Balance| Skeletons of a travel memoir

J. Rick Thompson

The University of Montana

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.
Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Recommended Citation
https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/1641

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Student Theses, Dissertations, & Professional Papers by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
Permission is granted by the author to reproduce this material in its entirety, provided that this material is used for scholarly purposes and is properly cited in published works and reports.

** Please check "Yes" or "No" and provide signature **

Yes, I grant permission  X
No, I do not grant permission  

Author's Signature

Date  S-8-98

Any copying for commercial purposes or financial gain may be undertaken only with the author's explicit consent.
Balance
Skeletons of a Travel Memoir

by

J. Rick Thompson
B.A. Southern Oregon State College, 1996
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Fine Art
The University of Montana
1998

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PART III</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

On November 16, 1990, I left Vancouver, British Columbia, on a loaded touring bicycle and pedaled 5,256 miles to St. Augustine, Florida. Little did I know that this journey would change my life; little did I know that my life was already changing.

I was born in Owensboro, Kentucky, on June 7, 1968, to Winfred and Wanda Thompson, and when my mother’s belly was sewn back up and my father arrived from Columbus, Georgia, and when the doctor said I was healthy enough to go home, we went to our new house in Muhlenberg County, where I met up with my three older brothers. For the next twenty years, I lived there just outside the town of Greenville, at the end of a dusty gravel road in a house of chalk white aluminum
siding surrounded by fifty-five acres of hilly forest and flat fields dotted with cows. Half of those twenty years I spent waiting for the day I would leave this place, and finally it came. And came. And came.

I kept coming back, at first reluctantly, and then willingly, but eventually I left for good, the day I boarded the Greyhound with an unassembled touring bike and a box full of the barest of essentials. But during my journey, and the years following it, I learned that, even though I left Muhlenberg County, Kentucky, and the people I loved (and even those I didn’t), the place and the people I grew up with will never leave me.

What follows are simply pieces of a much larger puzzle I’ve been trying to put together for years. It’s become my life’s work, and it all began in Vancouver when I started writing the journal that would chronicle my journey. Although certainly not well written and often filled with shallow thoughts, the journal is still a record of people and places and events I encountered on the road, and it’s this record I add to the years of my youth to form a narrative of who I was back then, and who I am now.

Of course, I could not write the dual narrative of both my journey and my growing-up years in eighty pages, nor one-hundred eighty for that matter; I simply need more space (and time) to write and write well about the folks in Rodeo, New Mexico, and Bayou la Batre, Alabama; or Buster Boy Building Supply in Central City, Kentucky, and Druther’s Restaurant down the road in Greenville; or Billy Batsel Greenwood and
the Reverend David Zaske or Sharon and Neil Sligh or Winfred and Wanda and Doug and John and Rodney Thompson. So, I've picked several pieces from much larger sections. Hopefully they are glimpses into where I was coming from, where I had been, and where I was going.

J. Rick Thompson
April 20, 1998
Missoula, Montana
A custodian stood outside the Vancouver International Youth Hostel and took my picture, the camera's flash like lightning in the early morning darkness. I grinned like a schoolboy in new clothes. Handing me the camera, he said, "That's quite a load you got there."

"Yeah, but I'm getting rid of some of it along the way," I said.

My bicycle looked more like a motorcycle than what it was, an emaciated steel frame beefed up with survival gear. Added to its gray-metallic skeleton were front and rear racks, on which were black panniers. A foam sleeping pad was
bent into a horseshoe over the top of the front rack. The rear rack was heaped with a sleeping bag, a tent, another sleeping pad, and a square cardboard box big enough to carry a globe. The tent and sleeping bag had their own stuff sacks, and the panniers didn’t need them, but everything else was wrapped with garbage bags.

I left the youth hostel and pedaled down Northwest Marine Drive. It was just before seven on a Friday morning in mid-November, the month the rainy seasons begin in the Pacific Northwest. All of Vancouver was wet, and had been since I arrived three days earlier. A light rain fell from the sky, ticking my helmet and rainsuit. Small drops of light swirled through the milky, orange triangles of streetlights, flashing like falling stars as they fell. Rainbows of light from coffeehouses and corner markets spilled into the street and poured through stormgrates into the netherworlds below. While stopped at a red light, I straddled my bike and breathed in the smell of wet asphalt and car exhaust.

The two lanes of traffic passed me in blurry, red waves, their taillights coming into focus when I picked up speed down ramp-like hills. The cars sprayed water when they moved around me calmly and deliberately, which was comforting. It was as if they were making room for a color-coordinated derelict on a bicycle, which is what I looked like in my shabby shades of obscurity: black, gray, and garbage-bag green.

***
Three days earlier I had arrived on Greyhound Bus Lines, which is one hell of a way to begin a cross-country bicycle tour. When the bus pulled up in front of a hotel in downtown Vancouver, it ended for me three days of legal torture. I was as stiff as a corpse and restless, for which there was no better cure than me putting my bicycle back together on the steps of the hotel and then riding to the youth hostel for a good night of horizontal sleep. That was my plan, anyway, part of a journey I had been thinking up for years.

It was around midnight when I stepped off the bus, and I couldn’t wait to get started. The driver dragged out the box with my bicycle in it. The sides of it were rubbed smooth in spots and missing chunks of cardboard, and the ends were crinkled and tissue soft when I took it from him. The shiny chrome of a wheel’s quick-release skewer poked through the side.

I started to worry and handed the driver two claim checks. Another box contained my tools, without which I couldn’t put my bike back together. “I’m supposed to have another one on there,” I said, “a square box.”

“There’s nothing else on this coach,” he said, shutting and locking the hatch. “You’ll have to check inside there tomorrow.” He nodded toward the thick glass doors with fat, brass handles.

“Are you sure?” I said.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” he said. “Where’d your trip originate?”
"Western Kentucky," I said.

"Hell," he chuckled. "That's the problem."

You got that right, I thought. Western Kentucky was indeed the problem.

I was tired of life in Muhlenberg County, that place made infamous by John Prine's song "Paradise," a 1971 folk ballad inspired by a coal company's purchase of a small town on the Green River in Western Kentucky, where Prine's ancestors were from. Paradise is now the sight of a coal-cleaning plant, a part of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), which has good jobs and still hires folks from the county, although those jobs, like the handful of good jobs left in the county, are scarce. Today Prine's song is still the epitome of a forsaken land, once beautiful but now scarred and empty of opportunity.

Several of my ancestors worked in those mines owned by Mr. Peabody. They breathed coal dust for most of their lives, which is some folks' idea of a good future in Muhlenberg County, but by the time I had graduated from high school in 1986, the coal industry was all but dead, leaving the county's economy in shambles and its miners to die of cancer of black lung, as my grandfather had. Today, most young people just leave.

Unfortunately, there were few easy ways out of Muhlenberg County, the easiest being a scholarship to play college basketball somewhere, which I was counting on. I was an honorable mention selection to the Kentucky All-State team as a senior in high school, but being the star of a team that
only won four games wasn’t very attractive to college scouts. Neither was my 2.3 grade-point average, nor the mane of hair midway down my back.

When that dream faded, I unloaded trucks at the grocery warehouse my mother worked at and then entered Madisonville Community College. After one semester, I dropped out with a new dream of being a drummer in a heavy metal band.

The next year, at the age of nineteen, I left for Nashville. I had faith that the nearest big city would change my life with simple things like a steady job and something to do. I worked construction for a few months, then bought a drum set with the money and took a job working nights in a grocery warehouse outside of Tallahassee, Florida. Then I worked in both a bicycle shop and a convenience store in Jacksonville, Florida, then another bike shop back in Nashville. Then another in Los Angeles. Then another in Paducah, Kentucky. Then back to the same one in Nashville.

Around noon one August day after I graduated from high school, I was called to unload 50,000 pounds of frozen ground beef off the back of a tractor trailer at the grocery warehouse where my mother worked. On my way there, I noticed a pair of long-distance cyclists sitting splay-legged on the park benches in front of the courthouse. They seem to have appeared out of thin air, the way I imagine angels do. I had never seen a long-distance cyclist on any road in Muhlenberg County and therefore found it odd that these two
landed in the dead center of the county seat.

But that day, instead of rushing to work, I whipped my '78 pea-green Chevette off Main Street and angle-parked on the courthouse square, right in front of these two guys. Their bikes, loaded with unzipped panniers frayed with the corners of plastic bags, leaned up against the benches, which were covered with bread bags, a jar of peanut butter, a bottle of honey, bananas, and apples.

I walked up on the sidewalk, put one leg on the ledge, and leaned on my knee. Grinning like these two guys were old friends, I asked, "Where'r you guys headed?"

With sandwich in his mouth, the blond one said, "New York."

"Where'd you start?"

"California," he said. "The Bay Area."

"That's cool," I said. "How many miles a day do ya do?"

"Anywhere between seventy and a hundred," he said, watching cars creep down Main Street. "Just depends."

"Damn." I said.

"Are you a cyclist?" the dark-haired one asked.

"Sorta," I said. "I ride around here, but I've never toured. I've always thought about it, though."

"It's great, man," said Darky. There's nothing like it.

"Awesome," said Blondy, nodding.

"You should do it if you ever get the chance," said Darky.

"I'd like to," I said. "Someday. To get the hell out of here."
“Not much going on around here, huh?” said Darky.
“Naw,” I said.
We remained silent for a moment. My arm started to sweat.
“What brings you guys through here.”
“It’s along our route,” Darky said.
“Really?” I said.
Darky reached into the pouch hanging from his handlebars. He pushed aside ziplocked bags and a small notebook and then pulled out a map. “Yeah,” he said, unfolding it. I leaned over. The map was from a bicycling organization that made detailed maps for long-distance cyclists. The highlighted route zig-zagged across the county as if it were traversing big-city streets. It passed through the coal communities of Beech Creek and Browder, each with big green trash dumpsters set on gravel lots, and streaked mobile homes set back into dark woodlands. The highlighted line turned onto Highway 70, tracing it to Rochester and Mr. Peabody’s Green River before disappearing at the margin.
“I’ll be,” I said, somewhat perplexed, looking down to see Greenville on a blocked section of map.
“Well, I gotta get to work,” I said. Then I shook their hands. “You guys take care of yourselves.”
“We will,” Darky said.
“Yeah, man,” said Blondy.
“Do that trip someday,” Darky said. “You’ll be glad you did.”
“I will,” I said. “I will.”
I backed out, waved, and then blew the horn on my Chevette. I drove toward the grocery warehouse, happy for the first time in months to be going to work.

Folks back home thought I was crazy when they learned of my plans to bicycle across the United States. When I told my parents, my mother went into hysterics; my father slowly shook his head from side to side without saying a word. My grandmother began citing examples of murder and other felonious acts from the evening news. Even some of my friends told me I was nuts, and their parents thought I was worse off than that.

Apparently, they hadn’t noticed the crazies running around our own community. I remember a bootlegger once went on a 27-day hunger strike to protest the cops raiding him more than the other bootleggers in the county, which to this day is still dry. Another man, after a divorce court ruled that he had to split everything with his wife, chain-sawed his house in half, right down the middle. Another man, having money trouble, offered his wife to a local mechanic in exchange for parts and labor on his ’74 Chevy Impala. My family knew all of these men, which in my eyes put them in familiar company.

