked Lou and Linda. They've been married for four decades. They are just slightly younger than my parents would be, were my parents living. They both worked as teachers. They are readers. They are proud of their progressive and solidly middle-class values. (Lou football coach, Linda kindergarten...)

After the recent hospitality from Liz and then these two hosts, however, I feel tired of trading abstract social obligations for a place to stay. I find that I want quiet and control, and a place of my own.

Originally, I had thought I would stay in Fredricksburg to see a dentist. I had arranged two or more nights with other warmshowers hosts. Nana in Austin made an appointment with a dentist she knows, so I canceled my appointments in Fredricksburg. I also gladly wrote the warmshowers host to say I would not be able to make it. I used the dental appointment as the excuse for the cancellation, but really I was tired of trading sociability for lodging.

I didn't actually depart from Lou and Linda's until after nine, as we were having a good conversation. They fed me breakfast, for which I was grateful. In Kerrville, I visited a kolache business owned by a Cambodian immigrant, and the combination of German pastry with recent immigrants from Cambodia made me as proud to be an American as I'll ever be. I ate a kolache with sausage and cheese, a kolache with bourdain (rice and sausage), and a fruit kolache.

Down the street from the kolache shop, I visited Hill Country Bicycle Works. I chatted with the man behind the counter. He provided me with advice about which roads I might take or should take. State route 16 was a straighter shot to Fredricksburg than the route shown on the ACA map. He told me that by taking 16, I'd miss some lovely scenery, but that the road would be fine for bicycling. He advised against US281 because automotive traffic on that road moves quickly, and there is no shoulder.

While we went over this, I used a floor pump. I'd been afraid to mess with the tires because I was concerned that the small travel pump I carry would not fully reinflate the tires. Because the tubes are made with presta valves, the compressors at gas stations will not fill them. I'd been afraid that I'd flatten the tires with no recourse. But in the bike shop, using the floor pump, I discovered that the tires were down to 65 psi, a full twenty PSI, or 25%, from their correct inflation pressure of 85 psi.

With properly inflated tires, the bike traveled so much more quickly with so much less effort on my part. I realized that some of my slow progress was due to this maintenance error on my part.

I was most of the way on 16 to Fredricksburg when the back tire went completely flat. I was taking a break on a bridge

Other topics: twin bike shops owned by married people, timidity at camping anywhere other than a campsite, this shitty motel, slow leak remaining in rear tire, going to Austin tomorrow.

# 4 December 2019 Johnson City, TX to Austin

[written on the 5th in Kerbey Lane Cafe, around the corner from Drifter Jack's hostel]

The hotel I stayed at, Hill Country Inn, was simply the shittiest place I can remember staying in the US. The walls, and especially the baseboards, were filthy. They looked like what I see after a negligent long-term tenant moves out of an apartment. The paint was peeling. The door showed signs of having been repeatedly forced open. The tile grout in the shower was full of what appeared to be mold.

There was no heat. Instead, there was a space heater. I listened to the vague television sounds from my neighbor all night long. For more than sixty dollars, I felt cheated. The only other hotel in town was a Best Western for ten dollars more. I wish I'd stayed there.

On the whole, I didn't like my choices. I could have stayed with warmshowers hosts, or camped in Fredericksburg. Alternatively, there were several possibilities for trespass-camping along my way: two cemeteries, several ranches that looked unloved and/or had signs indicating they were for sale. Instead, I pushed hard to arrive at this shitty hotel, exhausted.

If I'd stayed in Fredericksburg, I would have repaired my rear wheel with the correct parts. Instead, when the woman part of the twin bike shops did not have tape that was wide enough for the wide rims I ride (24 inch tape), I bought the too-narrow tape. I fixed my jerry-rigged flat repair, tearing up the old tape on the rim and replacing with narrow tape. Almost immediately after I left Johnson City, I had a flat which I had to repair using Gorilla tape. The jerry-rigged repair cost me almost two hours.

That said, it was a thrill to ride a bicycle with properly-inflated tires through hill country and down into Austin. It was a challenge to try to get to the Wednesday-night contra dance in time to participate. Nana brought me a change of clean clothes, and convinced the responsible people at the dance hall, a city recreation center, to let me use the (cold) shower.

Meanwhile, Zsa arranged a call with me. She went to the house in Nashville. I directed her to the places in the house she could find several things I wanted mailed. She agreed to do this after both Lenny and Jonathan volunteered to, but then failed to complete, the task. There was a moment in the recreation center where I had to juggle Nana's social expectation of me with Zsa's immediate need to talk with me via telephone. I only got to dance two contra dances and a waltz, but I can anticipate seeing my forwarded mail, specialty warm "lobsterlaw" bicycle gloves, and an exceptionally-bright helmet-mounted headlamp when I pick up general delivery in Navasota.

After the dance, I went out for frozen yoghurt with Nana and Scott. Scott is a formerly-homeless man who lives in the tiny house and RV community in service to the homeless where Nana serves as a resident volunteer. I didn't really want to go for frozen yoghurt, and yet I had so many questions for Nana.

On the whole, biking to Austin was a challenge in which I felt alive. Coming down into the city, losing elevation and going up hills, taking the lane in rush-hour suburban traffic, speeding down the Southwest parkway [?]- I felt masterful. Here, I know what I'm doing and what I want, which is to bike across the country and to arrive at the dance before it ends.

## 5 December 2019 Drifter Jack's Hostel, Austin

When I turned 30, I was living in San Francisco. I thought it really was the end of me to turn thirty. I felt like I hadn't accomplished anything. I didn't know that for many people, having little to show for the first three decades of life is not unusual. I also judged myself too harshly, for at thirty, I had

- Finished a college degree
- Completed a term as a Peace Corps Volunteer
- Moved from Atlanta to San Francisco without a solid plan and only \$1000
- Lived in Seattle, Tucson, the Dominican Republic, Asheville, and, briefly, a monastery
- Had some great sex and great loves
- Involved myself deeply with a series of religious and political movements that I cared about

I can see in hindsight that my self-loathing and gratuitous self-critique were the only things that distinguished me from many of my peers. I understand now that people make significant commitments starting in their late twenties or early thirties to education, career, and relationships. My sense that I had done nothing at all was inaccurate, and my panic about my situation was unwarranted. That choices motivated by the panic caused unfortunate outcomes for me.

The changes that brought me to my current situation really started around the time I turned thirty. I did the best I could with the material resources, emotional wisdom, and intellectual tools I had available at the time. Nonetheless, the difficulties of the following years outpaced my ability to make a certain sort of choice that, lacking any other term, I will call "the self-actualizing choice."

When I say self-actualizing, I mean a choice that tends to increase my future possibilities of contentment. It is an expression of my values and preferences that tends to make it more likely the way I live my life in the future reflects those values and preferences.

Since my move from San Francisco, I have sometimes failed to recognize the significant handicap that some ways of thinking, combined with specific social obligations, have placed on my ability to make a self-actualizing choice.

- Negative decision making, or deciding against the risks instead of in favor of the possibilities
- Requiring a known destination before starting a promising journey
- Intolerance for ambiguity and risk, generally
- Impatience
- Mistaking outcomes I did not like as evidence of my own incompetence as a decision maker and/or evidence that I needed to change course because that course was a mistake
- Eldercare. When I considered moving away from San Francisco, the city I felt passion about to rural Illinois for graduate school, but
- Not having savings or a fallback plan
- Conceiving of myself in unkind and untrue ways (e.g. self-loathing, self-hate, belief that I was extraordinarily stupid or unlucky)

I don't feel angry or bitter with my younger self about the shortcomings of my process. There were no perfect decisions. I would hazard to guess there may have been relatively fewer merely good options than would have been ideal, which may mean that there was no actual "right" or "correct" choice. If I fall headily and deeply in love tomorrow with a woman who is the embodiment of everything I ever dreamed of, I might say to her, "My Beloved, all of my mistakes, at long last, have led me to you." I am reminded also of the quote attributed to the Zen Buddhist teacher Shunryu Suzuki: "My life? One big mistake!" In absolute terms, there can be no plan, but rather only the opportunity to experience and learn.

