Drugs And Daydreams

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Disclaimer[s]:

This is work of fiction.

[However] Don’t believe

everything that you read.

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Drugs And

Daydreams

I don’t know when it was, or even why, but somewhere along the line, my sense of patience just disappeared. I just don’t have the tolerance for all of the structure in the world around me. Here I am, a couple years out of high school, and I’m seeing too many of my friends choosing to continue school or go to work. Maybe they enjoy it, but all of their whining would lead one to guess otherwise. If high school taught me anything, it’s that spending my time and energy trying to appease other people is something I’d never like to do again.

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We came to the conclusion that our enjoyment couldn’t be brought about by our passive entertainment, but by creating it wherever we go. A bicycle trip? What better way is there to explore places I’ve never been before? Of course I was down for it.

I didn’t know what to expect. All I knew is that I would be riding along the coast for a few weeks, and, due to my aversion toward the whole capitalism thing, there would probably be more than a few opportunities to be creative as far as acquiring food and amusing ourselves went. As it turns out, to guess that this would be one of the most fun times of my life would still be an understatement.

I knew The Captain well enough before the ride to know that he was always down for a little mischief. That’s pretty much what our crew, the Monster Squad, was all about when we’d take to the streets of Portland for nights filled with petty crime, and, every now and then, some not-so-petty crime. So with only an atlas of the US, a book about west coast bike routes, a couple phone numbers and a little cash, we hit the road. Traveling is always more fun when you are unprepared.

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This is liberty. We thrive on walking into the supermarkets – the cornerstone of the capitalist lifestyle – with its aisles of food, the essence of life, commodified and quantified, where beneath its watchtower windows and video surveillance, behind the suspicious eyes of managers and security guards, we walk out with pockets full of Clif-Bars and pants bulging with cartons of soy milk.

The Monster Squad pays no one and makes no apologies. This is life. This is defying our sense of security, intentionally jumping into a world of vulnerability, and coming out on top!

**‘Boredom is counterrevolutionary’**

There was always someone new to talk to, somewhere new to explore, a new tree to fall asleep beneath, and, given the right circumstances, a new surface to deface or a new chainstore to loot. The thought of having nothing to do never even crossed my mind. Like I said, this is life. There are no cubicles or fancy cars, no deadlines to meet, TV shows to catch, or bills to pay. Pleasure isn’t a recreational activity relegated to evenings and weekends, it is a state you live in constantly. And each night, with your muscles aching and nerves exhausted, you lay down, eager to do it all again tomorrow.

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The idea: The Monster Squad is the name of our bicycle gang in Portland, Oregon. Kinda shabby as far as gangs go. We have no stories of crazy showdowns with rival gangs, nor can I say that any of us rank all that high on the Portland police’s ‘Most Wanted’ list. But there have been plenty of rides that last until sunrise – nights of covering the town in wheatpaste, hitting new car lots with eggs and cottage cheese pulled from grocery store dumpsters, crashing parties, sneaking into hot tubs, very indecent exposure, successful schemes to get free alcohol, and just chaos in general. Well, the idea was to go out and conquer the entire country! No bagel shop undumpstered, no movie theatre un-infiltrated. We were going to cross the country, dirty punk kids on bikes as far as the eye could see, bringing entire metropolises to a standstill, and leaving a path of wreckage in our wake.

The plan: None really. Which is just as well. I don’t do well with plans. As the ride came, more and more people who had originally said they wanted to go became involved with other interests and projects, and what we had pictured, or at least fantasized, of hundreds of kids turned out to be… three. The destination was moderately altered, so that, rather than going to Boston as was originally thought, we would now be riding from Portland to San Francisco. Between the three of us, we had a handful of contacts on the way, and a handful of places we definitely wanted to stop, but beyond that, everything was completely up in the air.

The characters: There was Sharky, a guy pushing 40 years old who has lived all across the country, and even in England a little, who is a veteran dumpster diver with some crazy stories to show for it. His other big interest is fixing up and riding bikes, and I always see him around town sporting a new ride. There was The Captain, still in his teens, who has done some crazy bike trips, including parts of Europe. I’ve known him for almost all of the two years that I’ve called Portland home. We’ve had many a crime-filled night of bike rides that last until dawn, as well as intoxicated punk-rock bowling nights and some crashed parties where you wake up the next day and wonder how it is you didn’t end up in jail, or at least with your ass beat, the night before. And then there’s me – I’m not giving you an introduction, you’ll get an idea of me as the story goes on. The three of us were united by our common hatred of the automobile. A contempt surpassed only by our feelings toward work, which left each of us with a free summer and a desire for adventure.

The preparation: I ride a bike to get around. Partly because Portland is such a small place that you really don’t need a car, and partly because of that whole impending ecological devastation issue. The longest bike trip I had done in the past was about 300 miles, a round trip from LA to San Diego along the southern California coast.

As for my bike, I had found a road bike at a thrift store for $2. It was a pretty nice bike, just a little old and dusty. I invested $5 in parts and about three hours in time fixing it up. Strap on my panniers and I was ready to roll!

I brought with me only the essentials; sleeping bag, some small tools, and a couple bottles of water. I also had a fair chunk of money in case my bike broke down. I thought that it was kinda unlikely that I would make it from the northern end of Oregon to the middle of California on a bike that I paid $2 for and had only finished working on two days before the trip. I don’t want to sound pessimistic, but I’d be quite impressed if I even made it out of Oregon.