I tell these stories now with mild embarrassment, but back then, I wouldn’t even mention them to strangers. I was ashamed of our country culture, and nothing embarrassed me more than a gray wooden shack out on US Highway 62 near the community of Depoy. It was a place we called the “Baby
Thompson 14

Factory," and whenever we drove by it, grimy, half-naked, snot-nosed children buzzed around it like fleas or bounced up and down on a front-porch sofa. At least one old car or truck sat up on blocks in the yard, and rusting appliances were often scattered throughout. My friends and I passed it regularly, on our way to get cheap beer and wine in Mannington, a wet town of eight liquor stores just two county lines away from ours. On the way back, half-drunk and armed with empties, we'd pass this shack, and I'd lean out of the car and smack a beer bottle against the speed limit sign in front of the Baby Factory. Plopping back into the passenger's seat, I'd open another beer and say, "Fucking white trash."

But these weren't the only people in Muhlenberg County I had a problem with. I also had problems with my family, and it had problems of its own.

When I was twelve, we lost a building supply company, a family-run business that my father had begun with his brother the year I was born, but halfway into it my father bought his brother out. At one time the business was worth over a quarter-million dollars, but when it dissolved, so did our comfortable lifestyle. My father had devoted most of his life and my mother half of hers to this comfort, but they lost the business to a deflated local economy, changing federal tax laws, and several unwise business decisions. Then my father had a heart attack. Although he survived, the doctors wouldn't allow him to work the only professions he knew: a carpenter or a self-employed businessman. He began
drawing Social Security checks, which were nourished by my mother’s paychecks from a local grocery warehouse, where she began working midnights when the business fell through. My parents began selling concession stand food at area flea markets, which they enlisted me to help with. My brother and I swept out the gymnasium after our high school basketball games for twenty bucks apiece. As a senior in high school, I worked the concession stand every day during the lunch hour for free Ho-Ho’s and miniature donuts, which I washed down with twenty-cent cartons of milk before returning to classes.

The cross-country bus ride brought back memories of these years: restless sleep, lousy food from microwaves and vending machines, birdbaths out of the sink of public restrooms. To escape these thoughts, I tried reading or listening to my stereo headphones, but at times neither did little to comfort me. The first line in The Road Less Traveled only echoed what I had felt for so many years; “Life is difficult,” said M. Scott Peck. “No shit,” I said to the back of the seat in front of me. For hours I would gaze out the window at the world rushing by, imagining myself with a better life.

In Kansas, looking west at dusk into the blazing prairie, I began thinking of the bicycle journey to come. I thumbed through a brochure I had received from the Vancouver Tourism Bureau. It was full of beautiful photographs of the city: jagged, snow-capped mountains; starry lights of downtown Vancouver at night; colorful triangles of sailboats in the false-blue waters of Burrard Inlet; trails through
lush rainforest inside Stanley Park; a beautiful woman in a white terrycloth bathrobe, her smile perfect, her sandy brown hair still wet and frayed after being towel-dried, her knees hugged against her breasts, her biscuit-brown skin reflecting all the radiance of the sun.

I told myself I deserved more: an eight-hour flight to Vancouver, dinner in a fine Italian restaurant upon arrival, a four-star hotel room with a Jacuzzi tub. I told myself that there was a better life out there somewhere.

When I tell people I left Kentucky on a bus, making changes in Evansville, St. Louis, Denver, Salt Lake City, Boise, Portland, and Seattle before finally reaching Vancouver, British Columbia, they look at me the way folks back home did when I told them I was bicycling across the United States: with a suspicious bewilderment, the way most of us look when we see the insane dancing along a city street. Some even ask why, and several similar Greyhound experiences later, I don’t blame them. But why I would take a Greyhound from Kentucky to British Columbia is easy; I knew the answer to this question from day one: because, like most folks back home, I had more time than money. As for why I planned to bicycle thousands of miles across the North American continent, I used to answer “Because it’s something I’ve always wanted to do,” an honest answer back then.

Now, however, I wish I could say that I had planned a pilgrimage, but unfortunately, at that time in my life, I didn’t know what a pilgrimage was. I wish I could say that I
was hitting the road to change my life, but I wasn’t. Instead, I was simply embarking on an adventure.

Of course, I’ve always known that I would become a traveler. My first memory suggests this. It’s me waking to the touch of my father’s big hands, his fingers poking the small of my back like a garden tool, three pronged. He guided me and my brother down a hallway lit only by a single nightlight, and out into the dark, where he boosted us into the cab of his new pick-up. I was four, my brother five. Our dad owned a building supply company and had just bought the truck in Evansville, Indiana, where my mom’s sister lived, where me and my brother had spent the night. And this place on the other side of the Ohio River is where my memory begins.

I don’t remember us crossing the bridge on US 431 into Owensboro, Kentucky, my birthplace. I don’t remember crossing the Muhlenberg County line near the community of Stroud. And I don’t remember pulling off Kentucky State Route 171 and rumbling down the gravel road to a house protected by maple trees and wrapped like a gift in brilliant, white aluminum siding, where I spent the next sixteen years of my life, shielded from the world.

So on the road is where my life begins. It was my fate to become a traveler, but that’s only half of my story. That’s the easy part. It’s the other half that I’m not so sure about, but for now I’ll stick with what’s easiest.

As a boy I often fantasized about travel and exploration—my way of seeing into the future—and I saw
myself experiencing all the wonder and mystery of being on the move. At home I watched television shows about travel at every opportunity. A program called The Big Blue Marble was my favorite. It took me all over the world and gave glimpses of different cultures and places, which utterly fascinated me because, in my mind's eye—even though immature and unfocused—I saw the lives in those places as better than my own. Most importantly, however, it sparked my imagination to revel in the mystery and wonder of other peoples, other places.

I would often sit on the propane tank outside my bedroom window. It was anchored behind our house, overlooking the cow pasture. Straddling it as if it were a horse, I would travel to faraway places on never-ending adventures. The captain of my own ship, braving unknown seas. There I would imagine myself in a New World on another continent that I had just discovered. This weekly adventuring helped me escape the turmoil inside the Thompson household and flee to the outside world, to a different reality.

This newly discovered desire to move was influenced even further in grade school. Fascinated by the stories of Magellen and Columbus, I'd imagine myself aboard their ships, standing out on the bow and leaning out against the wind, into experience and discovery. I was so taken by the thought of adventure that I starred as Christopher Columbus in a third-grade play, wearing leotards and those puffy knickers. The whole bit.

I had my lines down cold.
When I boarded the bus to Vancouver, my family remained linked to a strange planet called Earth through the rectangle of a 26-inch color screen.

After many hours on the propane tank, I became infatuated with what then seemed a fantasy: to travel, to roam free, to live a life of adventure.

So now that I need to understand the years of my youth and my excess of wanderlust, I am doing the journey over. But today, my map is a blank piece of paper, and my vehicle is a fountain pen, which scrapes and scratches across my past worlds like a shovel blade digging through rock and root.

Nearly three days after I first arrived in Vancouver, my box of tools and clothes arrived, but in the mean time I spent my days wandering the wet streets of the city in the same clothes I wore on the bus: a gray, hooded sweatshirt, a pair of pocketless, navy blue sweatpants hiked over my calves, and a new pair of cycling shoes made especially for touring. Around my waist was a fanny pack that held what little possessions I had at the time: a water bottle, my wallet, a Swiss army knife, a bandana, lubricant for my contact lenses, and Canadian coins. My long brown hair was pulled back in a wavy ponytail. I looked like a jogger who never jogged but instead walked around in the rain like a drifter. I’m sure my strange sight blended in with all the other diverse characters usually found in the heart of a city, but I didn’t care if it did or didn’t because I felt like I belonged, a feeling I never had on my three-year,
five-city tour of shitty jobs. No other city felt like Vancouver. It was the most beautiful one I had ever seen.

Apparently, I wasn’t the first to think so. Two hundred years prior to my arrival in Vancouver, Captain George Vancouver reached the Pacific Northwest. He had made earlier trips with Captain James Cook, who was sent to find the Northwest Passage for Great Britain, but this was the first trip that Vancouver led. Unlike those who came before him, looking for opportunities of wealth and trade, Vancouver came looking for discovery. He was intent on surveying the Pacific Northwest coastline, and was commissioned to do so by the British government.

I can imagine his sense of wonderment and intrigue, of hope and promise, as he first viewed the humbling beauty of the coast from his ship, the Discovery. In April of 1792, he wrote the following:

*The country before us presented a most luxuriant landscape, and was probably not a little heightened in beauty by the weather that prevailed. The more interior parts were somewhat elevated, and agreeably diversified with hills, from which it gradually descended to the shore, and terminated in a sandy beach. The whole had the appearance of a continued forest extending as far north as the eye could reach, which made me very solicitous to find a part in the vicinity of a country presenting so delightful a prospect of fertility...*

That first day, as I did each day while there, I went downtown by riding the electric busses, their flexing tails latched to a grid of cables overhead. Skyscrapers seemed to disappear overhead, angling away into the gray clouds like steep mountain peaks, which made me dizzy when I looked up.
Not worrying about where I was going, I walked the maze of streets amid bustling crowds headed for work. Eventually I found the waterfront near the Vancouver Convention Centre, which jutted out into Burrard Inlet. On top of the building were massive sail-like structures that gave it the appearance of a futuristic, sea-faring ship. Ferries from North Vancouver across the bay hummed toward the waterfront, and farther out, creeping freighters and tugs bellowed their calls, which bounced back and forth between the city and the forested mountain walls opposite me.

Around lunch I stumbled upon the Gastown area, a tourist district teeming with curio shops and restaurants, from which emanated the aroma of tomatoes and thyme, fresh sourdough bread and homemade chocolate. A famous steam clock pushed thick white clouds into the air. A neighborhood pub chattered with talk from the locals. I wanted to join them, but a thousand-dollar, four-month budget pushed me across the street for a deli sandwich and city water from my water bottle.

From Gastown I walked to Chinatown, which I learned was North America’s largest. The streets were flooded with Asians, which made me self-conscious, a lanky, six-foot-three ex-basketball player, my head and shoulders bobbing up and down above the crowd. But the thrill of being in such a foreign place prevailed. I was intrigued by the jumbled sounds and guttural voices, the sword-like slashes and boxes of ideograms on store windows or the flapping ends of awnings. Produce stands sold odd-looking fruit just off a
boat from the Far East, and street vendors made fresh spring rolls on the spot.

In the afternoon, I walked to Stanley Park, a thousand-acre peninsula that separates Burrard Inlet from the English Bay and, beyond it to the west, the Straight of Georgia, which to me looked like an unending sea. Beneath Lord Stanley’s statue, a bronze plaque promised that the park was for “the use and enjoyment of people of all colours, creeds, and customs for all time.” I felt right at home.

The park has both a zoo and an aquarium, but what attracted me was its inner forest. I hiked through fog-covered trails surrounded by towering Douglas firs and Western red cedars, their sagging branches arm in arm and dripping with moisture. A black squirrel dove onto the trunk of a ponderosa pine and surged up into the solace of pine boughs. Deep inside the park, no noises can be heard. I whispered to myself, “This is what I want.”