## 6, 7, 8, 9 December at Community First! Tiny home village

I visited the Texas tower. I served sandwiches to homeless people. I ran food from the kitchen to the serving area for a festival of lights fundraiser for the community.

Lots to say about this, but not a lot of time to write. I had my tooth worked on. I had a nasty accident when I collided with a curb in the poorly-designed bike facilities on 51 south-easterly from the H-E-B grocery. I thought I might have to call off or delay the rest of my trip because my hand and wrist were sore. I freaked out about insurance. I spent a lot of time trying to figure out what I should do to get treatment. Finally, I went to an urgent care center, Concentra, Monday the 9th before going to the dentist. There was no fracture; the only treatment I was given was a brace.

I spent a lot of time with Nana. Because Community First! is far away from the places I needed to go, and because I wrecked on Saturday, I felt beholden to Nana. I value autonomy and privacy so much that it was hard to let Nana do for me. Nonetheless, being dependent on Nana seems to have been what was necessary.

## 10 December Community First! to Bastrop State Park

43 miles.

I meant to do more today. But it was raining in the morning, and cold. Furthermore, my stuff took a long time to pack, and Nana's tiny house took an additional amount of time to clean. Tasks included carrying dishes from her house to the communal kitchen, washing them, and then carrying them back. I emptied the garbage. I swept. Nana's generosity with her time and effort was such a large donation that that I will forever be uncomfortably in her debt. The least I could do was make sure I left her house as good as I found it.

Problems often come in pairs. My braced wrist would be fine as a problem by itself, but today it was also cold and rainy. Also, many of the roads I traveled on today had inadequate shoulders or automobile traffic that went too fast for comfort. It was a difficult start. Nonetheless, I would not have felt comfortable importuning on Nana even one day more. I want privacy and autonomy. I don't want to process or negotiate with others. I can avoid doing emotional labor by continuing forward and traveling on my own.

I came the closest I have yet come to being hit by a car today. I was in the shoulder of a four-lane highway near Cedar Lake. Before arriving at the right-hand turn lane to the on-ramp for another highway, which is the point at which the four lanes become four lanes of forward traffic plus two turn lanes, a blue Toyota Camry attempted to pass the through-traffic in the straight-ahead lanes and enter the turn lane by coming onto the shoulder. The driver almost sideswiped me. I wanted to know why the driver almost killed me, but there was no way to catch up with the car. Instead, I flipped the driver off.

In Bastrop, at a convenience store outside the state park, I bought firewood for a fire. When he saw me struggle to attach the bundle of firewood to my bicycle, the man working there, who appeared to be the owner, said he would dispatch his employee in a truck to deliver the firewood. Now I am here with a warm fire made with that firewood, and with other wood I scavenged from near the campsite.

# 11 December 2019 Bastrop State Park to Round Top

51 miles

I wasn't all that enthusiastic about my ride today. I felt like the scenery I saw could have been in any rural area with deciduous forests. Bastrop State Park and Buescher next door are known for having a geographically isolated population of loblolly pines. These pines are not found this far south and west, usually. The population here is left over from climatic and geological changes millions of years ago.

These pines weren't enough to hold my interest. It probably didn't help that there was a massive fire eight years ago that wiped out much of the pine, leaving a landscape of burnt tree skeletons, scrub, and young trees. It looked like a south Georgia tree farm after harvest. What was left were these stupid hills going up and down and up and down.

Leaving the park, the roads had narrow shoulders or none at all. For many of the roads, this was not a problem, as there was little traffic. But when there was traffic, it came furiously and fast.

I only started at about 11:30. I estimated which town was about fifty miles from Bastrop, and made a phone call to the listing on the ACA map for an RV Park. The RV park listed was closed, as it had been sold. But the man I contacted, the former owner, knew the number for the owner of a pizza parlor, draughthouse, RV park, and dance hall across the street from the property he had owned. I called this second business person and got a commitment to allow me to camp on his lot.

I relied on Google Maps, but I regretted it. I did not want to do the extra miles south into LaGrange and then back north to Roundtop, so I accepted Maps' offer to carve a hypotenuse across the countryside. Alas, Google dropped me on a dirt road several miles out of town where I found further progress impossible because of a locked gate. I was cold, and I had just lost the cellular data service that I would need for Google to reroute me.

I set up behind the pizza parlor. In search of warmth, I went to one of the two places I saw open, a bar. I chose against the Mexican restaurant because I didn't want a beer or Mexican food. This bar offered an alcoholic hot chocolate that really hit the spot.

# 12 December Round Top to Navasota

Met a young woman, Sidney, in a bar in Round Top. I flirted. I wondered if I should have come on more strongly. She found me fascinating, while I appreciated the attention. I realized that I am missing company so much. She texted me and said she was sorry I couldn't hang around

and tell her more about my journey. When I told her I'd be in Navasota, she indicated it wasn't too far for her to come visit. I couldn't tell if she was joking, but I set out to be ready just in case.

Round Top is a long stretch of stalls and barns dedicated to the antique trade. Once a year, there are two weeks called "Antique Week" during which the town and environs swell with orders of magnitude more people. I found the thought of it bizarre, since in my life, my job has been to disgorge my parents' collections of old bullshit. I couldn't imagine attending such an event. In any case, at this point in the year, all the lots and barns were empty, awaiting whoever, perhaps old people, who like antiques.

[visited a cotton gin in Barton]

I crossed the Brazos River, which is one way of saying I entered East Texas. I passed by Washington-on-The-Brazos, the original capital of the Texas Republic. I drank a soda in the store in Independence, the original home of Baylor University.

Stayed in a hotel that I had to travel on a bike-unfriendly frontage road to get to. Prices were unexpectedly high because of Texas A&M graduation in nearby College Station. After two nights of sleeping in the cold, and being generally cranky, I wanted a morale boost and the opportunity to do laundry. There was also some sort of outside chance that Sidney would show up and I would charm the pants off her, though I recognized this as unlikely, and recognized my desire as coming from being alone so much recently. Unfortunately, I did not bring detergent, the store to buy detergent was back up the nasty frontage road, and Sidney had other plans.

## 13 Dec Navasota to Cagle Recreation Area

I left Navasota after a morning of picking up mail, resorting mail, and talking to the postal clerk ran into the afternoon. Jennifer P sent me one of my food boxes. Zsa sent me lobsterclaw gloves, the bright headlamp, and my accumulated mail. A third box awaited, for I had sent myself a box from Langtry containing things I thought I might want in the future that I didn't need right then. Additionally, I bought two isopropane stove canisters in Austin at REI with the intent of mailing one down the line, but had instead been carrying the extra weight with me since then.

I sat in the "Classic Rock Coffee Shop" that is housed in the building one of whose outside walls is covered with a mural in homage to local blues artists. Navasota is known for Mance Lipscomb, a famous blues artist who recorded during the folk revival of the early sixties.

I retrieved the general delivery packages after waiting in a slow line for the sole postal clerk. He would not accept the isopropane canister without greater discussion; I remarked that I'd come back with the regulation citation. I removed the packages back to the coffeeshop and began to

sort between what I would keep with me, send home, or send forward to my next maildrop, which I have planned for New Roads.

I was cornered by a retired Border Patrol agent who wanted to talk at great length about his desired trip by bicycle, which would follow the Lewis and Clark expedition. The old man did not know how to use a computer, but I put information about the Adventure Cycling Association website and warmshowers on a postcard so his wife could help him. I know my trip would be very different if I did not have access to the Internet or the ability to exploit the information that is available on it.

After I answered so many of the man's questions, I took my packages for home and New Roads across the street to the post office, along with both the fuel canister and the postal regulations on my phone that explained why it could be shipped. The line was ridiculously long, and the clerk, an affable fellow, lectured me on how I should ship canisters in the future. I regretted that I hadn't ended my conversation with the man who wanted to go on tour more quickly, for now it was late.