How do you prepare for a ride from Portland to San Francisco? I was gonna be on the road for several weeks, so it would be important to condition myself mentally and physically. With valuable preparation time running out before the ride, I decided to get into a conditioning routine that ended up consisting of a lot of parties, alcohol, and public nudity. You’d think that after a week of this, I’d be ready to run a marathon or climb a mountain. But I ended up just getting sick. Oh well. Maybe I’ll try a different routine next time.

**The Destruction Commences!**

May 5th had been our planned leaving date for a couple weeks. But a couple days before the 5th, we decided to leave a day later. The decision was that none of us wanted to leave on a Saturday knowing that there would be shows and parties gong on that night. Like I said, I don’t do well with plans. So May 6th, the three of us, Sharky, The Captain, and I – the fuckin Monster Squad! – met up downtown. The Captain had given out flyers for a ‘good-bye potluck’ in downtown Portland, an ingenious plan for us to load up on some food for the road. As it turns out, I was feeling too sick to eat anything. The result, no doubt, of my intense conditioning. But I did accept Harley’s gift of one can of Pabst Blue Ribbon, a very Portland gesture. We were ready to ride!

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Off into the unknown. We had an entire coast of adventures awaiting us. The excitement was definitely in the air as we raced west on Burnside, headed for the coast. It took less than 15 minutes before we reached our first obstacle and began to wonder what the hell we were thinking. That obstacle was Washington Park, our passage through the west hills. It was a slope that I wouldn’t even want to walk up, let alone ride a bike carrying the extra weight of all my gear. We had the option of taking the MAX, Portland’s light-rail system, to the other side, but we said no, that would be cheating. We made several stops for water and to catch our breaths before finally getting to the top of the park. By the time we got to the peak, we swore we would be cheating next time. The rest of the day was just a straight ride along the highway until we hit the mountains just before the coast.

There wasn’t too much talking, we’d have plenty of time for that in the next few weeks. The three of us just pedaled up into the mountains, stopping occasionally to eat or look out at the ‘vista points’, most of which throughout Oregon are views of clearcuts. I was just excited to be out of the city, on the road with a couple friends. Though as excited and optimistic as I was feeling, you can only be so ecstatic while riding up a 1500 foot mountain pass. Kinda ironic how riding into the clouds tends to pull your head out of them. So the next couple hours were spent struggling uphill, reminding me once again of my error in preparation practices. Oh well, given the choice of working myself into top physical form or spending my days exploring the city with friends and my nights trading sleep for punk shows and spraypainting sprees, I’m sure I’ll make the same choice next time as well. But, like anyone with a bike can tell you, no matter how physically draining a hill or mountain is on the way up, you completely forget as soon as you begin the ride down.

Partway down, we pulled off the side of the road and laid out our sleeping bags behind a haystack. Sharky began to tell us stories of he and his lady friends in the past. Sharky is one of those guys that breaks any moment of silence with a story about him and a woman, one of those weird stories that make you just kinda stare at him and wonder why the hell he’s telling you that, where you can’t quite figure out if he’s bragging or trying to be disgusting. And it took him less than 12 hours into the trip before he got into them. Needless to say, I was pretty tired. At this point, I went to sleep.

In the morning, after passing through some small towns, we came to

**Tillamook**.

Nothing too special except for a Safeway. Now, as a way of life, in general, I try to avoid capitalism. This includes working, and, as much as possible, paying for anything. In Portland, the majority of my food comes out of dumpsters. It’s probably safe to say that a good portion of my possessions come the same way – records, clothes, furniture. The other method of obtaining things is theft. Of course, I’d prefer to dumpster my food; it eliminates waste rather than creating it. But when you’re traveling, and passing through towns with no health food stores or bagel shops, dumpstering, let alone dumpstering vegetarian items, is more difficult. So chain grocery stores become the next best thing. You walk inside, take a look around, and think to yourself that every single item in this store (or at least all that you can fit in your pockets) is free! Safeway’s are the best, because they are the biggest chain in the country, so you’re never more than a couple hours away from one. And the majority of grocery stores outside of the big cities and college towns have little or no security. So when we saw the first Safeway of the trip, our eyes lit up. For the trip, I had given myself of budget of $1 per day. I went through the register line in the store and paid for a couple bananas, then walked over to my bike and pulled out the granola, Clif-Bars, and chocolate soy milk which I had looted and packed it up. Off to the coast!

If I had to list the best songs for a roadtrip soundtrack, ‘Only The Young’ by Journey would probably be at the top. Any time I go on a trip, I get that song in my head. So of course with the clear blue skies illuminating the brisk feeling of morning, I get Steve Perry’s wailing stuck in my head. But you can only pump your fist to the same song for so long. After about three hours, you’re desperately trying to do anything to get the song out of your head. And the fact that the rolling hills of Oregon offer no spectacular scenery to keep you distracted, you’re on your bike for hours at a time with nothing to do except watch the mile markers go by, and you can’t really talk to the people you’re with because of the traffic on the highway that keeps forcing you back into a single file line, the only way to get one song off your brain is usually to start humming another one. And so it goes, until you finally have something to see or do to take your mind off the song.