I sauntered around the Seawall, a five-mile paved path that encircles the park. Cyclists, runners, and pedestrians smiled at me as they passed. The sun came out as if to remind me I hadn’t been forgotten, so I stopped at a bench on the west end of the Seawall and stared at the water, which shimmered like orange mercury. I sat there for an hour, my happiness not even thwarted by an approaching gray veil of rain out heading east from the Pacific.

Outside the aquarium I asked a couple of attractive young women for directions to the bus stop. They were from Vancouver and looked my age, in their young twenties. They
could tell by my accent that I wasn’t a local and asked me what I was doing there, so I told them about my trip, about how glorious I thought their city was.

"Where are you from," one asked.

"You tell me," I grinned.

She played along. "Texas?"

"No," I said, looking down at the top of my new cycle shoes and the S-logo that zig-zagged down the sides. "I’m from Nashville, Tennessee."

A drizzle of rain fell from gray sky above, which was now lightened by a hidden sun. Further from downtown, the streets grew wider. Lines of parked cars gave way to spacious, smooth shoulders. Traffic moved faster, but further away from me, it was less threatening. I was still smiling.

Next to a gas station that sold gas by the liter, I stopped to look at my map. It showed a checkerboard of residential areas and parks, the latter just a small part of the city’s 20,000-square-block-area of public parks. A few miles up the map turned me off this busy thoroughfare and into quiet residential streets, which were lined with small homes of either wood siding or brick. Not so much as a candy wrapper littered the streets and sidewalks. Every few blocks there were parks, some filled with glistening spruce trees, wet swingsets, grassy soccer fields, and puddled baseball diamonds. In my mind I transformed them into summer parks, adding color and warmth to the picture. I wondered why I
hadn’t grown up in such a place.

Leaving Vancouver, I toyed with the idea of retuning there and beginning a new life. Then I stretched the idea into fantasy. I would go back to college, find a good job, marry the Queen of the Vancouver Brochure, start a family. But my life would have been no different had the same things happened in Nashville or Los Angeles. I was seeing Vancouver the way a couple looks at real estate magazines for their first home. I envisioned a place so extraordinary that it would erase the past, but such is the mind of the long-distance traveler. He sees new places with a biased eye because they are different from where he’s come from and what he’s known. But cities no more change small-town people than do self-help books. They simply mask sorrows and loneliness, hide a person’s past, and strip away what’s left of one’s culture. They are states of denial.

The morning I left the city, my travel alarm sounded at 5:30, and as it went off, so did the man below me. As I leaned over the edge of my bed bunk, I saw a dark mass dash from its bunk and stumble over shoes and jeans that were strewn next to the bunks. He ran to the window and clutched the steel screen that covered it, his arms tense and dark. Looking out through the window, he sighed and slumped over a bit, his muscles relaxing. The street light glimmered through the window, reflecting off the beads of sweat on his body.

I climbed down from my bunk and slid lycra shorts over
my long, naked legs. The man returned to his bunk, glaring at me the whole way, his white eyes glowing and, in memory, moving like a ghost toward me. He crawled back into his sleeping bag, and I quietly carried my belongings out into the lighted hallway and began to pack.

Outside I unlocked my bicycle from a storage cage and rode it to the front steps of the hostel, where I had assembled it the evening before, when my other box had arrived. After I loaded the bike and bounced it slowly down the rain-slicked front steps, I was ready to finally begin my journey. The custodian took my picture.

A week later, I stuffed the film into a mail-order envelope and sent the film off to be processed. On the return address was the only place I had truly ever known:

Rt. 3, Box 196
Greenville, KY 42345

Several weeks later, my mother received these photographs in the mail. When I called her on the road, she said “You caint see nothin’ in ‘ese pictures. Everything’s dark.”

And now when I look back at this photograph, I can see how blurry things were that day I left Vancouver. The sky was dark like a bruise, the youth hostel was bone white, and everything else was covered in darkness, everything except my smiling face, which was as pale and as thin as gauze.

Outside of Vancouver, I came upon a man riding a bicycle, although his was quite different from mine. It was a single-speed cruiser with fat 26-inch tires, a machine
obviously not made for long-distance touring, but it wasn't made for toting hubcaps, either. And not just ones in a milk crate on the rear rack, but ones dangling and jangling all over, on both sides of the bike.

The man wore a navy blue corduroy blazer that had jagged holes in the elbows and a navy blue admiral's hat. He had a mound of gray facial hair the size of a small bush. When I stopped and nodded, he tried to smile through the wiry beard. I never saw his teeth, if he had any, but I smiled back. I thought we had nothing in common but bicycling, which was itself a vague connection. There in the new rays of morning light, gleaming off the bright chrome and dulling aluminum of this man's hubcaps were thousands of images of me, some contorted and some clear, some rightside up and some upside down, but all there and inches from me.

I looked down at my map, which was broken up in segments, each panel showing only three to four miles of the route at a time. It lay folded in a waterproof slip-case buttoned to the top of my handlebar bag. Like tiny globes forming from the map itself, large raindrops magnified the lines and letters and green blocks laid out in front of me. Ahead of me was the Fraser River and then the suburb of Surrey. Beyond that was the college town of Bellingham, Washington, my destination for the day, and then the tourist town of Astoria, Oregon. Then the cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles, Tucson and El Paso. Then small towns like Uvalde, Texas, and Pierre Part, Louisiana; Ocean Springs, Mississippi, and Bayou la Batre, Alabama. And finally there
was the coastal town of St. Augustine, Florida, America’s first city and my ultimate destination. After that, I didn’t know where I was going.
I left Fort Davis thinking about Anna's letter. The sky was a blue plate with several scrambled clouds piled onto one side. The mountain air was cool and lingering, its smell like piney dust. I turned down Texas State Route 118 and wound down the backside of the Davis Mountains, their reddish-brown color like faded gold in a fifties book of nature photography. I leaned into curves that wrapped around massive rocks the size of dump trucks and crags that were smooth and wrinkled like old muscles. There's nothing like starting a day of long-distance cycling with more than five miles of downhill. A scented letter from an ex-lover doesn't
hurt, either, or so I thought.

At the base of the mountains, 118 got horizontal again. It bordered ranchland speckled with brown steers and barred hay feeders. From the way things smelled, the stench of manure was most concentrated at nearly five-and-a-half feet off the road. I passed a sign that said I was ENTERING BREWSTER COUNTY.

Twenty-three miles into the morning, I rolled into the crossroads town of Alpine, but the locals probably don't think of it in such a term. They call it the "Gateway to Big Bend National Park." And the home of Sul Ross State University. And the seat of Brewster County. Apparently, Alpine's 6,000 inhabitants have a lot to be proud of.

I eased Bessie into Alpine as if she were a slow horse. At an altitude of nearly 4,500 feet, Alpine lives up to its name, but only to a point. It's also surrounded by tan and tawny red hills of dry earth, which no name can transform. The town reminded me of Bisbee, Arizona: dry, rustic, and on the ass-end of several mining booms. Red brick buildings, some of them leaning, huddled around the downtown streets. A yellow stop-light sagged from criss-crossed wires at 118's intersection with US 90.

At the Safeway, I stopped for lunch and supplies. While munching on a banana and a peanut butter and jelly sandwich in the shade of the storefront, several townsfolk, unlike those in Bisbee, stopped to ask me about Bessie and my journey. All of them were friendly. One was a grinning, big-hat rancher in dark blue Wranglers and a light denim,
long-sleeve shirt.

"Whur you goin' on 'at biii-cycle, fella?" he said.

"St. Augustine, Florida," I said smiling, my mouth half full.

"You're shittin' me. All the way on that thang?" He squatted down like a catcher behind home plate and peered at Bessie out from under his creamy white cowboy hat. An oval-shaped buckle of silver gleamed from his waistline. "That's one hell of a trip," he said, still studying her.

"How many miles a day you go on that thang?"

"I try to average around seventy," I said, "but it depends on the weather and terrain."

"I'll be damn." He shook his head, still looking at the bike. "What's the most you've gone in a day?"

"I did a hundred and sixteen in southern New Mexico," I said.

"Jesus."

I took another bite of my sandwich.

"So you carry all ya need in these here bags?"

I answered with a muffled "yeah."

"Sleepin' bag, clothes, spare parts . . ."

"Yep," I said, having swallowed.

". . . some food. Say, you got one o' them tiny cookstoves to cook with?"

"Yep." I drank from my water bottle.

"Boy, you got it all," he said with a touch of envy.

"Say, you are headed down t' Big Bend, aren't ya?"

"I'm thinkin' about it."
"It’s just beautiful," he said, "and this time o’ year is the best time to go. It won’t have much tourists."

"Great," I said. "A friend of mine told me I should go if I made it through this part of the country."

"He’s right," he said.

That friend I referred to was not so much a friend as he was an acquaintance, although when we met we had much in common. His name was Brooks, a biologist from Austin, Texas. It was the summer before I left Vancouver, and he had just finished bicycling up the Natchez Trace National Scenic Parkway into Nashville. He had walked into the bicycle shop where I worked and asked for his touring bike to be partially disassembled and boxed to withstand the rigors of going Greyhound, and since I was the only mechanic in the store with a passion for touring, I did the job, but not without asking him about his travels. He filled me in on them all—the Eastern Seaboard, the pacific coast, all over Texas, and the Natchez Trace, of course. We talked more than I worked, which was fine with me and okay with my boss since I worked was paid strictly on commission.

I told him of my upcoming plans, and he instantly told me to go to Big Bend. "It’ll be well worth the effort," he said.

After work, we said goodbye and exchanged addresses. We shook hands, and before he left he put one last plug in for the national park. "Go to Big Bend. Trust me, you’ll be glad you did."

"I will," I said.
"And when you get to Austin, look me up."

Of course, when I had promised to give Big Bend a try, I hadn’t looked at the map, yet. After hours of dreamily gazing at my atlas the way a boy cloud-watches on his back, the reality of a Big Bend excursion started to hit home. Geographically, Big Bend National Park sits at the bottom of the Texas scrotum, that pouch that sits behind the tongue-like phallus on a Texas map. The entire southwest border of Texas is shaped by the Rio Grande River, and its “big bend” forms the state’s scrotum and, more particularly, those sharp turns at the bottom of the pouch that give the national park its name. Brewster County itself, at more than 5,000 square miles, makes up roughly half of that scrotum, but instead of being shaped like a testicle, it’s shaped like a Sul Ross State cheerleader’s megaphone that’s had its end broken off at the Rio Grande. To put the 5,000 square miles and my proposed side trip to Big Bend in perspective, Alpine sits on the small end of the megaphone, and Big Bend near its broken end. Did I mention that Brewster County is larger than Connecticut?

The shocking truth of an untopographic map and the simple addition of mileage made any trip to Big Bend a journey in and of itself.

I had two choices in the crossroads town of Alpine. I could ride across the acute end of the megaphone by turning at the stoplight and pedaling 38 miles down US 90 to the town of Marathon. That choice would turn me east toward my goal. It would also get me out of the desert sooner. On New Year’s
Day I left San Diego and by January 2nd was on the eastern side of the Coast Range, with basically nothing between me and central Texas but deserts filled with little more than sandy hills and dry mountains, cacti and scrawny coyotes. And sky. There’s always an oppressive sky in the desert.