I rode somewhat more quickly than I had before. The terrain is flatter. Leaving Navasota and entering into the Sam Houston National Forest, there was, for the first time I can remember during my trip, a persistent full canopy of trees, like a green tunnel. Along the way, I met an Irisman with full panniers and a trailer, only the third or so bike tourist I've seen. The Irishman complained of the roads ahead. I advised him to visit Marfa, but he said he was turning south at Austin towards his ultimate destination, Tierra del Fuego, Argentina.

Roy, the Vietnam vet and former mainframe expert, with a heart of gold.

## 14 December Cagle to Shepherd

Shared resort venue with blue collar wedding. Venue a fancy camp designed by lesbian aunties. Paul, Crystal were hosts. Crystal talked a great deal with me about her career with SW airlines.

## 15 December Shepherd to Kountze

[crystal, morning greetings, shitting myself]

Woke up with a flat tire. Couldn't find the puncture, and it was a slow leak. I resolved to bike on ahead. Choices were bike store in Beaumont, twenty miles south of route, or getting something mailed to me up ahead.

I was already late leaving out of the venue, and I had already said my goodbyes. It was too awkward for me to consider just staying another night and sorting it out. I did think that Crystal might have taken me into town to pick up tubes.

Instead, I cursed myself for not having more tubes on hand, I stopped a couple of times an hour to reinflate the tire. I theorized that much of this trip has involved not knowing what would happen next, but finding a solution when absolutely necessary. I reckoned that it was no emergency, just as long as I could forebear the uncertainty and endure the extra effort needed to reinflate every so often.

I bought a barbecue plate from a food truck in Rye [?] that was the best I've had. I sat by the road to eat the fatty slabs of brisket, which was served along with white bread, pinto beans, potato salad, and jalapeño peppers.

I decided I'd again get a hotel to sort out my business. I planned on arriving at the hotel in enough time to select an ACA health plan. This was the deadline for doing so, and I've been unhappy with the PEO plan from Oscar. My plan from Oscar doesn't provide care other than urgent and emergency care outside of Tennessee, and I have certainly been thinking about being outside of that state some in 2020.

I rode through the Big Thicket, which is miles and miles of pine scrub and brush. There were no shoulders. Traffic was fast, though sparse. I attribute the sparseness of vehicular traffic to it being a Sunday. In this cross-county bike game, there is always another challenge. This day, the weather was warm with no wind or precipitation. I was in good health. The terrain was, taken on the whole, flat. But the tire issue and the lack of shoulders slowed my progress.

[fat rude cop in the hotel]

In the Super 8 in Kountze, I attempted to go on to healthcare.gov to select insurance. I had a password/username problem that prevented me from logging in. I then called the contact number, only to be told that due to a great number of calls, no agent would be available. In fact, the first few times I called, I was given the opportunity to leave a phone number for a later callback, but since the system would not correctly process my voice answer to its query as to whether the phone number it recorded was correct, it said it would not call me back. At the fourth attempt, I left a message, and the system accepted my enunciation of "yes." The recording promised the opportunity to change my insurance later, since I had left a message in the process of doing so before the midnight deadline.

I calculated where I might stop two nights after leaving Kountze. I discovered Oberlin, LA would be convenient. Warmshowers listed a woman who is a local economic development leader. She said I could ship tubes to her. I overnighed several from REI.

I notice I'm leaving out a lot of interesting detail because I'm busy, preoccupied, and not as turned on by my trip as before.

## 16 December 2019 Zero day in Kountze

When I woke up in the morning, I didn't feel like leaving. There were supposed to be thunderstorms. The National Weather Service issued a tornado watch. I thought it would be wise, albeit expensive, to deal with several pieces of business that had come in the mail to me in Navasota. These included property tax bills, medical bills, and a credit card bill. I also wanted to set up rental deposits from Zsa, and interest payments to RBC.

This worked fine. I had a very productive day. I even found the small leak in the tube by submerging the tube in a tub full of water. I then patched the tiny hole, mounted the tube inside the rim, put the tube back on the rim, and felt rather self-congratulatory.

The difficulty emerged a few hours after the patch when I heard a hiss and saw the tire go flat again. My investigation revealed that the new leak was at the base of the stem. As a last hope, I attempted to seal the stem to the rubber at its base with several layers of patches. This only held for about five minutes before it deflated. In the morning, I will be obliged to find my way to a bike shop, for sure, even having stayed here for two nights without forward motion.

## 17 December 2019 Kountze to Kirbyville

41 miles.

I engaged an Uber driver to take me to Beaumont, where I bought new tubes. I installed one of these after checkout in the lobby of the hotel. After leaving the hotel, and after a stop for lunch, I had four hours to get to Kirbyville. Fortunately, it was flat, and I was energized. For the first time on my trip, I made an average speed greater than 10 miles per hour.

I've been having a difficult time accepting help. Even though a lot of the hosting is free of monetary charge, there is an exchange. Tonight, I'm staying at the United Methodist Church. Jim, a leader here, has been hosting touring cyclists at the church for five years. He is an old man with many stories. He lives alone. He used to be an adventurer himself, but now, at 77, walks with a limp due to a hip problem that keeps him from riding and hiking. The exchange here is that I listen to his stories, go out for dinner with him, and share my company. Fortunately, Jim, who used to lead trips for the Sierra Club, has good stories.

In exchange for being Jim's emotional labor gigolo, I have a pleasant place to stay on a night when temperatures will dip below freezing.

Looking at the binder of touring cyclists that Jim has assembled, I see that many went faster than I have gone. It's been two months since I left San Diego. Some of these did the same tour to this point in a month. Stops for dental work, sickness, or mechanical issues are demoralizing. The trip to Austin added a week to my trip. There were three extra days in Tempe, a pleasant extra day in Tucson, the detour to see Slab City, and the extra three days in Silver City on account of my dental issues. I went more slowly through much of west Texas than was necessary merely because I didn't stop to inflate my tires. In the future, I will know how important forward progress is, and will have better ideas on how to ensure a more rapid pace.

Though I know it's not a reasonable goal, I would like to arrive in St. Augustine before New Years. I'm impatient. I feel like I have already passed through the most interesting parts of the route. Part of me would like to skip New Orleans, and bang out the last thousand miles in ten grueling days. Since I suspect that ten consecutive hundred-mile days would ruin me, even if I were able to go that fast, and because I very much do want to see New Orleans, I'm not going to try to finish so quickly. But I am going to pick up the pace. Tomorrow, I'm going to try my hardest to get to Oberlin, almost eighty miles away. I think the challenge will be helpful in focusing my efforts and building enthusiasm.

## 18 December 2019 Kirbyville to Oberlin

78 miles approximated.

I crossed the LA line at Bon Wier. I stopped at a gas station, where I bought a "boudin": rice and meat bits encased in a sausage form. Miles and miles of flat pinelands and logging.

At DeRidder, I stopped at a coffee shop where they served me a latte and beignets. I had only once ever eaten a beignet. The beignets I had here made the previous ones seem as plastic fruit in a bowl is to produce picked from the tree. They were warm on the outside from frying, doughy on the inside. I got powdered sugar all over my black merino wool top. It was satisfying.

The bathroom of the coffee shop was full of graffiti from other bicycle tourists. I took a picture of the wall for instagram.

When I was in Kountze, I had ordered bike tubes shipped to the tourism director in Oberlin, Adria. I biked to meet her, even though she dropped hints that there was a hotel nearby, that she usually left the office about an hour before my planned arrival, and that the bathroom in Veteran's Park where her office is located is temporarily out of order. We talked, she gave me my now-unneeded tubes and a stack of brochures about tourism in her parish, and she told me to set up my tent on the front porch of the office. "The porch doesn't have lights, so I'll leave the

lights on inside."