Our first view of the Pacific Ocean was from a vista point on the side of the highway. We stopped, and, like every single other stop, took a moment to admire the view, then ate a Clif-Bar. While we were here, we met a couple who were riding from Portland, Oregon to Portland, Maine on a tandem bicycle. Now, just when I was starting to get an ego from hearing so many people say, ‘Portland to San Francisco?! You’re insane!’, there’s nothing to sober you up like running into people twice your age riding five times as far. We talked to each other a bit, then split off.

**Lincoln Fuckin’ City**

We rode up a hill into a little coastal tourist town called Lincoln City. As we came around a corner, we saw a Safeway smiling at us. I got some Clif-Bars and trail mix, then we rode down to the beach to eat. I liked this city. It was one of those coastal towns that wasn’t too big or too small. The shores were lined with homes that were half summer homes for old rich people and half Bed and Breakfasts. It was also the type of place that had funny Viking statues outside of motels and several little outdoor shopping centers which seem to be the small town equivalent of a strip mall. Needless to say getting food here would be no problem. We slept on the beach that night, building a bonfire with driftwood and cooking pasta and sauce over it. Yep, this was roughing it. Sometime in the afternoon, Sharky thought it would be wise to mix LSD and alcohol, not telling us until we were about to get settled for the night. The last thing I remember seeing before I fell asleep was a wild smile on his face as he was dragging chunks of driftwood bigger than me across the beach to put on the fire.

The Captain and I awoke the next morning and saw that Sharky was missing. I’m not sure why, but it seemed funny. We found a note that he left that instructed us to meet him at the Marine Science Institute in Newport. Ha! We weren’t even sure how far Newport was, or where the Marine Science Institute would be. So we were off, half laughing, half wondering what the hell Sharky was thinking, though I’m sure a head full of LSD and a belly full of malt liquor , along with sleep deprivation, may have a small affect on one’s sense of judgment. On the way to Newport, we were complaining how it was pretty important that we meet up with Sharky again, after all, he had the cookware. We were just talking about the importance of Sharky as we passed a thrift store. It was closed until 10 am, but the junk pile out back would make for an exotic dumpstering experience. We jumped into a scrap-heap and triumphantly emerged with cookware. Now, to hurry up and meet Sharky.

Sidetracked once more by the Devil’s Punchbowl. Our logic: if it’s named after the Dark One, it’s gotta be cool. It turned out that we met one of the coolest critters here – Asshole The Squirrel. So affectionately named due to his assholish nature of fighting every other squirrel who approached us while we were eating. The Devil’s Punchbowl also lived up to its name – a large circular hole carved out by years of water erosion. Photos and goodbyes with Asshole and it was off to catch up with Sharky.

Nothing could stop us. Nothing, except a Fred Meyer and Safeway - separated by only one street. It was too appealing to pass up. A Thriftway down the street. There was so much looting that paying for a single item became a bore. It would be walk-outs for the most part from here on out.

Sometime late in the afternoon, we rolled up to the Marine Institute, but absent was Sharky. We decided to sneak into the nearby aquarium. ‘Do you have a bathroom we could use?’ The woman pointed me to a bathroom on the inside of the admissions desk. We were in. I was disappointed at the lack of penguins, but we did see some puffins and sharks.

One more try at the aquarium, no Sharky. Do we sit and wait? After all, he does make up one third of the Monster Squad. Hell No! At the stroke of ten minutes, The Captain and I are on the road. We have chaos to create and it waits for no one.

A bit down the highway, a house catches our attention – covered in railroad paraphernalia along with a room full of model railroads and a neon ‘OPEN’ sign. We went in and talked to the old guy whose house it was a bit. It turns out Sharky just happened to be riding down that stretch of highway right then, and saw our bikes, and went inside to find us. We all got back on our bikes and continued south, until we hit the town of

**Waldport**

where we split off from Sharky. ‘You wanna meet somewhere tomorrow?’ I asked. ‘Nah, I’m sure I’ll run into you on the highway somewhere tomorrow.’ We didn’t know it at the time, but this would be the conclusion of the Sharky portion of the tour. The Captain and I slept on the beach again that night.

**The Forest**

The coast of Oregon varies so greatly from one part to another. Over the course of a couple hours, it would feel like we were in totally different worlds. We had already emerged from tiny farm towns into touristy beach cities. When we woke up this morning, we began our ride in a town just south of Waldport. While we overheard the conversations of the drivers and the gas station owners (who were also the attendants and mechanics) asking each other about the others’ family and plans of vacations… you know, that sort of small town Mayberryesque atmosphere. Leaving this environment, we began to head up into the hills, through amazing lush green mountains overlooking the ocean. We made more than a few stops just to gaze off and lose ourselves in the sounds of waves crashing against the cliffs which lined the shores. It was still morning, and the sun had not yet peaked over the mountains, and the crispness of the air felt so soothing blowing against my sweaty body. Everything seemed that much more fresh. Somewhere along the way, we turned off from the highway and onto an old road that had been closed to automobile traffic, making the ride through the trees that much quieter and more relaxed. We pulled into a cove that had trails leading down to some tidepools, and a rock formation called the Devil’s Churn. The Devil’s Churn is pretty much a giant crack into the cliffs that goes from being empty to violently full of water with each wave that comes in. Its end is in a small dark cave full of rocks the size of bricks, which are thrown up and down as each wave comes in, making the sound of one of those wooden rainmaker tubes. We sat there for a long time, just staring at the water and listening to the rocks. The forested areas of the Oregon Coast I remember as being one of the most beautiful environments I have ever seen, and the Devil’s Churn is one of the reasons why.