Or I could continue against the grain on the advice of two strangers simply for the promise of beauty. Of course, it seems like I’m always doing things the hard way. And I’m a sucker for beauty in all its forms.

At the Safeway, the rancher’s knees were aching. “Well, I’ve got t’ git goin’. You really ought t’ go down t’ Big Bend, ’cept the problem is you probably won’t be able to git down there this afternoon.”

“I’ll just camp somewhere along the way,” I said.

“Hell,” he said, “if you go down there, you cun camp on my land. Jus’ drop yer tent anywhere on the left side. I run cattle damn near all the way down t’ the park.”

“I’ll do that,” I said.

Still smiling, he shook my hand. “You take care now.”

As he walked away, I began to think about the kindness of strangers, how they intersect our lives, how they turn us down roads we never thought we’d be on. Because of two strangers, I had two night’s lodging assured me, two pleasant conversations that briefly broke through the silence of loneliness.

After twisting upward and around several hillsides, 118 passed through pockets of residential homes, behind which
were several carton-like house trailers. After that, and it
didn’t take long, the homes gave way to true desert.

I took some comfort in knowing that 118 was cradled by
mountains. My map showed several peaks and bluffs along the
eighty mile stretch to the small town of Study Butte, just
outside of Big Bend: Mt. Ord, 6814 feet; Cienega Mt., 6580
feet; Elephant Mt., 6230 feet; Turkey Pk., 4228 feet;
Santiago Pk., 6521 feet. But on the highway, the mountains
seemed far away, too distant. When I thought about the
rancher’s offer, I envisioned camping in the lee of a mesa,
not tan stretches of dusty earth patched with mesquite and
creosote bushes. Apparently the rancher wasn’t lying.
Barbed wire fences paralleled 118 pretty much the entire way,
but only several times did a fence branch off and disappear
over a bluff.

I pushed on. The second half of the day looked bleak.
I grabbed the bottom of the handlebars and dropped my head
out of the wind. During much of the next three hours, I
watched Bessie’s front tire, the buzz a straight line in my
mind.

South of Alpine, 118 stays flat most of the way down,
rising softly over occasional benches not yet worked to grade
by wind and rain, neither of which were present that day.
The sky was veiled by clouds as thin as a cotton sheet, which
was enough to keep the heat down. In the Chihuahuan Desert,
the mercury can easily reach ninety in January. I had plenty
of water still, but when I came upon a small grocery store
sitting on a hill halfway between Alpine and Study Butte, I
stopped. I had learned back in Arizona to take advantage of such opportunities, to be wary of dots on a map.

The store was a maroon trailer with only a few tiny windows, two of which were lit up with neon beer ads. I bought a Little Debbie oatmeal pie for a quarter from a short Hispanic woman, her round body engulfed by a flowery dress of crimson and orange, her face lined with soft wrinkles. I asked if I could fill my water bottles, and she said the spigot was outside, in front of the store. I went out and washed down the pie with some water, then topped off each bottle.

I got back on Bessie and kept on riding. I thought it odd that the woman in the store didn’t ask me where I was from or where I was going, or even why on earth I would be out there in the desert on a bicycle, or what brought me there in the first place. Surely she didn’t get many visitors out there. Surely she was lonely. I kept the same pace since having topped the upland mesa outside of Alpine.

On the road heading south, I passed only several vehicles heading north. Even fewer passed me. Occasional RVs or long-bed, extended-cab pickup trucks heading to Alpine came by every twenty minutes at most. Those in the RVs, there bodies tiny in the front windows, most often waved big and smiled. Ranchers, unlike my friend from Alpine, weren’t so happy. Their faces unmoving, they’d raise a single finger off the steering wheel.

As I kept moving, the sun peeked out from under the veil
of gray cloud, holding itself up just above the horizon. I kept pedaling, hoping to find a bluff or a small hill to hide my campsite behind, but anything vertical lay miles away from the road. Only sickly shrubs rose from the desert floor. Several miles later, I came upon a bend in the road. It was right on top of a small rise, so the road dropped down behind it. I decided to hide back in its corner, out of view of northbound traffic, in case there was any.

I got off Bessie and guided her by the horns through creosote and mesquite bushes to a spot 30 yards off the highway. After setting up camp, I made a package of chicken noodle soup for dinner, eating it with an entire sleeve of crackers for carbohydrates. As the sun drooped toward the horizon, I rinsed my cookware and then crawled naked into my sleeping bag. All was quiet, as if I had the entire Earth to myself.

Instead of writing a passage in my journal, I simply wrote down the usual heading of place, date, day, and miles:

B.F. Egypt, TX 1-25-91 Friday 70.2 miles

Then I got out Anna’s letter I had received general delivery back in Pecos. I had told her I would let her know the names and zip codes of the towns where I went looking for mail. Only after two months and two thousand miles did I send her a postcard; I was still licking my wounds. I had written plenty of people along the way, but I put off writing her. By the time I reached West Texas, however, my wounds had
healed, but the scars remained.

It was full of her usual chit-chat, except without all the I-can’t-wait-to-see-you-agains and the I-love-you-so-muches. She hadn’t written those in years, but then again, she hadn’t written me letters in years. We went our separate ways while she was at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green and I was still in Muhlenberg County unloading tractor trailers and dreaming of a better life. Part of the split was her failure to write me once a week, one half of a bargain I had diligently kept. The other half of the split was my smothering her with need; when we became a couple back in high school, she was on the flute end of all my troubles: our family was financially devastated, and my father and I, always at arm’s length, began to drift away from one another. Anna and I were high school sweethearts—me the captain of the basketball team, her the homecoming queen—but when the relationship ended, we went our separate ways. She married the boyfriend I had replaced, but divorced in only seven months, while I went to Nashville and Tallahassee and points west, where she wrote me and told of the divorce. When I returned to Nashville, we saw one another again, several times making the 60-mile trip between Bowling Green and Nashville, and then the mistake of sleeping together, a mistake we repeated several times. Then she dropped me. On my 22nd birthday.

She had the day off and was supposed to drive down to Nashville. We planned to picnic in Centennial Park, walk arm-in-arm around the Parthenon, feed the ducks. Then I was
going to cook her dinner and unfold the sofa-bed, where we made love several weeks before. But she never arrived.

After calling her at work in the mall, I drove up to Bowling Green in a fury. She told me it was wrong, that we shouldn’t be doing this, that it would never work out between us.

I spent the next six months preparing for my cross-country journey. Near the end of October, she called me and said to make sure I dropped by to see her before I left. A week later I did, begging her to make love like a little boy begs for candy.

"I can’t," she said. "I have a boyfriend."

I begged some more, then gave up.

"You will write me, won’t you?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I will."

And I did, but not until I had pedaled more than 2000 miles.

I read her letter yet again, the third time in two days, even though I knew it was over between us. The words were plain, the typical chit-chat from ex-lovers who are now only friends, but I was tired of being lonely, and not merely physically lonely, but alone in the world, as if all I was doing was moving aimlessly through it. When I pulled it from the creamy white envelope, the perfume lingered in the tent, warming me like a blanket.

I closed my eyes and imagined her above me, her bronze flesh shaded blue by the sunlight that filtered through the tent, her breasts as firm and as round as oranges, her brown
eyes half open and hiding behind her mop of brown hair. Then I rolled over and hugged my pillow, my stomach mashing my warm erection into the sleeping bag.

The next morning I rode thirty seven miles into Study Butte, Texas. The sign said it was supposed to have a population of 120, but the entire time there I never saw more than 15 people who could have been locals. Besides that, there were only three houses that looked occupied near this dot on the map. And the town’s name is just as mysterious. It’s not pronounced as I first thought, and, no, the word “butte” wasn’t the culprit. “Study” is; it rhymes with “booty,” not “buddy.” Stoody Byoot. Named for Will Study, manager of the now-defunct Big Bend Cinnabar Mine.

When I first arrived just after noon, I learned the correct pronunciation, thankfully without making a fool of myself, at the Study Butte Store, a small flat building that had been pieced together with area stone. A grid of local advertisements, even ones from Alpine 80 miles to the north, covered the entire front wall, including the open face of the front door. Only the screen door remained uncovered. On the ceiling was a wooden sign, twenty feet across and knee-high, supported with two-by-fours. Routed into the wood in giant capital letters was the words THE STUDY BUTTE STORE, the “THE” being a fourth the size of the other. A miniature version of the sign hung in the left corner, and below it was a steel sign painted white with black letters that read
I leaned Bessie against a wall and walked toward the store. On its porch a couple of Hispanics sat drinking beer, one in a metal folding chair in the sun, one on a wooden bench in the shade.

"Where'd you come from on that bi-seekle, amigo?" asked the large one in the chair.

"Vancouver, Canada," I said smiling, expecting an astonished look and a response to match.

"An' you rode all dee way?"

"Every mile."

"Where are you going?"

"St. Augustine, Florida." I said.

He let out a loud, machine gun laugh from under his thick, black, handlebar moustache. "Why don' you jus' take a car?" he laughed.

"A car's too fast," I said. "You can't enjoy what's around you."

He drank his beer while nodding. "So whud brings you to Study Butte?"

"What's the name of this place again?"

"Study Butte."

"So that's how you all pronounce it?"

"Tha's it, pardner. So whud brings you here?"
"A friend from Austin told me I should come through here if I had the time. He said I'd never regret it."

"Ee's a beautiful place, amigo." His wiry friend nodded. "My name's Ayg-ter," he said, standing up.

"Hayk-ter?" I asked.


The wiry man stood up, moved his UTEP foam beer hugger from one hand to the other, and mumbled "Hello," as if he could only move his lips and not his teeth.

We all shook hands. "My name's Rick," I said. "It's a pleasure."

"Say, amigo," Hector said, "you wouldn't happen to have a dollar so a man could buy a beer, would you?"

"I'm afraid not," I said. "I've got to save my money so I can get home."

He nodded. "Hey, tha's okay, brother. I unnerstan'."

I stepped inside the building, which was much cooler than it was outside. Two rows of shelves stretched back to my right, both of which were only sparsely stocked. At the end were coolers, their glass doors revealing stacks of beer and soda. To my left was the counter, over which hung cards of travel-size pain relievers and Zippo lighters, Texas magnets and keychains. On it was a small spin-rack of postcards.

I bought a bag of tortilla chips and a can of beer and asked the white-headed white woman at the counter if there was a place I could camp for the next few nights. She told me about an abandoned house, left over from the mercury mines
in the forties, she said, just down a dirt road back behind the store. Supposedly, no one from the mines was ever out there, and everybody used it: hitchhikers, backpackers, even the occasional touring cyclist.

Reassured, I went back outside to make myself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to go with the chips and beer. I sat down from Hector on the other end of the wooden bench. Paperback novels were stuffed into wire racks in front of me.

“So this is the Study Butte Library,” I said.

“Tha’s it, pardner.” Pinching his eyes, Hector looked back out toward the sun, even though he was still in the shade.

In the sun next to the door, Shorty leaned back on the hind legs of the chair. His eyelids grew heavy.

Just then a pickup truck skidded in the dirt in front of the store. A thin man with tanned muscles jumped out of the truck and trotted toward the store. “Hey, man!” he said, giving Hector a soul shake.