She meant well. For my part, I couldn't bring myself to pay for another hotel stay, but I wished I had made other arrangements. It was a cold night, and would have been uncomfortable anywhere. Yet the constant noise from the traffic on the road in front of that office, the lights from inside, and the light from street lamps competed for which would be the greatest cause of my poor night's sleep.

She told me that her assistant would be by in the morning to take me to her organization's proud new project, a swamp museum. I resolved to get up early, before the assistant arrived, and haul ass out of there. Having kept her at her work after her business hours and slept on her organization's front porch, even without any comfort, I felt guilty but determined about this choice.

It was cold. I planned to get to Simmesport. I contacted a truck stop there that allows camping and has 24 hour access for bikers. I confirmed they were available. At least Adria provided Internet access, useful in my escape from guilt and a situation I didn't want to be in.

## 19 December 2019 Oberlin to Bunkie

61 miles, approximated.

I did not want to go to the swamp museum, whatever that might entail. So I got up before seven to avoid conflict. It was below freezing. I broke down the tent and packed up. I was forced to use lobsterclaw gloves, which gather pinky to ring finger and middle finger to index finger, reducing five digits to two digits and a thumb in a manner similar to how mittens reduce the hand to one digit and a thumb. I was not careful or dainty, but slapped everything in the panniers as fast as I could. Two stakes fell through the cracks in the porch decking; I crawled under the porch on my belly.

I continued to Landreneau's grocery. I got a cup of coffee, two eggs, a biscuit, and something called "pan sausage." This pan sausage was square smoked meat unlike the patties or links I see elsewhere. Landreneau's grocery specializes in area smoked meats. I could not explain what goes into pan sausage, and there's a chance I should not want to know. I did, however, see a case full of smoked meat from rabbits, deer, and other animals. I had no idea as to what some of the stuff the butcher case was.

A group of men congregated at the largest table. One would leave, and another would come. Children from the school came in and bought snacks on their way to their day of classes. The

men's club continued their ongoing gathering for the hour I was there, albeit with a changing membership. I've seen this gathering of men at the breakfast spot in many local communities.

I didn't listen to the men, though I did hear one claim that the impeachment of Trump was a coup. The House just passed articles of impeachment. This is Fox land. These are Trump supporters. Fox "Friends and Family" showed on the television.

On my way to the bathroom, a little girl saw me and asked her mom who I was. I heard the mom say "oh, dear, he's a bicyclist." The way she said it made it sound like a disease, as if she was warning her child not to get leprosy or go on a long bicycle trip. I felt uncomfortable. I had a paranoid reaction that everyone in this little town now knew who I was, and that I had dipped out on the swamp museum tour. I wrote Adria a regretful message, gathered my stuff, and left with haste after paying my bill. Adria wrote back, politely accepting my apology and wishing me safe travels. I was glad to get the hell out of there without burning any bridges or causing any confrontations.

I immediately made the mistake of trusting Google maps to get me to the next town, Mamou. I did not follow the ACA map, which warned that "many parish and some state highways are unpaved." When a man, a farmer in a truck, stopped me early along this Google route to ask whether I knew where I was going, and to warn me it was a rough way to go, I did not heed his hint. I had meant to cover forty miles by lunch, but Google took me down some odd farm roads that ultimately led to a six mile stretch of gravel and dirt in different conditions. I had to slow to six miles an hour to stay on the bike. By the end, I worried that I would have knocked my tires totally out of true or broken a spoke.

Meanwhile, the conversation with Sidney from Roundtop had gotten odd. I had written to her while sleeping in a cold tent on the porch. I asked her if I could be frankly sexual with her. I probably did this because I was bored, cold, and could not sleep. If she had immediately said "yes," I would have tried to lure her into a scenario where I encouraged her to fantasize about whatever while I directed her to touch herself and tell me about it. But when she did not respond, the moment passed.

Now, with intermittently useless data service as I went down equally useless dirt and gravel roads, she wanted to know why I asked her permission to be frankly sexual. When I explained the question, her answer was "I guess," I told her that wasn't enthusiastic consent. The bottom line is that she's not interested in my sexual game. I'm not disappointed in this outcome. I'm totally flattered by her genuine interest in me as a whole person. Nonetheless the negotiation needed to arrive at this conclusion was arduous when done asynchronously with forty-minute gaps.

I allow that it was beautiful country on these backroads. Much of what was not wooded was flooded and planted in rice. I can't recall having seen rice production before. In those fields where the harvest had already happened, droves of birds gleaned the leftovers. With the

exception of the noises from the occasional pickup truck or farm machine, I experienced several hours of quiet solitude. Were my goals for the day different, I might have enjoyed this experience more.

In Mamou, I found the Krazy Kajun cafe for lunch. It's across the street from Fred's. Fred's is a club that claims to be the cradle of the Cajun renaissance. Starting from about 1940, the owner of the club hosted traditional bands and so-called "swamp pop" to play. He also hosted a French-language radio show that is still in existence.

By now, it was past noon and I'd only done twenty miles instead of forty. I sat in the cafe and had to readjust my expectations. I would not make it to Simmesport. I decided I would try for Bunkie, where there is a fire station famous amongst cyclists for taking overnight guests. I ate the smoked sausage and chicken gumbo, and asked for extra rice.

I called the fire department in Bunkie. I have read accounts from other tourers about staying in the Bunkie firehouse. It's listed as "cyclist only" accomodations on the map. I spoke with a man named Geoffrey. He assured me that he was the shift leader for that evening, and that I would have a place to stay.

Much of the rest of the journey for the day involved passing through Ville Platte and Chicot State Park. In Ville Platte, I attempted to visit the Swamp Pop museum, but found it closed. I looked about for a restroom because I needed to take a shit right at that very moment. I ended up in a McDonalds, off route. I started out on 29 out of town, which looked like a straighter shot than what the ACA map held in store. But soon after town, I experienced fast traffic on that road with minimal shoulders. I made my way slowly back to the ACA route, losing yet more time.

I got lost in Chicot State Park. I made a wrong turn into a campground and recreation area. The road ended in a parking lot after a couple of miles. In order to get back on track, I had to work my way back to the park entrance and study the map carefully. I note that in many parts of my trip to date, especially in the most rural parts of the Southwest, there were fewer navigational requirements because there were fewer roads.

At the end of Chicot State Park, ACA chooses to go to Lone Pine before Bunkie. I chose the more direct route, which took me back out to 29. In doing this, I cut out at least an hour of travel.

## 20 December Bunkie to Baton Rouge

106 miles

I felt good about my adventure to Bunkie. Even though I did not go as far as I wanted, I redeemed my faith that I could go a far distance. The firehouse adventure felt like bike touring instead of being a bum or a gigolo. I decided I would travel all the way to Baton Rouge.

Signs of a shift change started at the firehouse around six. There were new firefighters who came in. I saw a woman on her way to work who came to exchange an infant with a firefighter whose shift was ending. By half past seven, there were three police officers, four firefighters, the assistant chief, and the chief all hanging around and bullshitting with each other. I invited them all to take a photo in front of the building, but they were blasé about the idea. Their overall friendly disinterest was a pleasant respite from hosts who wanted a lot of my focus, or who wanted me to tour a swamp museum.

I hoped to arrive in New Roads before the post office closed. I thought I would then decide whether to press on to Baton Rouge. I missed the post office because it closes at 4:30 instead of 5.

Morganza Spillway challenge, state police, bridge, helpful man who bought me lunch

I wanted to challenge myself. I got that challenge when I arrived, 70 miles in, dusk falling, to the wye to New Roads, and decided instead to press over the Mississippi River Bridge for the last thirty miles in the dark.

For most of the distance between the bridge near New Roads and Baton Rouge, US 61 is a divided four-lane highway that has ample shoulders. The exceptions are about four bridges, which have no shoulder at all. For these bridges, the only solution was to wait for a lull in the interstate-speed traffic, and sprint across. I am pleased that Zsa mailed me my bright headlamp, the Lumina 1800 dual, so that I could attach it to my helmet and be better seen. Still, I did have one close call where a truck almost rear ended me just as I left the end of one of the several shoulderless bridges.