We climbed back up to our bikes and continued through the misty hills toward wherever it was that we were going. We spent the next few hours riding amongst huge trees, weaving closer to and further away from the cliffs which stood over the rocky shores, south on highway 101.

For the last couple days, The Captain had been talking about a trail that someone had told him about. It was called the Hobbit Trail, and he was told to look for the sign on the side of the road. His sources told him that it was just south of the city of Waldport. Well we had woken up in the morning south of Waldport and had been riding for several hours, and we hadn’t seen any signs. We just figured we had passed it. Somewhere along the road, I had the urge to relieve myself, so I pulled off onto a small shoulder on the highway and ran into the forest to make use of the facilities. I passed a small sign, completely illegible from the road… Hobbit Trail. Wow, the great things you stumble upon while urinating. So we pulled our bikes off the road and walked off into the trees. My god, I cannot even begin to describe the atmosphere. The trail headed down to a small sandy cove which was completely enclosed by cliffs. I imagine that if a heaven existed, it would be the Hobbit Trail and the beach underneath.

The Hobbit Trail is a different world. Not only are each of your senses in a trance from the absence of traffic, neon lights, buildings, etc., but they are absolutely overcome with the beauty, the brilliance of the colors, the clarity of crashing waves and chirping birds, the sun on your eyelids and the sand blowing gently against your legs, the air so fresh, the sky so clear. This put both of us into a state of ecstasy. This was the absence of all forms of civilization, the absence of all of the constraints and dulled senses that come with living in the city. It’s funny how walking 10 minutes away from the highway transports you into a new dimension, so brisk and refreshing, where there’s a feeling of togetherness with everything around you. I haven’t really described many of the features of the trail and the beach which make this area so unique. All I can say is that all of us have those places where we can go to think, or talk, or daydream, where we can just sit forever. Personally, I love the beach. Especially in the evening when it’s empty and lit only by the moon. The Hobbit Trail is that magical place for me, only on the most vestal level. Both The Captain and I liked the place so much that not only did we promise to come back to it again sometime, but we decided that we were going to come back and live there for a couple weeks. We’d run around naked and live on berries and insects. It would be the life!

From the Hobbit Trail area, we headed downhill, through a tunnel, and came upon the next roadside attraction staring us down and daring us to conquer it. This place was the Sea Lion Caves, some type of natural underground caves where hundreds of sea lions live. We walked inside, scoffed at signs advertising the admission price, and came up with a plan. We asked nicely for a free trip: Nope. We looked for the employees’ doors: Nope, you need a key. We walked outside and looked for a space in the fence that we could hop: Nope, we would have to climb a fence and then trample down the side of a hill in broad daylight. I believe brute force would have been the next option, but we gave that idea up pretty quickly, due to a likely arrest being a bit too much to pay to gawk at sea lions. This was the Monster Squad’s first defeat, though it wasn’t so devastating as to keep us from hopping back on our bikes and riding on.

**Florence… What the Fuck?!**

The 101 started its descent from this point and in the next hour, the trees and cliffs and ocean were gone and replaced by a scenery of trailers, sand, and not too much else. We entered the city of Florence. The first thing we saw was a recently built Fred Meyer store, which had a huge sand dune towering above the height of the store behind it, separated only by a brick wall along the back of the property. It was straight out of a Sci-Fi movie. It was interesting, in a nearly creepy way, which would be my impression of the entire city. We parked and went into the store. No cameras! It was one of those places where you were suspicious because it was too easy. I trust these stores even less than the ones that are full of cameras. Either way, I grabbed some Clif-Bars, bagels, and even some vegan ice cream sandwiches, and walked out with no problems. Further into town, there was a Thriftway that also happened to be giving out free groceries! Whatever you could conceal was yours. I filled up on Odwallas.

We went to a park at a middle school to go through our stuff and lighten our loads a bit. Sharky had brought a slingshot along with him on the trip, though he decided he didn’t need it and gave it to The Captain. And we couldn’t see ourselves using it anytime soon, as tempting as some of those fast food restaurant windows were. We decided to leave it on a bench in the playground, where, hopefully, some middle school student would be playing, glance over, and find out that it was his lucky day.

Florence is a weird city. There are very distinct sections, such as the sprawl (the Fred Meyer, and the trailers just outside of town), the industrial area (gross heavy industry, near the highway junction), and the old town area (exactly what it sounds like). The entire city is pretty isolated, as it seems there’s really no other city anywhere nearby. The people we spoke to were just weird, though maybe that’s just my big-city upbringing clashing with these podunk townsfolk. It was a nice city, but at the same time, I wouldn’t be missing it when we were gone.

The sand dunes slowly faded back into the forest. There were some areas where 40 foot tall dunes touched the side of the highway, and there were trees growing out of the sandy slopes. I think living in this area would be the equivalent of living anywhere else while constantly being under the influence of hallucinogens. I’m serious, that description really is accurate. We made it into the mountains and slept just off the side of the highway right next to Elbow Lake.