“Hey, amigo!” said Shorty.

The man patted Shorty on the shoulder.

I was envious.

“Where are you staying, amigo?” asked Hector.

I had hoped that he would ask, then maybe even suggest that I stay with Shorty and him. That way my things could have stayed safe when I went hiking in Big Bend for the day. Plus I could make a couple of new friends and maybe right down there addresses in my address book. “The lady inside said there was an abandoned house back behind the store
here.” I took a bite of my sandwich. “Said the mines never use it.”

“Everybody stays there,” he said. “You’ll be fine.”

The man walked back out and handed Shorty and Hector a beer each.

“Thanks, brother!” Hector said. Shorty waived. The man threw his hand in the air, hopped back into his truck, and drove away.

After lunch, I drank another beer on the porch. Shorty was asleep in his chair, and Hector was soon to follow. I softly said “See ya later” and rode down the dirt road near the store. I topped a small ridge and saw several buildings, all hidden from 118. One was a small brick cube, which was dwarfed by the tawny red butte behind it. The remaining three buildings looked like butter-yellow homes. I imagined kids like the Nichols boys back in Rodeo, New Mexico, roaming the small rocky hills, playing a game of make-believe in a land where imagination must be as essential as water.

The building I chose was the one with the roof still somewhat intact. It had several rooms, including a large living room with a fireplace, but over it was was a giant hole in the roof, which looked like a coffin fell through it. Planks and boards and chips of shingles lay everywhere. An adjacent bedroom had less dust and debris and its own fireplace, so I occupied it. Chunks of plaster were missing from the walls, and cellophane wrappers, wadded cigarette packs, and cigarette butts had been wind-swept into a corner.
Inside the fireplace, paper sacks with burnt edges and singed aluminum cans, the ones potted meat and vienna sausages are packaged in, lay among ashes and wood coals.

"Home, sweet home," I said aloud, "at least for a couple o' nights."

The next morning I went to the Study Butte Store just around 8:30. Hector and Shorty were still there, wearing the same clothes. I didn't ask where they had spent the night.

Inside I bought breakfast: a quart of milk, a package of powdered mini-donuts, and a chocolate creme pie. A young man with short orange hair was working. He looked my age. I asked if rides into Big Bend National Park were easy.

"Sure," he said. "Jus' stand outside 'n' ask around. Won' take ya no time 'tall. Usually somebody'll take ya."

Two hours later, after asking everyone that walked into the store, and chatting with Hector in between, I caught a ride with a park service employee on his day off. But he was only going to Park Headquarters at Panther Junction and could only drop me off at the only road into and out of The Basin, which everyone I had talked to said was the place to go, especially if I wanted to hike.

After the ranger dropped me off, I started walking the six miles up the dead-end road, which looked like a snake, its back lined with twin yellow stripes. It twisted and turned upward before disappearing at the base of the Chisos Mountains, giving the appearance that the only way to reach The Basin was through a tunnel. At first glance it would
appear a god-forsaken land, one to be driven through, or ridden through, quickly. But I thought traveling by bicycle was slow enough, and only after walking toward the basin did I realize that even a 100-pound bicycle with a 180-pound rider can move too fast at times.

I had walked for about a mile, turning and tossing my thumb out whenever a car passed, but none had stopped, but just when I was about the lose hope for a ride, a sky blue Ford Bronco pulled over. It was a retired couple from Haddenfield, New Jersey, and they drove me into The Basin. When we topped the steep pass and began winding downward, I noticed that The Basin was getting a facelift. Backhoes and Bobcats and dump trucks thrust back and forth as if by remote control. Engines revved black belches into the air; trucks beep-beeped as they backed towards mounds of rock and sand and dirt. Pockets of dust swirled downcanyon.

After the couple treated me to lunch at the lodge’s restaurant, I filled the water bottle in my fanny pack and talked to a ranger about hiking in mountain lion country—photocopied warnings were taped to every door to every building there; each showed a black panther crouched low to the ground—I started up the trail, a gritty powder of dirt, sand, and stone.

A bit nervous about the thought of spotting a mountain lion, I scanned both sides of the trail. If I spotted one, according to the ranger, I was supposed to look big, wave my arms, and grab stones but only throw them if my bigness didn’t scare it away. And then he warned me to never step
backwards, or worse, turn and run, a sign of submission and therefore a signal that lunch is being served. “That’s easy for you to say,” I said.

The trail leads up into a network of loops and spurs that form over a 100-mile system of arteries that anyone could lose themselves in, a thought which enticed me as I moved cautiously upward, bounding through pockets of chest-high tallgrass and bushy, green-headed piñon junipers.

Above treeline, I continued in the shade of sandy rock walls, which were like giant, dried-out sponges, their porous holes rough and crusty. Behind me, along the inner wall of the basin, mounds of them surrounded the basin’s inner forest, a wave of piñon junipers that trickle upward into droplets of green. Triangles of scree looked like fine rouge powder pouring into gullies. The blue sky and cool air made it a wondrous day. I didn’t want it to end, but knew it must. I was still thinking about sundown.

When I rounded the wall, I was struck still by the sight before me. The crumpled backside of the Chisos was colored deep green, like the forests I had experienced after a rain back on the Olympic Peninsula, and beyond it the vast desert floor extended out into a plain pockmarked with deep shadows pushing from the lee of hills and mesas. I climbed onto a ledge and sat on a rock. A wind-twisted piñon juniper clung to the ledge. I drank some water, never once taking my eyes off the this juxtaposition of nature.

It wasn’t long before I wanted to cry. For the first time in my life I suddenly felt a closeness while being
alone, which is how some define being touched by God. But this experience felt nothing like the god I had first learned of in Sunday School or had studied in Adult Bible classes, not the one found in hymnals or in sermons, and definitely not the one I was professing to youth groups on my journey. There on the edge of the world, I felt an intimacy like no other. I was a part of everything around me, as if I were supposed to be there at that time and that moment, unseparated from everything else in the world but this place.

But I explained this view, this mountain, this feeling, as ones made possible only by God. In my journal I referred to every picturesque scene as God's Artwork, and I did so simply because I had no other excuse for the natural world: *Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.*

I looked out across the dry, vast earth. Tears formed in the corners of my eyes. Although utterly alone in the world, I felt more alive than I ever had, my spirit had moved, my cup was filled to overflowing. It was one of the happiest moments of my life.

This memory reminds me of similar moments in my native Kentucky woodlands, in the fifty-five acres that I still call home. I remember feeling eased by the late spring breeze that blew through the summer days in the tree house, revealing the silvery green undersides of maple leaves. I remember falling back into the comfort of a bed of dry leaves, looking up through the maze of tree limbs and up into the clear autumn sky. I remember standing at the edge of our
hardwood forest, leaning against an oak tree and peering out over the barbed-wire fence. It is there that I contemplated running away.

After coming back down the trail and starting my walk out of the basin, I caught a ride with a construction worker who was headed to Terlingua, where he lived in an RV trailer, as did his co-workers, he said. Once back at the Study Butte Store, I unlocked Bessie from a post. For the first time, Hector and Shorty were nowhere in sight.

I went back to the abandoned house and changed into my jeans and the long-sleeve shirt that smelled the cleanest and went to Al’s, which was a bar a quarter-mile back up 118, a flat adobe building with a screen door. I walked in, and the insides were dark, lit only by the glow from a couple of lamps behind the bar and two small color television sets framed in off-white plastic shells. Hector and Shorty leaned against a tall table, both of them droopy-eyed. I waved and then stepped to the bar, where a muscular, silver-haired man in a tank-top leaned his elbows onto the bar, his bicep curling into a bronze grapefruit. Six or seven were scattered throughout the bar. There were no women.

When stopping at different bars along my route, I talked to people, or just listened to them talk, or simply watched them. I wanted to share a few moments with other humans. But there in Al’s, no one talked much. And that was okay with. A few cheers broke out at key moments in the game. When the Bills missed a last-second field goal and the final
cheer died down, I finished my last beer and said good night to Hector and Shorty on my way out. "See you later, brother," Hector said. Shorty mumbled.

I turned my headlight on and then rode down 118 toward the Study Butte Store. Then I turned it off and looked up into the night sky. The air was cold, the night clear. The starlight filled the sky. I did not feel alone.

Late the next morning, I said goodbye to my home, the only solid structure that I had called me own for over two months. Bessie loaded full, I pedaled to the Study Butte Store and had my picture made in front of it with Hector and Shorty. In the photograph, we are standing arm in arm. Hector is holding a beer on my shoulder. Shorty is waving with his UTEP hugger. I wrote them when I got back home, and I never heard from them again.

I said goodbye to the white-haired woman inside and came out to find the folks from Haddenfield filling their bus-sized camper with fuel. I thanked them again, and they wished me well.

I rode down to Terlingua, went into the post office, and asked for a box. I planned to lessen my load.

In the box I stuffed my winter cycling jacket and tights, old maps, brochures and other keepsakes. Then I opened my Bible, placed Anna’s letter inside, put them into the box, and sealed it.
Part III
Louisiana

Gray clouds hung outside my motel window. I was excited about leaving Texas, but not in a rainstorm, especially along the Gulf, and especially in Louisiana. The thought of riding through the bayou backroads and finding myself in a scene from Deliverance scared me enough, even on a sunny day full of tailwinds. Apparently, though, Nature had her own plans for me.

Usually I slept in due to exhaustion, but a real bed and an alarm clock made it easier for me to get a jump on the day. Since it wasn't raining yet, I dressed quickly to beat as much rain as I could. There was surprisingly little
traffic in Port Arthur for a Wednesday morning. I pedaled past bright supermarkets and new-car dealerships, which soon gave way to small houses bunched together like empty cigar boxes on end, their fronts flat. Some had no porches and were unpainted and splintered, while others were fortunate enough to have white aluminum siding. Most were so narrow that two long-armed men could hold hands and hug the front of them. One had a black man sitting on a wooden chair, just staring at the road, his porch leaning downward at a slight angle the way an off-ramp does. He watched me pedaling by, so I rang my bell and waved. He waved back. I passed a small white church and wished it had been my connection rather than the mega-ministry that was. At least the folks there were friendly to strangers. At a bakery thrift store I stopped and paid a dollar for three packages of frosted orange cupcakes and was greeted with several good mornings from several plump black women in blue vests.

The landscape opened up as I continued south toward the Gulf. The dilapidated homes of the black community gave way to fifteen-foot high levees. A cold wind blew off the ocean, but no rain. My route was paralleling Sabine Lake, which is nearly ten times larger than the town of Port Arthur and more like the size of a small city. Along the levee a wrinkle-faced black man in jeans and a gray sweatshirt pulled a fishing rod out to the trunk of his faded brown Impala with Texas plates. A few miles down was a petroleum refinery, its bright-orange halogen lights clinging to a skeleton of girders and fat pipes. All around were the white, flat
cylinders of storage tanks. From several places throughout
the refinery white smoke choked the sky with white pearls,
which soon dissipated into the clouds. All this in front of
the gray backdrop of the sky.