This was my first day of riding more than 100 miles. I arrived at my warm showers host, Mark's, apartment delirious with satisfaction. I felt like I had won a great prize. He had me take a shower, and then we went out for a beer.

## 21 December Baton Rouge to Baton Rouge

0 miles

I spent all day hanging around Mark and Mark's apartment. He was just the right person to meet. He is a decade or two older than I am. He's a bachelor who has not married and has no

children. He's dedicated to living in the center of the city so that he can bike anywhere he needs to go.

Mark is an archivist at the LSU library in its special collections department. His house is covered in books from his favorite publishing venture, Microcosm. This is a publisher that started with punk rock zines, but now publishes an extensive catalog of countercultural information. I was especially impressed by his collection of feminist bicycling science fiction by Elly Blue. If there is space for such a specialized sort of writing, I feel there is hope for humans.

Mark took me to the Saturday morning farmer's market (Red Stick farmer's market) that he had a hand in creating. He seemed to know everyone. He gave me an expert tour of the state capitol that Huey Long built. And in the evening, we went to a solstice party that was mostly attended by bicycling advocates.

## 22 December 2019 Baton Rouge to New Orleans (mid-city)

110 miles

Mark rode with me out of town. A young man named Mike, who had some idealistic ideas about touring without money or savings, met us on the levy. At a park along the way, we saw another cyclist who knew Mark. He changed his route to follow us, so that I was seen out of town by a lovely group of people.

There was no place to stay between Baton Rouge and New Orleans except for a couple of "plantation resorts." These are old plantation estates that now house and feed tourists. I have a hard time reconciling the enslaved work of those who put the planting into plantation with my leisure here, so I will not stay in a plantation resort.

Much of my route was along the river road. Chemical plants, spillway, mud, falling into the ditch. Mississippi mud that stopped my wheels. Arriving in NOLA with a phone that didn't seem to do data.

## 23, 24, 25 December 2019 Falling in Love with New Orleans

## 26 December 2019 New Orleans to Gulfport, MS

[77 miles, about.

Instead of retracing my steps back to New Roads to follow the ACA route, I hustled east on the coast. Much of the riding was fine, though there were two notable hazards. The bridge from Gentilly to Chef Menteur highway had inadequate shoulders and automobile traffic that moved too quickly for comfort. About a half mile from the Mississippi state line, the shoulders gave out, as if the Louisiana transportation officials stopped providing safe passage to bicyclists who might choose to leave their state. The point at which the

I stayed in an AirBnB. The host met me at the door. She said that previously, she maintained the rooms as apartments. She didn't like the tenants she got, which she said were mostly drunks who spent all their time, and sometimes their rent money, in the casinos nearby. She was an older lady who looked like she drank a fair bit herself. The house was a time capsule of 1970s fashion: dark wood, cutesy signs, a pink bathroom. She left a radio on all night to an oldies station, just to complete the effect. I could have rolled my eyes and said "Whatever, boomer," or something like that. Instead, I slept, glad to have paid only \$40 in a stretch that didn't have so many options.

## 27 December 2019 Gulfport, MS to Dauphin Island, AL

On this day, I rejoined the ACA route. The epic highlight of the day was crossing the massive bridge (or causeway) from the shore to Dauphin Island. I felt hurried, and regretted it.

## 28 December 2019 Dauphin Island, AL to Pensacola Airport

I hustled out of Dauphin Island, but not as fast as hindsight would have recommended. I slept well under the house of a warmshowers host whose beach residence is on piers, and but a block from the ocean. He leaves a pad in the shed for cycle tourists to use. I arrived late. I did go down to the beach. It was cold and dark, however, so my plans to get buck naked and run in the surf were foiled. As a matter of fact, I was in too much of a hurry to even see much of the ocean.

Even though I arrived quite late, I planned to be on the 8AM ferry off the island. Instead, I slept more. Then I went looking for a breakfast cafe that turned out to be closed, after which I ended up eating two breakfast biscuits, handmade and tasty, at the Island Gulf convenience store. I was the first in line for the 9:30 ferry. I was given a ticket, a laminated piece of paper, but no one ever asked for the ticket when I boarded. I later would give this ticket to a German bicycle tourist I saw in a restaurant between Defuniak Springs and Marianna, FL.

I had a long struggle into the wind for much of the rest of the day. It was cloudy, and it threatened to rain. In many of the places that might otherwise have shown the most promise for scenic enjoyment, namely the spits of land between gulf shore and inland waterway, the wind was most severe. I regretted that my plans did not allow me to stick around. My hurry turned what might have been pleasant or interesting into a chore.

I worried about timing. I had planned a seventy mile day, with the belief that the ease with which I biked a hundred or more miles from Bunkie to Baton Rouge, and from Baton Rouge to New Orleans evinced that a mere seventy miles would be done in about half a day. But the headwinds and the topography, which, especially considering the height of some bridges that I crossed, was not flat, kept me from manifesting this imagined ease. In fact, at Gulf Shores, having understood the unexpected difficulties after only a few miles into my day, I attempted to see if the nearest Enterprise rent-a-car might pick me up. Instead, I found that they and the other rental car place, both about twenty miles inland, would be closing at noon, it being a Saturday. Thus, I kept toiling.

Ultimately, after a harrowing adventure bicycling Pensacola's streets at night, I rented a car at the airport. Traveled three hours to Greeneville, AL, where I stayed in a hotel. This was get-there-it-is, a disease, at its worst, and the brightest idea I'd never pursue again. With hindsight, I would have just biked the previous day to Mobile, and left from there. But my! Dauphin island was a treat, as was the ferry. I shall go back sometime.

## 29 December 2019 Greenville, AL to Cincinnati, OH (Blue Ash) via Nashville (via automobile)

In the morning, I traveled to Nashville. I put all the stuff from the trip in the house. Roommate Jon helped me return the car to the Budget rental car location on Church Street. After a nap, I dressed in comfortable non-biking clothes and departed in my own car to Cincinnati. In Cincinnati, I stayed with Rene Cline.

## 30 December 2019 Cincinnati (Blue Ash) to Cleveland, OH (North Olmstead) (via automobile)

I arrived in plenty of time for the Kappus holiday party. All seven cousins, three remaining children of my grandfather Robert Kappus, the spouse of my one married cousin, and the spouses of the three living children of Robert Kappus were in attendance.

## 31 December 2019 North Olmstead, OH to Louisville, KY (via automobile)

Celebrated New Years Eve at the Louisville contra dance. I picked up Rene in Cincinnati (Blue Ash) on the way. As I left the day before, Rene had invited me to come dance in Cincinnati for the NYE celebration. I had uttered something noncommittal. In order to decline her offer, I offered her transportation with me to Louisville. I was surprised when she said yes; I followed through because I wanted to be good on my word.

Callie and Robbie hosted us. Rene, Jaie (from Nashville) and I were the oldest people there. The twenty-somethings stayed up late into the morning. Starting around 2, Rene and I tried to sleep by taking up a side room in the apartment, her on an inflatable mattress and me on my sleeping pad. We did not sleep well. I dropped Rene off at the bus station at 10:00 as agreed.

I went back to Callie and Robbie's and tried to nap on the couch. Jaie joined me on the couch eventually. Our feet and legs in the center, we had a lazy and sleepy conversation. We caught up on what had happened since I last saw her, especially as regards her choral directing over the Christmas season and her composition of a cantata that received its debut.

A young woman named Abby was also there. She is a senior in computer science at Indiana University. She was going to stay in Louisville for a couple of days and then get a ride to the next dance weekend, Jan Jam in Urbana. We talked a lot about her plans to get started on her adult life, such as the job she has lined up in Indianapolis. We also talked about how a crisis of faith when she was 18 led her to leave the strict evangelical Christianity of her upbringing.