We started the next morning with a long downhill ride which brought us into

**Reedsport.**

We stopped at a Safeway in town where I flipped through the new Q Magazine which had Depeche Mode on the cover, then walked out with some oranges and chocolate soy milk. We stopped in Winchester Bay to cook up some of the Boca Burgers that The Captain had looted. As much as I was romanticizing the whole hobo aspect of this trip, I think I have to admit that there is a line between bare necessities and luxury, and I think that at the point where you’re looting vegetable oil so that you can cook your food, you’re probably not quite completely in the category of ‘roughing it’. But maybe that’s not a bad thing anyway. Winchester Bay was also the first time we consulted The Book. Bicycling the Pacific Coast, which I’ve seen touted as the bible amongst those who ride down the coast. Our first use of it ended up getting us lost. So we turned around and rode the two miles back to the road we were supposed to be on. Strike one, Book. Back on the 101, we headed south again.

Further down the road, we came to a huge bridge, where we stopped to eat some Clif-Bars. We walked around underneath the bridge a little bit, where we left a nice big Bike Punx! tag, then rode over the bridge into

**North Bend.**

North Bend was the first town on this trip where we saw any punks. It was just some kid with his dad, but he had a leather jacket with a big Germs patch on the back. P.F.R! We said what’s up and rode on.

We rode into Coos Bay, hit the Safeway, and then hit the Wal-Mart. Inside the Wal-Mart, I started talking to an employee about our bike trip. He told me that he was going to go into the forest soon to try to survive for a month on his own. He also told me of a nice beach area where we would be able to stay for the night if we wanted to. I thanked him, grabbed a pocket knife from the outdoor section (the one aisle in the entire store which didn’t have multiple cameras above it) and headed out toward the beach.

We found the spot that he was talking about, but found that we couldn’t get to it because of the high tide, so we tried climbing the hill overlooking that part of the water. We ended up walking through an area that looked like it could have been an army base or something. Then we walked right into the signs which said that it was, indeed, a US Air Force Installation and that trespassers would be prosecuted. Hmmm, that explains that barbed wire we had had to climb over. We sat atop some rocks watching the sun fall toward the water, then hopped back on our bikes and tried to race to a nearby lighthouse before it got dark. We accidentally passed the road to the lighthouse, but ended up at a beautiful beach cove. It looked like a cove straight out of a movie, crescent-shaped and enclosed by green palisades and a small creek that flowed into it on one side. We built a fire, roasted some tofu dogs, then went to sleep near the water.

When we woke up the next day, we had a campground ranger waiting for us. They saw that we had slept in an area reserved for day-use only, and hit us for $4 each! (the price of camping without a car) This was the Monster Squad’s second, and most economically punishing defeat of the tour. This was gonna wipe out our budget for the next few days! We reluctantly paid, and left, swearing a blood-filled revenge.

We spent the morning riding through Bandon, with a view of nothing but clearcuts. In Portland, I constantly see cut trees being shipped through the city either by trucks or on barges, but today, we spent the bulk of the morning riding through land that was nothing but stumps as far as you could see. The ride was pretty frustrating to say the least.

Into Port Orford, and a Ray’s Groceries. Soy milk in the pants, Clif-Bars in the pockets, and we were out. At the southern end of town is Battle Rock, a piece of land that you could climb up on from the beach. On top of this rock are trees, flowers, and a couple footpaths. The Captain and I decided that Battle Rock is possibly the most perfect place in the world, even though its area probably doesn’t exceed a quarter of an acre. We later heard that every year, there are crazy parties here on the 4th of July. I imagine it would be a crazy place for a party since it was hard enough to walk around on the rock in daylight, sober. We made plans to move back here in the future.

Down the highway was another little tourist stop called the Prehistoric Gardens. The idea here, apparently, was to take ‘life-size’ fiberglass dinosaurs and place them in the middle of a bunch of trees and a man-made creek, and then hype it up and charge too much money for people to walk around the path and look at. You weren’t even allowed to climb on them! Why people think it’s worth it to pay money to do this, I couldn’t understand. We asked the girl working if they’d let us in, and she said ‘no’. So we walked around in the gift shop. As we were about to leave, the boss went home for the day and the girl working came out and told us that we could ride our bikes through. We took advantage of the opportunity to have our pictures taken with the dinosaurs suffering from atrociously funky paintjobs (I’m talking neon-colored swirls on some of them). We rode away comprehending even less after we saw it why people would pay money to do that.

**Gold Beach**

Evening was approaching, and I had a medley of NOFX songs in my head for going on like four hours as we came into Gold Beach. We stopped at a couple grocery stores.

After seeing and talking to some of the locals, I swear to god that there must be something in the water in this city. One drunk guy stumbled up to me outside of one of the stores and started telling me how one of the terms of his probation was that he can’t drink. As drunk guy was mumbling to me, a younger guy who had just gotten off work came outside and sat on the curb, apparently waiting for a ride or something. Luckily, he wasn’t drunk to the point of incomprehension. About this time, a car alarm started going off in the parking lot, which led to a conversation that was something along these lines…

drunk guy – You should go turn off that car alarm. The lady who owns it is all legs, and mmm mmmmm, she gives it up. (Keep in mind that the woman is nowhere near, and, in my experience, it’s not all that easy to turn off someone else’s car alarm…)

other guy – What are you talking about, man. She’s old.

drunk guy – I’m telling you, old women are the best. It feels just like butter. [!!!]

other guy – Shut up, man.

drunk guy – What. Do you like guys or something? C’mon, hit me.