Further south I entered the heel of Louisiana, a state
shaped like a hiking boot on the map, its toe pointing
eastward. Before I left the motel I had looked at the map to
get an idea of what kind of terrain to expect on the bottom
of Louisiana’s boot, but all it showed was a thin gray line,
State Highway 82, running east-west into Cameron, the day’s
destination, sixty miles away.

I crossed the Sabine River at a low, flat drawbridge and
entered Louisiana and was greeted by yet another state
welcome sign. On it was a yellow-and-white-and-red pelican
that stood on a hitching post circled with a fat rope. On a
green background read

WELCOME TO
LOUISIANA

I leaned Bessie against a guard rail, walked back across the
road, and took a picture, yet another milestone for me, yet
more proof for the folks back home.

Back in Nashville, the summer before I left to begin my
journey, my service manager and I stayed late one night at
the bike shop I worked at. We were both working on our own
bikes, as we often did—he on his kids’ BMX racers and me on
Bessie—and we talked about things that bike mechanics talk
about: the Tour de France, weekly bike club rides,
problematic customers and their problematic repairs, bicycle tours both taken and only dreamed of. In between topics we swigged from beer bottles.

Richard was a sad-eyed man in his forties with soft wrinkles in his face and short, graying hair. He spoke with a soft, kind voice, as if he was trying not to hurt your feelings. He was shorter than me, and his head fell forward as if it were too heavy, which made him look like his shoulders were higher than normal. Despite all this, he had my respect, the first boss of many to do so. He knew bicycles, but he also knew people. However, he usually talked more about bicycles.

I was removing the bottom bracket assembly from Bessie’s frame and Richard was trueing his son’s wheel on a trueing stand when he asked me about my upcoming journey—where to camp, what to eat, what to take. Then the topic switched over to where I would stay while out on the road.

“You goin’ through Louisiana?” he asked, speaking over his shoulder while eying the wheel’s wobble.

“Yeah why?” I asked, preparing to remove the fixed cup of the bottom bracket with a large, t-handled tool.

“I was just gonna say be careful, is all.”

“Why’s that?” I asked, grabbing both ends of the handle and torquing downward.

“I had a friend who was once touring through there . . . had a ponytail about the size of yours . . . he made it into the middle of this one county down there when a deputy sheriff stopped him just outside some town and told him to
I stopped working and leaned back against my workbench. "Really?" I asked, somewhat shocked, thinking that kind of thing didn’t happen anymore. "Yeah."

"What’d your friend do?"

"He told the deputy he was over halfway through and that he’d be out in no time, but the deputy told him that this was as far east as he could go, to turn around and not to be anywhere around come sundown."

"Why’d he do that?"

"I don’t know," he said, still truing the wheel. I thought for a moment. "Was your friend black?"

"Naw, he was white."

After reassembling the bottom bracket, I took the bicycle down from the stand. I hung it by its wheel on a rack with repair bikes that hadn’t been picked up by customers, and from the same rack I removed my mountain bike. I removed my grease-stained apron, changed into my cycling shorts, and put on my helmet. Richard and I said our goodbyes, then I let myself out the back door and locked it behind me. Orange lights spread a dull light across the parking lot. The mile home my mind raced in fear.

I never said anything to anybody about that fear I felt that night; of course, I was one to push uncomfortable thoughts to the back of my mind, more due to optimism than to denial. At least that’s what I tell myself now.

***
After snapping a photo of the “Welcome to Louisiana” sign, I put the camera away and pushed Bessie off the shoulder, a mixture of broken seashells and gravel. I swung my leg over her and looked up at the sign again before pedaling away. The happy, colorful pelican didn’t fit its environment, and I began to wonder whether or not I did as well. That fear I felt in Nashville resurfaced in me, and I began to worry about not only backwoods rednecks but tough guy sheriffs with the law on their side.

But the landscape ahead of me was not what I had envisioned Louisiana to be. Instead of run-down shacks hugging swamps and plantation-era homes was flat, treeless marshland, so I thought that perhaps I had Louisiana all wrong.

Fortunately, I had the weather all wrong. It wouldn’t rain all day. The wind, however, never let up as I pedaled east. The gusts forced themselves across the dead seawater and hurtled into my side with such force that I had to lean into it, which would have been a funny sight from the rear, a loaded bicycle the size of a small motorcycle about to tip over. When the wind blows north like that, it obviously doesn’t remain at a right angle to the latitudes; it does not care for the formalities of geometry. Sometimes it whipped around to hit me in the the face, which sounded like my head was out the window of a speeding car, and sometimes it hit me in the back of the head, flopping my ponytail over my left shoulder and into the side of my face. The wind blows when and for how long it wants, and that morning was no exception.
It pushed from the south for an hour and a half. After several miles I told myself the wind was hitting me in the back of the head more than the front, which classified it as a tailwind, an optimism essential for bicycle touring. However, at the time I had no idea that nature, the governor of our lives, has a way of balancing things out.

At Johnson’s Bayou, which wasn’t really a town but a small natural gas plant, the road joined the sea again, its gray water lapping against a narrow strip of beach. The marshland to the north looked thicker, its grasses taller and more numerous, and it would remain this way for roughly the next sixty miles. The framed scene in front of me did not change except for several small, flat bridges and occasional bands of Red-winged blackbirds clutching the tops of cattails that swung wildly in the wind. Occasionally I heard their guttural tweet. The birds reminded me of home, where as a boy I would shoot them with my pellet gun every chance I got. I shot them because I owned a gun, and because my dad told me to. “They’re full of disease,” he said.

A few miles away I stopped off for lunch at a stretch of beach named Crystal Beach, the whitest I had seen since arriving on the Gulf a week earlier. Facing the ocean, I sat down in the sand and ate a couple of oatmeal pies, a handful of raw oats, and a banana. In the distance were several off-shore oil operations, there structures like mechanical giraffes stiff in the water. After lunch I walked down the beach a ways and came upon a lump angled toward the road. It was a dead dolphin, its skin three different colors. Its head
and flipper were solid black, its mid section was a reddish orange peppered with black splotches, and its tail end was a sickly gray. I frowned and walked back to the bike.

A few miles ahead the road turned north to parallel what I first thought was a thin river, but after seeing how straight it was, I was convinced it was another government-made waterway. On the map it looks like someone has drilled a tiny hole into Louisiana’s boot heel, the heel being Cameron Parrish. The waterway punctures Calcasieu Lake, a bladder-shaped lake that’s connected by an intestine of water to Lake Charles, a thirsty petroleum town. Almost two miles later the road turned east again and emptied onto a ferry platform. The ferryman picked me up and took me to the other side, saying nothing the entire time. When he docked on the other side I pedaled Bessie up the hill and into Cameron, a small town of 2,000 that clings to the highway.

In town I looked for the Methodist church and found it with no trouble. It was just the other side of downtown, past a small cluster of shops, white buildings, and a tan-bricked post office. I met the local minister at the church, a small chapel made of whitewashed wooden planks and big enough to hold maybe 125 wretched souls on a Sunday morning. The minister was in his office to the side of the chapel in a small wing off to the side. He was a tall, thin, frail-looking man nearing sixty who wore dark slacks and a white, long sleeve dress shirt that looked like it would form a sail if the wind blew hard. I introduced myself, and we shook hands. He obliged but said nothing more than necessary.
Although a man of few words, he had been able to muster enough to answer the form letter I had sent around before the trip and invite me to stay with him and his wife. I accepted and sent him the obligatory postcard a few days prior reminding him of who I was and what day I would arrive. Like all other times, I arrived when I said I would.

He called his wife to let her know I was on the way and gave me directions to the parsonage, which was just several blocks away. Within minutes I rode up their driveway. His wife met me at the side door and introduced herself. She spoke with a pronounced accent but one with less of a drawl or a twang and more of a snotty tone, as if she were wealthy woman of old southern money.

"Welcome," she said. "We've been expectin' you." She stood straight as if proud and appeared healthy and strong in a way that reminded me of my own grandmother, who was too stubborn to let life get her down and too tough to complain when it did. She had a warm, round face lined with mild wrinkles and wore gold-trimmed glasses. Her eyes bulged round and white.

There were a couple of hours before sundown, so the minister's wife let me settle into the guest room, which had a double bed with one of those handmade white cotton bedspreads with raised images and tight balls of cotton so dry they scraped the backs of my legs when I sat down. The day was shorter than most and less strenuous than most, but I was still tired smelled a little, so I took a shower and put on fresh clothes before returning to the living room, where
the minister's wife was finishing up in the kitchen.

She offered me sweetened iced tea and I accepted since it was what my mother always made, and it had been some time since I had had a glass. We sat down in the living room, her in a wooden chair with embroidered upholstery and me on the sofa. The room smelled like lemon furniture polish.

I went through the abbreviated version of "my story" yet again, answering the whys and wheres and hows and whens that go with the whats and whos that most of my hosts already knew, which, even after so many times, I still hadn't tired of. The minister's wife listened enthusiastically, leaning against her forearm, which lay on the chair's curved, wooden arm. When I finished she told me about Hurricane Audrey, which swept through Cameron Parrish in 1957, killing over 400 people.

"Lawd, it was awful," she said. "They was waves higher'n this house, came crashin' in on people in the middle of the night--washed entire buildings out into the marsh. Some folks were washed clean out of their own houses and swept away. Some got to the tops of their houses'n stayed safe, but other folks weren't so lucky. Some were out float'n around on their rooftops. Of course I don't know how many died."

"What'd you do?" I asked.

"Oh, we weren't here. We were up north, but when we heard the news we came down to help. When we got here we went down to the courthouse, and Lawd, you wouldn't believe the sight! People were on top of the courthouse, on top of
their houses, even in trees."

"Why were they in trees?"

"They was Cottonmouths everywhere! People tried t’stay out of the water.

She stopped and stared out into the living room. "I’ll nevuh forget on the way in seein’ this tree near town that had dozens of snakes in it."

When she said this I immediately pictured the oversized head of Medusa on top of the base of a tree.

The minister soon arrived and we sat down at the dining room table, which must have been made with cherry or a dark-stained oak. Dinner was roast beef, mashed potatoes, and green peas. The minister’s wife began telling her husband everything I had told her, to which he nodded, still arched over his plate. When he finished chewing he asked me to name some of the states I had traveled through and I told him.

His wife was more interested in the future. "Rick, whe’re you gonna finish ya trip?" she asked.

"St. Augustine, Florida."

"And when you ’spect you’ll get there."

"I’m shooting for the first of March."

"Ah you goin’ through N’Awlins?" she asked.

"I am, yes, and I’m looking forward to it, too. I’ve never been there. I hear it’s a great town."

"Well I hope you like it ’cause I cain’t stand it."

"Really?" I asked.

She nodded while chewing.

"And why’s that?" I asked.
"'Cause there's thieves and murderehers and weirdos everywher, 'specially them niggahs down by the cemetery."

I stopped eating and took a drink of water, still looking at her over the rim of the crystal glass. She looked up at me and I instantly looked down at my plate and moved to eat some more.

"What paht o' town you stayin' at, anyway."

"I'll probably stay at the youth hostel."

"Is 'at over by the cemetery."

"I'm not sure," I muttered, my fork moving toward the plate more slowly.