Religious sects say let Jesus come inside you

## 1 January 2020 Louisville to Nashville (via automobile)

Eventually, I noticed that of the party, only Jaie, Callie, Abby, and Robbie remained. Robbie remained asleep. Jaie left, her 14 year-old son, Thomas, in tow. I had earlier discussed taking Abby to her lodgings, an Airbnb that she could check into no earlier than 2PM. Callie was leaving at 12:30 for work, and I worried I would be sending the wrong message by spending an hour alone with the young woman and then driving her to her lodgings. I also wanted to get to my next stop. I made an excuse, and left Abby to rely on Robbie and her own abilities to get to her lodgings, two miles away.

I drove to Nashville.

## 2 January 2020 Nashville to Blackwater River State Park, Florida (via automobile)

## 3 January 2020 Pensacola Airport to Blackwater State Park

About 30 miles

In the morning, I sorted out which campsite I could be in. The ranger assigned me to campsite 30. It seems that they hold back a campsite or two just in case. If I had instead left for Pensacola and returned on a bicycle, I still would have been accommodated, as Florida has a policy of not turning away bicyclists. At this campsite, cyclists will set up in the picnic area if there are no campsites. But I paid for two nights in an actual site because of the ambiguity of whether I was a cyclist or not, and also because I wanted to have a fire ring for a fire.

I moved all the stuff from campsite nine to thirty. I put the contents of the tent inside the car, and put the erected tent on top. I drove to the new site. I left three panniers, all the firewood I'd bought, most of my clothing, the sleeping bag, and the sleeping pad at the site.

I packed one pannier and the handlebar bag with the essentials of riding for a day. These were snacks, a battery pack to charge the phone, maps, warm clothing, rain gear, and the repair kit. I put that pannier, plus everything I would not take on my bike, into the car. The bicycle itself remained in the car, partially disassembled.

I drove to the airport, taking my time. It was, by turns, sprinkling and sunny. I asked Google Maps for a list of independent coffee shops on my route. Of that list, I chose The Drowsy Poet. It turned out to be a mediocre choice.

The Drowsy Poet is down the street from Pensacola Christian College. Its outside storefront is covered by the lamest stock photography of people drinking coffee. Its insides were full of anti-abortion propaganda and signs from anti-abortion fundraisers, along with decorations that were every bit as inane as the stock photos. Fox News played on both televisions. It appeared to be a poor copy of Starbucks for people who are aggrieved that Starbucks insufficiently celebrates Christmas, or that the original Starbucks logo had breasts in it. That the Christian right could appropriate fancy coffee and make it theirs, including shitty aesthetics, saddened me.

Heck, they even had a player piano provide the music. It played the Beatles, Elton John, and other light rock favorites, known to all who ever went to the dentist or who heard piped music on an elevator. I do not know, but I think they did this to avoid offense that playing recent music with lyrics might cause among some of their more sensitive customers.

The latte was fine. The scone was a bit sweet and a bit stale.

In airport economy lot 1, section A, I parked. A real downpour started just as soon as I'd assembled the bicycle. After putting the seat on, affixing the handlebars to the top tube, and putting the wheels in their drop outs, the front wheel was rubbing against the front fenders to the extent that it wouldn't easily move. I locked the bike to the airport parking lot fence in the pouring rain, putting a helmet cover on the leather seat.

Internet research revealed that in order to adjust the fenders, I would need a 10mm socket. I left the bicycle locked to the fence. Because I had been in the parking lot for less than an hour, I did not pay to leave. I drove towards Lowe's. As I was feeling hungry, I stopped at a Jason's Deli, where I ate clam chowder and half of a pastrami reuben.

After the usual frustrating wait to be helped, which is the hallmark of a big box store, an employee helped me pick up a socket and driver, similar to a screwdriver. I went back to the same parking lot, adjusted the fenders, and changed my clothes. By now, it was seriously raining. Fortunately, it was warm. I only attempted to keep my upper legs and crotch dry. Wearing the rain top just made me wet with condensate.

I arrived before dark. I made a fire using wood and charcoal starter fluid I'd left at the campsite.

I note that none of this was very comfortable or fun. Also, I didn't feel as authentically bad ass as I might have if I had not taken five days to go see family and friends, and to sleep in my own bed. Nonetheless, I displayed great technical prowess inasmuch as I successfully reassembled the bicycle, even when tools that I did not have were required. I demonstrated good judgment when I planned only thirty-odd miles on my first day of riding after a break.

Jason's Deli, Lowe's, further plans with Heidi.

## 4 January 2020 Blackwater River State Park to near Defuniak Springs, FL

It rained hard during the night. I prepared mentally to break camp and ride in the pouring rain. I was pleased when I did not have to do so. Instead, I bagged the two pieces of wet clothes I had, a button up riding jersey and chamois shorts, in a grocery bag that I attached to the outside of a rear pannier. At some point down the road, these had fallen away, leaving me with fewer clothes. The replacement value is just south of \$100.

In a convenience store at about the halfway mark, I bought snacks, a tallboy beer, and charcoal starter fluid. On the door of the store hung a sign announcing that sales of tobacco products to people under 21 were now illegal due to legislation passed by congress and signed into law by the President. I asked the clerk if she had fielded many complaints from 20 year olds who could not buy their own smokes.

I arrived before dusk wondering if I should have gone further. The RV resort, which really seemed to be more like a trailer park for old people, was about four miles north of the route before arriving to DeFuniak Springs. It is one of several similar "RV resorts" along a lake, King Lake, that was a swamp until the river that drained into the swamp was dammed.

It turned very cold in the evening, and forecasts predicted the temperature would be around 35 degrees Fareinheit in the morning. I spent a couple of hours on a leather couch in the warm clubhouse confirming that I could arrive to meet Heidi in San Augustine on the 10th of January. I shaved about forty miles from the route by staying on US Bicycle Route 90, which avoids the ACA route's meander into Gainesville. I made reservations at Suwanee River State Park. All this time, there was a bingo game going on behind me.

The RV resort is another situation I might have enjoyed more under different circumstances. If I had swimtrunks I did not mind getting wet, I might have tried their hottub. As is, I made do with camping in an environment that was not really made for tenters, on a night that was by rights too cold to stay outside comfortably.

## 5 January 2020 Defuniak Springs, FL to Marianna, FL

About 69 miles.

After a relatively futile attempt at good sleep in the freezing cold, I awoke around seven. I attempted to get my act together in the cold. Somehow, it took me until about nine to be entirely ready to leave. Then I

Being lost because the RV Resort enclosed the road. Beignets. Almost losing wallet. DeFuniak Springs' history. The ease of the day, overall, and hopeful evidence that my plans going forward will work.

## 6 January 2020 Marianna, FL to Bicycle House, Tallahassee

68 miles

I have a serious case of get-there-ititis.

I biked into a distinctly different part of Florida when I hit the Apalachicola. Immediately after crossing the bridge, which is just downriver from the lake [?] at the GA border, I ascended an abrupt three hundred foot bluff. The hills continued. There is little net elevation gain, however. As a result, any delay introduced in a day of bicycling by climbs is immediately offset by descents. The route here is full of what some would call "roller-coaster" hills.

Florida appears to have a "two-lane" system for US90, which they are trying to have marked as US Bike Route 90. If there are two lanes in each direction of travel, one of them may be a bicycle lane, but if there are two lanes for any direction of travel for motorized traffic, there will be neither bike lane nor wide shoulder. In many cases, the two lanes in each direction for automotive traffic appear when passing through a town, in which instance the speed limit decreases significantly. Abstractly, substituting a lower speed limit for bike lanes seems reasonable. In reality, people driving cars do not follow the speed limit, and traffic patterns in a town tend to be more harried. People on bicycles would be safer if the Florida authorities continued bike lanes and/or wide shoulders into town.