Drunk guy went off on his ‘hit me’ tangent for a bit, then stumbled off, only to pass out in the dirt lot next door. So we talked to Other Guy for a bit. Somewhere in the conversation, he repeated a quote from the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles movie, laughed at his own brilliant humor, then stared at us like we were aliens for not immediately recognizing the movie the quote came from. Now this movie must be at least 10 years old at this point, and if I remember correctly, was not particularly a movie worth remembering in the first place. He then went on to explain to us how, ‘those dolls with the big colored hair’ are the hot item in Gold Beach. ‘Troll dolls?’ The Captain and I both said in disbelief. ‘Yeah, that’s them,’ he said. I now understand how my friends outside of Oregon have the impression that our state is 10 years behind the times. The Captain and I looked at each other and kinda laughed. At this point, we really weren’t sure if we were fucking with him, or if he was the one fucking with us. He started explaining to us how he works in demolition as well, and how he gets paid to play with explosives. I wouldn’t be surprised if I ever heard that the Jerry Springer Show gets a lot of their guests from Gold Beach.

The sun was beginning to set, and we had to begin thinking about finding a spot to sleep for the night, so we said goodbye to the guy. He said bye and began walking away. I asked if he was waiting for someone, since he had just been sitting on the curb for a while.

‘No, I just didn’t want to go home so soon.’ ‘Oh,’ I said… There’s definitely something weird about the people in this town.

We found a spot on the beach to cook our pasta over a bonfire and stay for the night. Come morning, we couldn’t get out of this place and away from these people fast enough.

**California!!**

This was the 7th day of the Tour of Destruction! and the first day we had seen a cloudy sky. The ride south of Gold Beach was through dense forest all the way into Brookings, where we made a stop so that The Captain could have a spoke replaced on his bike. This gave us time to loot the Fred Meyer in town and enjoy a lunch of dry Ramen on the curb in front of the library. Once The Captain’s bike was fixed, we rode the last few miles to the Oregon/California border.

By the time we saw the ‘Welcome to California’ sign, we were giddy with excitement. I can’t remember ever being so happy to be in California in my life, and I grew up in the damn state. We each cracked open our cans of Pabst that we had been carrying since the potluck back in Portland, and chugged our 12 ounces of warm barley-malt goodness. As Sharky used to say in the day-and-a-half before he disappeared, ‘just like an angel pissing on your tongue.’ Oh yeah. I missed Sharky’s drunken wisdom and eloquence. I asked The Captain where he thought Sharky was right now. ‘Not drinking Pabst at the border! Ow!!’ We finished the drinks, admired some of the tags by other bikers on the sign posts, and then left one of our own. If any of you ever happen to stop at the border, and happen to notice the MONSTER SQUAD ROCKS! written in huge black letters, that was us. On to California. Ow!!

A few minutes into the state, we passed a billboard for ‘First Chance Liquor Store, 1 mile’ which I saw as we rode by was a small shack sitting by itself on the highway. A little further down the road was a billboard on the opposite side of the highway which said ‘Last Chance Liquor Store, 1 mile.’ Gotta love the ingenuity of those Californians.

The first town we rode into was

**Crescent City**

where we stopped to relieve their Safeway of a few Clif-Bars. I made the observation to The Captain that you don’t even need a sign, you know when you’ve reached California by the generally trashy vibe we picked up on in the state. Down the road, we stopped at a picnic area where we cooked our pasta and watched the Crescent City skyline light up as the sun fell into the ocean. From our point at one end of the crescent-shaped bay, we could see the entire skyline’s length, from downtown Crescent City to the lighthouse at the tip of the coast, twinkling in the nighttime sky. Something about the wide open sky, with the moon gleaming down from above, wave after wave crashing into the shore with the celestial glow on their rolling white crests, the small fire crackling behind us, a line of small trees to one side of us, and the sand and water of the shore to the other, it was freedom. I think this was the first time it really hit me. We had no schedule, no deadlines to be anywhere or obligations to do anything. Nothing to worry about. We were sitting on an empty beach, just us and our bikes. I’d never been in a more physically beautiful place. The only perceivable sign of civilization was the glimmering skyline it provided across the water from us. Other than that, it was the two of us encapsulated by the enormity of the sky and the ocean and the meadow beside us. Nothing feels better after spending eight or nine hours riding a bike than sitting amidst a gorgeous scenery, letting the cool breeze blow against your face and massage your hair, while the crashing waves and glistening stars put you into a trance. You have a lot on your mind after physically exerting yourself so much throughout the entire day – every day for the last week – but somehow it all slips away, and for a short period of time, not a word was said. For the time being, even if only for an ephemeral moment, everything was perfect.

**The Northern California Coast**

We awoke in a free campsite in Nickel Creek, which we were able to find in pitch darkness the night before. I ate my breakfast – if I remember correctly, it was around this point that my diet began consisting almost exclusively of Clif-Bars – and then walked along a trail which ran parallel to a small creek and offered a view of a couple small waterfalls. Eventually, we made our way back to the highway and immediately began an uphill ride. The atmosphere was nice – the highway ran right through a dense forest of redwoods – but it was hard to enjoy as there was only one lane going in each direction and huge logging trucks were constantly rushing by. I’m not sure what elevation these mountains reached, but they brought us above the clouds to a point where the mountaintops looked like islands resting on a white ocean. When we looked to the skyline, we saw nothing and it appeared we were riding along the edge of the world. Then we glanced just ahead of us and saw the clouds before we rode right through them on our way down.