"Well, if it is, you betta watch yo' back. Them niggahs are everywhere over there. They're liable to take you for all you got. They'll rob you blind, with a gun, a knife, whatevah they got. Why they'd kill ya of' a dollah and won't thank nothin' of it. Just stay away from them niggahs down by the cemetery and you'll be alright."

I looked at The Reverend, who quickly looked up at me and then back down at his plate. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. My heartbeat raced.

"You cain't trust 'em," she said. They'll take ever' dime you got."

I was taught long ago to never talk back to my elders, I had learned that ministers and their wives were to be respected, but this minister's wife hadn't yet sensed that I was uncomfortable.

"Sho' will," she said.

"There's plenty of white people who do the same crimes,"
I blurted out, my voice shaky but strong.

The Reverend stopped eating again and looked up from his plate at his wife.

“Why sho’,” she said. “I ain’t no racist. I don’t like no white trash none neither.” She paused and her eyes caught mine.

“I’m not sayin’ that all blacks ah’ niggus. I jus’ don’ like any good-fuh-nothin’. They all stay on their side of town, I’ll stay on mine. Then ever’thing be alright.”

The Reverend looked back down at his plate and resumed eating, his fork clinking against the china.

Except for a few trivial comments by the minister’s wife, we finished the meal in silence. I thanked them for the meal and excused myself when we finished.

The next morning I rose early. I gathered my things and stuffed them back into Bessie. The minister’s wife told me not to worry about making the bed and asked me if I wanted some breakfast. With a false smile, I politely declined. Since the Reverend was already at his church office, I thanked her for my stay and I stopped by the chapel on my way out of town to thank him. We walked outside to Bessie, where we shook hands. “Godspeed,” he said.

The road out of Cameron soon left the ocean and was surrounded as if by two half moons, one of high grass on one side and one of wetlands on the other. The sun shone brightly and brought a beautiful sheen to the world around me, everything golden except for the gray pavement and the
that had ditches brimming with water.

That day the wind had in fact favored my backside; it was no self-delusion. It pushed me and my smooth pedal stroke onward. The road stayed straight, passing through the towns of Oak Grove and Grand Cheneir, both I’ve since forgotten, which is common on good riding days when the air is clear and clean and, best of all, behind you. It’s usually a harbinger of a good day to come, a blue heaven above, no high and low pressure systems butting heads, no thunderous conflict, no rain.

To my left I spotted groups of mallards in the channel and single blue herons at the edge of the high, sand-colored grasses. The red-winged blackbirds resumed their unforgettable call.

Before long I was next to the Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge and Game Preserve, which was about halfway between Grand Cheneir and Pecan Island, both dots on the map that had to have made pretty good arguments to end up in an atlas. Although at the time I didn’t know it, I was near a protected place, but I had a hunch. My first hint was a big splash I heard off to my right. I turned quickly but instead of seeing movement I noticed dark, slender lumps across the fifty-foot wide aqueduct between me and the island of dry grassland. Are those gators, I thought.

I kept riding and kept hearing the plops and splashes, but without actually seeing one of those masses on the banks moving. I wanted to stop and take a photograph, but fear
that I might end up showing friends and family photographs of garbage sacks or black rubber tubes filled with toxic waste made me wait for more evidence. So I rode looking ahead and with my head angled south, anticipating another group of alligators. Soon I witnessed one crawling into the water. I stopped and took a photo of the rest of its group lay still, their backs flat and glossy black in the sun.

I could see why Louisiana was called "Sportsman's Paradise," although I had given up hunting for simply viewing wild creatures, and seeing all the wetland wildlife on such a fine cycling day made it even better. Such wondrous days, however, only prompt one into reverie, the buzz of the tires on dry pavement nearly mesmerizing. My mind kept going back to the minister's wife and her explanation that niggers and black people are two different things. Her rationale was the same one my father used, and I can remember him stating it over and over throughout my childhood like a liturgy. "There's a big difference between a black person and a nigger," he'd say. "A black person is an okay feller, but a nigger is one lazy, no-good, sorry sonofabitch." Of course, like any child wanting a stronger connection to his father would, I adopted his philosophy. I even remember myself retelling it to friends, for "nigger" was already a part of my vocabulary.

And that philosophy went unchallenged until one day we went to visit my mom's sister, a nurse who lived in a middle-class suburb of Louisville. I was a young teen then and randomly blurted out the word "nigger" like I would any
other. My aunt turned and yelled, “Ricky!,” her soft, pale face and big, sad-looking eyes turning wrench and horrified, an image that stays with me today. And its this image of my aunt, along with her words and willingness to speak, that helped me understand how words can have negative connotations. If the word “nigger” hurt a white woman like my aunt, I thought to myself, how would it affect a black person.

Of course, growing up I never called anyone a nigger, much less used the word around black people. But that is the dual nature of small, southern towns, and the small towns in Muhlenberg County were no exception. Folks didn’t outwardly use derogatory terms around those for whom the terms were aimed at. But there was little chance of this anyway; like most whites in Muhlenberg County, we lived separate from the black community, which was often referred to as “Colored Town” or, worse, “Nigger Town.” I did, however, play high school basketball and was forced for the first time to have blacks as teammates, and of course I never used the word around them, just as my father never used it around their parents. Our speech became guarded.

The wind continued to be mild and cool as I pedaled on toward the town of Pecan Island, where I stopped at the only store in town, which looked like a small house with gas pumps in front of it. It was covered in tan aluminum siding and had two small windows on each side. Concrete steps led up to a glass door. Inside I asked if I where the water spigot was and if I could help myself. A young woman said I could help
myself, so I did. The water was a light brown, so I went back inside and bought a gallon of water, which cost $1.69. Outside I looked up at the large red numbers under the Unleaded sign: $1.29/gallon.

Louisiana State Highway 38 turned away from the ocean and into a mainland of darkness. It was late afternoon. A wall of cypress and oak trunks lined the western side of the road, as if surrounding a fortress. It blocked out the sun, which rarely found its way through cracks of tangled branches, like soft white stars in the night sky, both beautiful and ominous.

To the east was the same, except for occasional fields and empty plots of land just sitting there, waiting to be filled. But no roads. I was on a one way road into the heart of Louisiana.

Not far after the road sprang north, I heard a vehicle slowing behind me, the motor not an increasing hum but a dying drone, the tires slowing from a whine to a crackle of sand and rock beneath rubber.

I kept pedaling, as I always do when I hear someone slowing down, even though it was a sound that made me both shudder and rejoice inside. It’s a sound that could be either trouble or kindness, either someone to hassle me or someone to cheer me on. On this journey, however, I had had only cheers, so why was I scared? Louisiana. There on that lonely stretch of highway, I thought that perhaps my luck was about to run out. All my fears rushed through my mind the
way I imagined Hurricane Audrey did though that section of the Louisiana bayou.

A truck the color of dried blood eased next to me. A stubble-faced man in his mid-twenties leaned over and yelled out the open window on the passenger-side door.

"You doin' awright?" he asked.

I hollered through the grumble of the motor. "Doin' fine!" I caught his eye for a brief second.

"You need a ride?" he yelled, but turned his head toward the road after the word need.

Don't I look awright, I thought.

He looked back at me. I angled my head toward the truck, keeping my eyes on the white line. "Naw, I'm awright!"

"You sure?"

"Positive!"

"Awright. I's jus' checkin'," he said, and slowly pulled away. I watched him till his headlights disappeared over the ramp of a soft hill ahead, the first since the ferry some sixty miles earlier.

As I pedaled up the slope, I thought about this man's offer and how odd it was. I wondered why a coonass in a truck with Louisiana plates stop and ask a cyclist in the best physical shape in his life, pedaling smoothly and evenly down the quiet of Louisiana backroads. Bessie wasn't even wobbling. It would have made more sense if I was standing on the side of a road wrestling a greasy chain or unrolling a spare tube, but I wasn't, and even that would be strange. A
Louisiana coonass was supposed to keep to himself, especially when someone else is getting along just fine. But something made that man stop, and what I later thought that something to be scared the shit out of me.

Several miles later I rolled over the Intracoastal Waterway, the steepest climb I would have in Louisiana, and that at the hands of man. The arching bridge was like a gateway into the swamp communities hidden back behind veils of Spanish moss. Small roads began poking out into rural flatlands of green fields staked with lone, leafy trees fed year-round by the humid Gulf air, obviously more in summer than in winter, for which I was thankful. Riding across the country on a bicycle in winter had its benefits. February is far less sadistic than June, especially there. But the air was still wet, and when I arrived in Abbeville ("Abbyville"), mosquitoes began landing on me as if I were O’hare, their mild tickle like that of fairies’ wings turning to an itching pierce of the flesh, which was soon followed by my gloved hand. However, my glove soon learned to squash the fairies’ touch, not waiting for the mosquito’s barb.

I stopped off at a supermarket and called the Methodist minister from the local church to find out if I had a place to stay for the night, and whether or not I was going to be fed or not. In this case, the lodging came through, but I picked up no hint of a free meal, so I went inside the supermarket and bought a supper of three-for-a-dollar chocolate creme pies and a quart of milk.
After following the minister's directions, I found the church, a dark red brick that looked saturated with both water and age. In the church office I found a man in what looked like his late forties. We introduced ourselves and shook hands. I noticed his brown hair was thinning.

"We ain't got much," he said, which to me was better than nothing.

"That's okay," I said. "Just havin' a roof over my head is good enough. You never know what the weather's gonna do, either."

We walked down the tiled floors of the hall, the minister peeking into open-doored rooms to find the most comfortable one. The church was in a two-story building shaped like an "L", which was attached to the sanctuary. It reminded me of a school building or an old hospital wing.

I didn't know what to expect of the minister, especially after my stay in Cameron. His demeanor was like that of a retired college professor, easy-going and laid back, almost too laid back, I thought. Too sagacious for his age, as if he could see right through a person and sense his frailties. I think he sensed that I was on the run because he looked at my shoes when I met him, but he didn't know the circumstances, and lucky for me he didn't ask.

"So," he said with a mild grin, "Whadda ya think o' Lweesiana?"

"I like it," I said. "It's very pretty."

He nodded in agreement, but his eyes were locked on my
when I glanced at him. "I got your card from Pote Awthuh. D’you come through Lage Chahz or through Cameron.

"Cameron." I said.

"What’d you think of it?"

"It was pretty along there."

"Not much out there, is there?"

"Naw."

He smiled. "Where’d you stay?"

"With the pastor there at the parsonage."

"What’d you think of them?"

"They’re nice people," I said.

He shook his head in agreement, and not so much to what I had said but how I said it. He must have read me and my ponytail and the shyness in my voice and the brevity in my answers. His smile grew wider. "Yeah," he said. "They are nice people."

We neared the end of the hall.

"See anythin’ you like so fah?" he asked

"Do you have a nursery?"

"Right down here."

"I’ll take it."

The road from Abbeville to New Iberia was as straight and as smooth as a new sidewalk, and the landscape reminded me of home, which felt good. Pockets of trees huddled around farm homes of white siding or whitewashed planks, as if to hide them. Clouds inched across fields of soybeans and cotton, with occasional red barns and gray-weathered shacks
spaced between.