Perhaps as a response to this pattern of truncating bike lanes and/or shoulders through towns, the ACA route often veers away from US Bike Route 90 when there are towns with extended stretches of four-lane road. On this day, I took ACA's recommended detour away from US90 when on my way from Quincy to Midway, and immediately regretted it. The ACA route was only one lane each direction, no shoulders, and hilly. Sight lines were short. The terrain added an extra fifteen to twenty minutes on to my trip to Tallahassee. I was already in a hurry because I was worried about biking after dark in a strange new city.

I made it to Tallahassee well before dark, despite my concerns. Part of my worry was motivated by looking at the clock on my cellphone. What I did not notice was that I had entered a new time zone, with the effect that my cellphone showed a time later in the day than I might have expected. With the change in time zone, however, the hour marked by a clock for the sun to set also came to be later. This saved my ass.

After some near misses because of fatigue and weird traffic patterns in this new-to-me city, I found the warehouse that Bicycle House occupies. It's not some democratically-run nonprofit with a board, but rather the personal project of a beneficent cabal. This cabal met me: Scott, builder and visionary; Cassie, his young wife and mother of his daughter, Lilly; and Luis. At my arrival, Scott and Cassie were busy reconfiguring shelves in the kitchen with the help of their eight-year-old. They weren't unfriendly, but they mostly ignored me.

The outdoor space immediately in front of the warehouse was enclosed with a fence made entirely of rebar and bicycle wheels. Inside this fence were piles upon piles of donated bicycles and parts. Inside, there were half a dozen stands and workbenches, along with some nicer donated bicycles. A friend of Scott's was working while I was here to polish a steel tandem; this is his gift to the family. Cassie intends to take Lilly on a summer bicycling trip to Colorado.

There were two guest rooms, and a bathroom with shower. The warehouse was ample. If I lived in Tallahassee, I'd volunteer here. Being that the space is open Tuesday through Saturday, and I arrived Monday, I was sad that my chosen schedule did not allow me to stay an extra day and see the space when it is open to the public.

I was so glad for the space. They also served me dinner, which was frozen supermarket pizza doctored with extra fancy ingredients. This was a celebration of installing an oven in the space, which previously had only featured an induction hotplate, toaster, and microwave. Luis offered Ponche de Crema liquor from Venezuela. During dinner, I was able to find out snippets more. Scott and his family do not own cars. Bicycle house exists to prov

Scott had a long rap about why he hates "bicycle advocacy" and believes that bicycle facilities principally serve the few rich people who choose bicycling. He feels that much of bicycle advocacy is classist and fails to help those who ride bikes for a lack of better options. I didn't entirely understand his rant, but I would like to visit again in order to understand the perspective.

I slept like a motherfucker. It was GREAT.

## 7 January 2020 Tallahassee to Suwanee River State Park

77 miles

I woke up in the morning at six with every intent of leaving the bicycle house early. Instead, I lounged for another hour. Then it took me a while to pack, especially since I had spread out all the tent parts to dry. (Condensation built up rapidly when I camped in the cold next to a lake.) I made a big bowl of cheerios, raisins, freeze-dried strawberries, and powdered milk. It was eight before Luis showed me the door, took a picture of me and my bike in front of the building for their records, and I took a photo of him with my bike. Then I left to the nearest coffeeshop, All Saints.

All Saints was mostly empty at this hour. It looked like it had been there for a while. Grafitti and old show posters filled the bathroom walls. The barista who served me indicated they had once been open for twenty-four hours a day, but now close at midnight, which she called “not late.” I ordered a latte, which had too much foam and not enough crafty artwork on the top. I also got a vegan cookie; all the baked goods were vegan. The cookie did not taste good. Perhaps it had too much leavening, which is a problem with some vegan baked goods that vegans don’t taste since they don’t have anything to compare it to.

I wrote a little bit, but didn’t leave until 9:30 or so. Given my planned mileage, this was a late start.

I really liked the route this day, overall. I felt strong and masterful. I asked my legs to carry me at ten miles an hour or more to my destination, and they did. There was some fatigue, but my body worked like a machine. As I often have on this trip, I worried about getting to camp after sunset. In this case, I arrived just as the sun was going down.

The most memorable delay of the day was stopping for groceries. I bought milk, string cheese, bananas, and lighter fluid.

Florida state parks and campgrounds close at a certain hour, after which the visitor or campground guest needs a keycode to enter the area. The emailed confirmation of my reservation did not contain this key code, so I had called earlier in the day to speak with the rangers. In addition to telling me the key code, they also agreed to leave two bundles of firewood at my site in exchange for my pledge to come by the office the next morning to pay \$6.75 for each bundle.

I was delighted that my firewood was at the site. I immediately set out to make a fire. I cut the top off one of a couple of beer cans I'd found on the side of the road. I filled the bottom with lighter fluid. I soaked a strip of cardboard taken from the granola bar box in the lighter fluid, and left this sticking out of the can bottom. I placed the can bottom in the middle of the metal fire circle provided by the park. I piled one of the two bundles of firewood around the can, and lit the cardboard in the can bottom alight. I doused the wood in lighter fluid, and thus I started a campfire.

I placed my tent close enough to the flame that I could feel some heat while sitting on the sleeping pad, but far enough away not to catch fire. It was so pleasant to sit there and watch the fire. I was also able to take a hot shower in the bathhouse, whereupon I discovered that this state park provides coin-operated laundry machines to campground guests. Eventually, I went to bed, clean body in clean clothes, feeling very pleased with my day.

## 8 January 2020 Suwanee to Starke

About 74 miles.

This was a difficult day.

In the morning, I woke up at dawn to light another fire using the rest of the wood. This was part of the plan I had. Knowing how difficult it is to break camp in the cold-- and it was 35 degrees outside this morning-- I bought enough firewood to have a fire in the morning. I was able to warm my hands that, even with gloves, radiated discomfort from the cold of the air and from touching the various things that needed to be put away, especially the metal tent poles.

My RVing neighbor brought me a gift of coffee. It was in a disposable cup with a lid. He said that he kept such disposable cups around just so he could help out those who were, like me, "roughing it." I appreciated the gesture, despite the condescension.

After I packed up, I went out to the ranger station. It was a few minutes after eight when I paid the ranger for my wood. I also used the warmth of the ranger's station bathroom to change into chamois liners, and the water fountains to fill my bottles. I asked the ranger if she knew of any good breakfast places in the next town, Live Oak. She did a little research and recommended Dixie Grill.

"Great!" I said, "cause I'll probably want a break by then." I thanked her for her help and went off into the cold morning, stopping briefly before I reached the main road to put on lobsterclaw gloves.

I had a choice to make. I could follow the ACA route, about ten miles longer, or I could go directly on US 90, which is also called US Bike Route 90. Because I wanted to be in St. Augustine in a timely manner, I had planned to take the shorter way. Someday, I will come back and explore the Suwannee river and the sites I would have seen on the ACA route. The routes diverged at the State Park entrance.

When I got out to US 90, however, the shoulders were completely rutted by a machine used in road construction. It was only the shoulders that were masticated, with ranks of repeating lines running in the direction of travel. I assumed that this would end after a short while; when it didn't, I began to worry. I called FL DOT, and after being transferred about, a woman in the communications department told me that the shoulders would be like this until Live Oak.

Comparing the six miles an hour progress I was making, the eight miles into town remaining, and the fifteen extra miles that it would take to go back to the ACA route and continue that way, I decided to cope with the rutted shoulders. Moreover, I wanted to go to Dixie Grill. So I tolerated this bone jarring ride all the way to Live Oak.

I ate my second breakfast at Dixie Grill. I had steak, eggs, sliced tomato, and two biscuits. I was surprised and a bit taken aback to see an elderly lady-- the aged are everywhere here-- wearing a "Trump 2020" hat. I caught myself, and nodded politely in greeting. We have been on the verge of a war with Iran, and I fault Mr. Trump fully.

Leaving Live Oak, the shoulders were narrow and blocked with debris, but they were not masticated. I felt good. I caught up with my desired mileage pace of 10 miles per hour from the time I started. Then I arrived in Lake City, and everything went to hell.