**Klamath, California… weeeeeeeeooooooohhhhh!**

On riding into town, we were greeted by a 40 foot tall fiberglass statue of Paul Bunyan, accompanied by Babe the Blue Ox. As it turns out, we were at the Trees of Mystery, another roadside attraction. We decided to go take a look around at how hard it would be to sneak in. It turns out that you pay as you leave, so getting in would be no problem. Once we were inside, we would have to sneak back out. We just stuck a stick in the doorway so that we could just walk back out through the entrance rather than going through the exit where the cashier was waiting. Ha! Another point for the Monster Squad. As for what was inside, the Trees of Mystery is pretty much some type of redwood freakshow – such as trees growing in the shape of lightning bolts or growing out of the branches of other trees. I can’t say that it was all that exciting. We just grabbed the coins out of their man-made ponds and left.

On the opposite end of town was another little tourist stop called the Tour-Thru Tree, a giant tree whose trunk has been carved out so that cars could drive through it. We posed with our bikes and had some nice couple take our picture. South of Klamath was another one of those mountain ranges that just kept going. I swear that it’s going to be one of these long steep hills that finally makes me crack. It may only be a 30 or 40 minute ascent, but that’s a long fucking time when you’re going uphill, using all of your energy. I couldn’t grind my teeth any harder, and I’m sure every vein in my entire head was about to burst. Every curve, you have your hopes up that you will start going downhill around the bend, but then you see that the road continues to wind further uphill. Your arms are going numb because you’re pushing so hard. I don’t even remember what thoughts were going through my head on these hills, only the feeling that I was pedaling myself closer and closer to the brink of insanity. Then, finally, we reached the peak and had a chance to relax and let gravity take over. Past the mountains, the highway met up with the coast again, and we got to ride between redwood forests and salt-water lagoons. As the temperature began to cool off, we found a secluded day-use area where we could cook up some pasta and then we walked over to a spot that wasn’t visible from the parking lot and laid out our sleeping bags. With the last hour of daylight, The Captain and I sat on a log talking about everything – growing up, school (and our desire never to return), some of the better memories of our more punk years, as we watched the most angelic sunset.

**The Destruction Cometh…**

First thing in the morning, we had a nice hill to ride up. I’m not sure why the trend started, but it seemed like we were greeted with a huge hill first thing every morning. I guess it’s probably because large hills don’t look too exciting in the evening after you’ve already gone 60+ miles. So we started on the hill. I’d say we hadn’t even made it a good ten yards from the base of the hill, my pedals came to a halt. I looked down to see that my front deraileur had completely busted. So I’ve lost five out of my ten speeds. No problem, at least it wasn’t my rear dearileur that broke (that would come later), that would have left me with only two speeds. So I chose to stick with my lower five gears, which makes climbing pretty easy, though it sucks when you’re riding along the freeway on a level grade and you have to pedal like crazy just to go the normal speed. Oh yeah, I forgot to mention that while I was taking off my derailleur… a whopping ten yards from where we started riding… with this huge hill we’d have to climb… it began to rain.

We continued down the highway, which at this point had turned into a multi-lane freeway, in the rain, until, like some type of heavenly doorway that releases rays of light and a gentle symphonic ‘ahhhhh’ sound when you approach it, we came to

**Arcata.**

Previous, all I knew about Arcata was that there were a bunch of hippies there. This turned out to be true, but despite this, the town turned out to be a utopia. About ten minutes outside of town, the rain had stopped. We rode into the city and stopped at a large health food store to stock up. We talked to a few people and didn’t immediately get a weird impression. This city was already looking better than 80% of Oregon’s small coastal towns. In fact, the people in Arcata were really nice, and the hoboes were the most helpful I’ve ever met. Arcata definitely put me in an optimistic mood. I got directions to a bike shop where they wanted $5 for a new derailleur. I was skeptical, that would blow my budget for a few days. But in the end, my good mood, coupled with the fact that there was at least another 400 miles before San Francisco, made me splurge.

It was the middle of the afternoon, and we decided to spend the rest of the day exploring Arcata. We hit the Safeway. The deal with grocery stores is that, generally, the stores out in the suburbs and small towns have little security, and the stores in urban areas and college towns have more, sometimes going so far as having undercover cops posing as shoppers checking people out, or, as is the case in Portland, having over 60 security cameras in a single store. So Arcata, being a liberal college town, I thought the stores would be up on their security. So I was surprised when I walked around Safeway and saw just how easy it was to loot. I mean, on my two trips into the store, I got twelve Clif-Bars! Twelve of em!! And that’s not even counting the Ramen, granola, pineapple rings, bananas, tofu, and Odwallas I also walked out with. It was almost as if they invite theft. I think the only possible way they could make it any easier would be if the bagboys offered to carry your stolen items to your car for you.

After we finished our grocery shopping, we went to a drugstore to fill up our water. Now up until this point, I hadn’t been doing any receipt scams, but lying right outside the store was a receipt for a $7 toy, and when $7 presents itself so conveniently, who am I to turn it away? Yes, Arcata was shaping up nicely. (A note to any of you who may be in the Arcata area ever: the Arcata Tofu Company makes the best baked tofu in the world. It’s free at Safeway, but it’s so good that it’s even worth paying for.)