But on the way out of town I hit traffic, or to be more precise, it hit me, and this on a road with three inches of shoulder. Slow-moving autos crept behind me as if in a funeral procession, while oncoming traffic was a steady stream. I watched them in my rear-view, bobbing over the yellow to see what the hold-up was. When the first gap appeared, an banged-up, bronze station wagon passed me. Then a delivery van, and then another car. Then a farm truck pulling a trailer with a tractor on it came by, soon followed by its twin. Then a truck passed slowly, and a man gripping the steering wheel as if he were choking it squeezed a pained look from his face. Several others followed suit. Some didn’t wait oncoming traffic to then and simply squeezed by as if they were driving through the super-buff cycle at the car wash. Another truck simply sped by and simply flashed America’s favorite form of nonverbal communication towards me and Bessie, and then reinforced his message with a verbal remarks unfitting of the clergy.

This was my first taste of Louisiana drivers, and it tasted bad. Rush hour had finally made it to the boondocks. However, traffic eventually slowed to roughly the rate of one vehicle for every thirty seconds, and I started to breath easily.

But when I turned down US Highway 90 towards Morgan City over fifteen miles later, things got worse. It was a four-lane highway separated by a humped median, and its shoulder went from three inches to none. Cars and pickups, work
Thompson 72

trucks and eighteen-wheelers passed every few seconds, sometimes growling in packs. I kept my eyes on my rear view mirror as much as the road in front of me and now only remember glimpses of the landscape: mixed forest of oak and cypress, dead brown fields, a leaning barn.

I had long ago given up on the American Motorist on four-lane highways to take a few seconds out of his busy day by lightly applying the brakes and safely pulling into the outer lane to give a cyclist—even a hitchhiker—some cushion and both parties some peace of mind. And it was a good thing I had, because nearly all of the motorists on US 90 refused to break the plane of the yellow dashes, much less get all the way over into the next lane, even when it was empty. Several even brushed within a foot of Bessie and me, even semis, which pushed atmosphere out from beside us, sucking us into their backdraft. I began to wonder if the state of Louisiana was enduring a power steering fluid shortage. Perhaps a Gulf freighter had just sliced the Atchafalaya Bay, delivering a highly coveted load to Morgan City, which would explain why all those motorists, especially the empty long-haulers, rushed past me, risking my life and limb for the sake of arthritic drivers everywhere.

Perhaps, but I’d like to think that they feverishly raced to get off US 90 because it resembled an interstate, seeking the slow and scenic backroads of America rather than the franchise-filled interstates that plague our country. For that, I couldn’t blame them. But then again, I was heading down what’s nationally known as Cancer Alley, the
main, hardened artery that branches out into a toxic matrix of good jobs and sickly lives by joining all of Louisiana's petroleum plants to small towns and to coastal ports.

Louisiana's twin to Kentucky's coal industry. For the first time on my journey, I felt I was getting close to home.

The next morning I stopped at another small supermarket, which in the backwoods towns of Louisiana aren't very super, but they're enough for even the most discriminating long-distance cyclist. I bought a quart of milk and a half-bunch of bananas, one of which I ate with a handful of raw oats followed by gulps of milk. That was breakfast, which I had outside, leaning against the store's concrete wall painted white, which was blinding in the morning sun.

A thin wrinkled black man shuffled by, his spine curved forward like a question mark, a sign that he was losing a dual battle with gravity and time. He smiled at me as he crept past, and I nodded and smiled back.

His yellow-toothed grin reminded me of Henry Singletary, the first black man I had ever known. Henry was the custodian at our church, and he sold sweaty bottles of soda pop for a quarter to us children between Sunday School and church. With quarters in hand, we Sunday-Schoolers would peer over the counter and push our quarters across to Henry, and then stand there and guzzle using two hands. I'd order a Big Red and talk to Henry, who was not much higher than the counter itself, even though his spine then was not yet curved into a question mark but more like a single parenthesis.
Often I asked him about his head, which was as shiny and smooth as a lump of dark chocolate on top, its sides lined with short white, spongy curls. About his rectangular glasses and why they made his eyes so big. About why he sold soda pops. Of course, he always laughed at us children and our questions, his plump, purplish brown lips pulled back to reveal his straight, yellow-stained teeth, one of which was a gold cap that sparkled. Henry was a soft-spoken man, quiet but sociable. He waddled when he walked, had a small pot belly, and always wore pressed slacks and a white cotton dress shirt, under which you could see where his white t-shirt ended and his coffee skin began. We kids liked Henry; we had no reason not to.

My parents also liked Henry. They were one of only a handful who went out of their way to talk to him before the church service. Of course, my mother did this more than my dad, and she often helped him in the kitchen during pot lucks and other church socials. And it was because of this relationship that Henry invited my parents to a revival at the A.M.E. Zion church, the only black church in Greenville. He might have invited others from our all-white church, but when we attended the revival one hot summer night, our family was the only whites there.

I remember Henry welcoming us, as did other strange but friendly faces, which was no different from how our church welcomed people. He found us a near-empty pew in a darkened corner near the back of the small sanctuary, which was nearly full. It was much smaller than our church. A narrow center
aisle separated about twenty rows of pews, each with room for eight people of average weight. People clip-clopped to their seats as the revival began.

The services at our church, even revivals, began with quiet hymns and solemn greetings and bible scriptures, but Henry's church began with energy. Like a Baptist, the black-robed reverend began praising God and Jesus with the fervor that politicians berate each other, but how he differed from the condemning and fear-provoking thunder of Baptist preachers I'd witnessed at vacation bible school was in his and joyous but voluminous voice.

"JESUS is the ONE!" he yelled.

(AMEN!)

"I caint hear ya"

(AMEN!)

"One mo' time!"

(AMEN!)

And then they broke into an unannounced song, as if we were the only ones who weren't told. Everyone started singing words I couldn't understand, their bodies swaying, their arms free of hymnals and waving in the air towards heaven. The choir's rows moved like waves, their arms clapping in unison, their white robes glistening under bright lights. Those thunderous gospel harmonies, at once frightening and inspiring, filled the place with energy.

Everyone stood and moved but us. We all sat still and restrained, as if we were still in our own sedate church. I looked around at the people near our pew, their faces smiling
and dripping with sweat, their eyes glowing as if out of the night. Wet, white blouses clung to large women, who trembled as if in a trance, while then men moved. White eyes bulged out of dark, sweaty faces.

I kept looking around, trying to fend off fear, telling myself it was alright, but my seven-year-old soul felt fear rushing toward the brim. It was as if the Devil himself had been conjured up, appearing any moment to take me away from my parents. As it turned out, my year-older brother started to panic, scratching and clawing at my parents like a wild dog, trying to break free from their grasp and flee. I sat paralyzed, watching him wriggle and scream, until I began to cry, the tears streaming down my face like warm rainwater.

Outside of town I stopped at a service station to air my tires. It had no fancy signs or lettering to tell what the place was, although I’m sure the owner’s logic was that the gas pumps are a dead giveaway. I walked around the gas islands looking for the air hose, my torso curved to the side and my head angled as if I were trying to spot a dropped quarter. A teenage boy came out from one of the bays. He wore faded, thinning jeans, a white t-shirt, and a cap. All had grease on them. Although it was impossible to tell whether it came from that morning or days prior or both, his pale arms were already marked with grease, like someone had whipped him with small strips of greasy rubber.

“What choo lookin’ for?” he asked.

“The air hose. You got one?” I replied.
"Yeah, it's in here," he said, and with a slow, unconscious strut walked back into the bay and returned holding a once-red hose now faded pink and covered with greasy slashes.

"Whe'uh you headin'?" he asked.

"St. Augustine."

"Florida."

"The one."

"Damn, 'at's a long ways. You mus' be crazy or somethin'." He handed me the hose, and I filled the tires. "Whed joo staht out?"

"Canada."

"Damn, you are crazy." I smiled, thinking of the folks back home. I handed him the hose. "How long 'at take ya?"

"I've been gone three months."

He shook his hand and started back to the garage. "I'll be damn."

The road cut through a dark forest of cypress trees, which blocked off the warm morning light I felt in Morgan City, but several miles down the road, the forest yielded to a murky, brown lake. Cloudy blue sky and sunlight lifted my spirits. A cold wind brushed the water's surface. The road was on top of a straight levee that cut an end off the lake. The levee entered more dark forest, where the blue sky soon gave way to foggy gray clouds. It was as if the forest itself had consumed the blue sky and sprayed grayness into the air overhead.
By then I had broken a small sweat; my body was warm, needing only my windbreaker rain jacket to keep it that way. My bare legs churned smoothly with the precision of cams and pistons. Since the road was free of everything from rain to traffic, my mind was left open and barren.

I looked into the wide-flanged cypress bottoms engulfed by black water but could only see fifteen feet into the forest. Everything beyond was a wall of blackness. Old tires littered the water's edge, as did occasional bundles of dark garbage bags. Plastic oil containers and beer cans and bottles were scattered across the banks of the chenier. When the mind of the traveler goes blank, it starts to notice even the smallest things. Candy wrappers and pill bottles, crumpled cigarette packs and the cellophane from donut packs.

Noting everything along the banks, I spotted a shiny magazine just below the narrow shoulder of the road. It was hot pink and royal blue that glimmered. I stopped and picked it up. It was a glossy hard-core porno mag with a name like Get Pumped or Beaver Brigade. I stuffed it into my right rear pannier.

It's not everyday a lonely and foolishly celibate traveler finds something to excite him in such a dreary landscape.

A few miles later, the road turned to the left. The chenier widened like a bulge in the middle of a garden hose, and just enough for the highway department to make a gravel turnaround. I pulled into the lot and pulled the magazine out, still straddling Bessie. Inside were pages of flesh and
little else: bodies glistened with sweat, their faces caught in moments of ecstasy and exhaustion, pleasure and pain. I don’t remember seeing any articles or columns.

My penis pulsed against my lycra shorts, which aren’t very good at hiding erections. I looked down at the form, which looked like I was trying to hide a small banana.

At that moment a truck rounded the curve, appearing out of the woods as if by magic. Its sight preceded its sound, which caught me by surprise, so I stuffed the magazine inside my handlebar bag and acted like I was looking for something I had misplaced. My insides still tingling, I grew nervous and pedaled away.

On the other side of the curve, the road again transformed into a gauntlet of cypress marsh. Gray clouds still hid the sun.

Pedaling along, I looked down at the spine of the magazine poking out from the handlebar bag. My fears chilled me. I imagined perverted swamp dwellers maneuvering through the filter of trees, their wiry bodies draped in patched overalls, the faces with mangy beards, their oily heads covered with greasy baseball caps.

We used to joke about these backwoods “pre-verts” while working after-hours at the bike shop in Nashville, where my service manager had warned me of crooked Louisiana sheriffs. The guys had teased me about possible confrontations much like the one I was imagining there on that highway, so to alleviate any fears I’d join in with an imitation or two. My best was a Deliverance-type character. I’d stick my thumbs
inside the waistband of my cycling shorts and say, "You drop 'em lycra shorts, boy, and you DANCE for me!" Then I'd laugh a sinister, machine-gun laugh and say, "Now Squee' lika pig, boy!"

We all laughed every time I did my imitations, but there in the heart of the that darkened bayou, I was anything but laughing. Feeling like I was being watched, I pulled the magazine out of my handlebar bag and slung it into the swamp.