As I mentioned before, Florida only provides a shoulder or bike lane when there is one lane in each direction. Reaching a town, the speed limit drops, even if the cars do not slow, an additional lane for automobiles appears, and any shoulder or bike lane disappears. When I got to Lake City, 90 became a four lane road with a center turn lane and no shoulders or bike lanes.

I treated this at first like any other town I've been in. I took the lane. I boogied along as fast as I could. I scanned behind me. Unfortunately, this didn't let up after a few miles. I hadn't paid much mind to it, but Lake City is a large town. This road passed by strip mall and business after strip mall and business. I kept going because I cared about my goal for the day.

I did one particular form of fuckery that I do to remain visible on city streets. I pull up to lights, lanesplitting on the right past the line of cars on my left. Before the light changes, but when there is no traffic, I pull ahead of that line of cars. This "shoaling" is a technique to be seen. It's pretty effective, but it can piss off drivers.

I'd been doing this act for a couple of miles, at least. It was tiring. The last straw was when two people in a domestic SUV pulled past me, but didn't go completely into the lane to my lane's left. They shouted something to the effect about how I shouldn't be there. I grabbed my u-lock as if it were a weapon, and tried to catch up with them. When they turned right ahead of me, I looked to see if they were parking. I didn't catch up with them.

I think it was then that I noticed I was putting too much emphasis on getting where I wanted to be, and I was not acting rationally. I pulled off the road and tried to catch my composure in the shade of a Sherwin Williams.

Other: pleasant reroute to Lulu, route 100 and logging truck, taking a bad fall, KOA kabin

## 9 January 2020 Starke to East Palatka

47 miles, about

[written in St. John's Campground in East Palatka]

On this, which should be the last night of my tour, I'm ready to stop and do something else. It's been a remarkable time, but I am tired. I want the conveniences of home. I was run off the road yesterday, and left with bruises and road rash. My clear vision that it could have been worse is making me a little too chickenshit to ride safely. This activity requires some acceptance of risk. Those who cannot, for example, take the lane in moving traffic, are at a greater risk in the long term.

Florida roads on this end of the state are hectic. Highway 100, especially, is full of fast moving trucks and doesn't have quite enough space for everyone driving a motorized vehicle, much less a bicycle. I feel like these roads have been more difficult than some of those from before, though that's likely colored by my recent fall.

I was surly this morning, and didn't want to go biking. At the IHOP where I ate breakfast, I was curt with the waitress. I was muttering stuff under my breath. I wanted to mutiny from myself. But the situation required that I move forward. Therefore, I was grateful that some thirty miles of my trip today were on a paved nonmotorized path, the Lake Butler to Palatka Trail. It made the miles easier since I was relieved on any requirement to play bicycle road warrior hero.

The trail was magnificent. It led through swamps, lakes, hammocks, and every variety of lowland Florida scene. The scenery was full of pine trees, birds, and palmetto. I was so glad for all this. It was a pleasant surprise when I was otherwise not looking forward to my day.

I also met a man named Lee in a picnic area at Florahome. Lee said he was hiking the Florida Trail, which he has done for several consecutive winters. He said he has hiked the length of the AT several times, as well. His journeying has lasted seven years. At what point, I wonder, does one stop being an adventurer, and become merely vagrant?

Heidi let me know that she has a cold that has laid her low. The key organizing principle of my trip from Pensacola has been that I would meet her on a weekend, this weekend, tomorrow, in fact. While meeting her would require longer days and forgoing some interesting stops, including Gainesville, her presence to celebrate the end of my journey would provide motivation and something to look forward to at the end. She would drive out from Tampa, we would go on a camping trip in her trailer, and she would deposit me at my car in Pensacola. I now can only wait to see if my friend feels better, which I hope she does, and not only for my sake.

I had exceedingly low hopes for the campground where I am staying tonight. Indeed, the owners did not return calls I made seeking to reserve a spot. Nor were they available when I came to the property at dusk. I left another message for them. A resident here indicated where the owners live, in a house adjacent to the property. I knocked on the door, but there was no answer. So I set up a tent in a flat spot next to a picnic table. If the owners are not around by the time I leave, I will stay without paying.

The reviews for the property are bad, and rightly so. The bathhouse has obvious mold and water damage. The floors are dirty with sand. But I will take a shower as soon as my clothes dry, albeit while wearing my sandals. I enjoyed what may be my last freeze dried camp meal for a while-- chicken parmesan-- on a table. All RV parks and campgrounds are on a continuum from poverty housing for struggling workers to camp resorts for vacationers and travelers. This one is full of families and itinerant workers. I surmise I am the only leisure traveler here. Assuming I never manage to pay, I'm getting more than I pay for, but only just a little bit more.

## 10 January East Palatka to Saint Augustine (North Beach Camp Resort)

About 35 miles, not including various lost detours.

I left before I ever saw the owners of St. John's Campground. I stayed at the campground for free. Some days later, a man called me, and claimed that he had not been present to take my money because he had experienced a death in the family. I am not certain that is true.

The first order of the day, after packing, was a haircut. I saw that there was a barber shop on the same side of 100 as the campground, and only about a quarter mile away. I went there, dodging traffic as I salmoned up the highway, being pushed out on the carriageway repeatedly by debris in the shoulder.

The hair salon was owned by the woman who cut my hair. We talked about Palatka. She claimed that Palatka was poor because the political elites of her county wanted to keep them that way. In her theory, as long as the many were kept unemployed and needy, the county government could continue to get grants and outside funding based on how poor the county is. She claimed that the county government was corrupt, and did not want new industries or employers.

Without noticing a contradiction, she launched into the story of how the county had tried to take a private lane serving her property and several others at the river. A shipbreaking company had wanted to build a yard on the river, and use the private road for access to their industrial site. She had participated in a lawsuit against the city when the city had allowed the company to use the private lane. She claimed that the county's use of imminent domain to take the private lane evinced the same corruption that was also shown when the county failed to produce employment opportunities and economic development for its residents.

My haircut and beard trim was satisfactory. The woman only accepted cash for payment, and I had none. She directed me to the gas station two doors down. I bought a coffee and a pop tart. I joked with the clerk, an African American woman who said she was from Tennessee. I felt myself drift back into an urban vernacular with her. I made jokes. I felt unlike my usual self: some of the jokes landed, and I was effusive. The ATM was more like my usual self: broken.

Across the street was the next possible ATM in a business called Cheyenne Saloon, a bar oriented especially towards bikers. I had a laugh when I saw that the bar served breakfast. I imagined a man having two shots of vodka wandering out and declaring that it was the breakfast of champions. Cheyenne also operates a drive-through package store and gift shop. I got my money out of the gift shop ATM.

Returning to the barbershop, I joked that the Florida motorcycle license test should require that candidates be able to ride while chugging a handle of Jack Daniels. That landed well, perhaps because I found the thought hilarious. I paid my bill and moved along.

The biggest challenge of the day was navigating. First, I attempted to go back to the ACA route. Then, after some twists and turns, I ended up on a bike path that went much of the distance to St. Augustine, paralleling FL100. Florida 100 was not fit for riding  
Celebratory photos with Don Pedro, giddiness at end of trip

11 January (Sat) in St. Augustine with Heidi. Photos with Heidi, also a trophy

12 January (Sun) parked trailer in Marianna; visit Caverns, drive to Pensacola Airport, Pensacola Beach and return. Arduous DTR with Heidi.  
13 January leaving out of Marianna with trailer; wiki watachee, arrive at Heidi's in Tampa  
14 January (Tuesday) tour of Tampa bay, Ft. Desoto, abortive attempt at Dali museum  
15 January (Wednesday) morning in Dali museum, afternoon shopping for dinner, dinner prep (brown rice, chicken/vegetable stir fry with peanut sauce, kale, sweet potato oven fries), kayaking with Heidi, dinner  
16 January (Thursday) driving back to Nashville (?)

## THE END (SO FAR)