We went and ate some tofu burritos and then stopped in a couple record stores. So far on the trip, I’d been very disappointed at the lack of new wave in the record stores and thrift shops. However, in Arcata, the new wave was almost as abundant as the smelly street kids. The Captain found New Order’s Technique album (unquestionably the best N.O. album) for only a couple dollars, as did I at another shop with Erasure’s Cowboy album.

We ended up in the Plaza, which, from what we were told, sounds like the happening place. Though, with the skies still gloomy and all the benches still wet from the rain, the only other happening person was a city worker hanging things on the lightposts. But we weren’t disappointed. The statue of William McKinley in the center of the Plaza had been spraypainted with the words, ‘Damn Indian Killer.’ Any place where monuments of imperialist American icons have been defaced definitely gets points from me.

As we were walking away with our bikes, an enthusiastic hippie noticed the loads on our bikes and started talking to us. His name was Huck, and he was an ex-logger, current hippie, who told us of several of his own bicycle trips, and even walking trips throughout northern California. He began to tell us everything about Arcata – about the people, the places, the local environmental movement, and gave us a list of possible places to camp out for the night. We told him of our planned route, to which he replied, ‘No, no, no, no!’ and suggested a way he thought would be a lot safer. It sounded good to me, since we had planned on crossing a mountain range which was 5000 feet tall, and Huck’s route would take us over a mountain range 3000 feet tall. We talked for a while, then thanked him for all of his help and went in our different directions. After it got dark, we rode into the wildlife preserve on the southern end of town where there were a couple covered shacks for birdwatchers. We laid out our bags on the dry wood floor, and sat, eating looted tofu, laughing, and admiring the skylines of both Arcata in front of us and the city of Eureka behind us.

**Into The Sky…**

Woke up perfectly dry and left Arcata with a bag full of food, a working front deraileur, and a promise to return, and maybe even live on top of that Safeway. We got back on the 101 north and turned east on highway 299, our first separation with the coast. This was the route that Huck had suggested. For the next two days, we climbed and climbed. We passed through a couple small towns nestled in the mountains, such as Del Loma, whose sign advertised a population of 30, and Willow Creek, the most colorful town I’ve ever seen, though it consisted of only about ten blocks along the highway. We passed herds of grazing elk, passed by deer standing only a couple feet away, stopped at some of the most exhilarating vista points, rode some downhill stretches where we exceeded the posted speed limit, and slept one night on the Trinity River.

**…And Back Out Again**

The highway eventually brought us to the peak of the Scott Mountains, elevation 3200 feet. We celebrated at the peak by cracking open some vegan chocolate bars, then started the descent. Eight miles down through extremely curved roads, eyes watering, at times we were pushing 40 miles per hour. It was like a roller coaster ride, only much more exhilarating and much more real. This was by far the most fun hill I’ve ever ridden down. At the bottom of the hill, we turned off into Whiskeytown Lake for a naked dip in the water. While we were in the lake, we could hear the drunken yelling and joking of a group of people who eventually made their way over to the shore of the lake with their beer, lawn chairs and kids. This was the epitome of the stereotypical white trash family; completely drunk, hootin and hollerin, wrestling with their kids to cheers of ‘weeeeeeeooooohhh!! Kick his ass, Bubba!’ They had a boy who looked about maybe 11 or 12 years old with blond hair cropped on the sides and a bit longer on the top who was getting the snot beat out of him by a girl who looked a couple years older than him. Just totally getting thrown into the water and kicked, while their parents on the lawn chairs just laughed and cheered. It was great.

A little further down the highway, we rolled into the city of

**Redding**.

The first building we passed was a grocery store, so we made a stop there. I spent the next hour grazing on pineapple rings and vegan chocolate drops from the bulk bins while reading skateboard magazines. I was going to like this city.

Exploration brought us into the downtown area, where the streets were closed and there was a street fair going on. We hopped off our bikes and walked into the crowd, but closer inspection told us that this street fair was to celebrate the city’s annual Rodeo Week. No no no! We jumped on our bikes and got out of there pretty quickly. Somehow, we ended up near the river and the convention center area, where stadium lights and a voice on a loudspeaker told us that there may be something interesting going on. We ended up riding up to the rodeo itself. NO NO NO! As if the line dancing wasn’t bad enough. Call me a city boy, but the whole I’m-gonna-wrestle-animals-to-show-how-tough-I-am thing just isn’t my scene. We couldn’t get away quick enough.

Now I knew that a couple of my cousins live in Redding. Each Christmas - the only time I ever see them – we always conclude our smalltalk by them telling me to stop by Redding sometime and see them, and then I’d say ‘yeah, definitely sometime this year’ and then make absolutely no attempt to. Well, after searching the phonebook, I found them and gave em a call. My cousin, Kateri, was actually very excited to hear from me and invited me right over.

I should explain my cousin, Kateri. She is about ten years older than me, so even growing up, we never really identified with or even really talked to each other. She works for the city tourism and events board, owns a house in the suburbs, has two dogs, goes to church, and overall, she and her husband are about the nicest people in the world. That night, we stayed up pretty late, not so much catching up as introducing our lives to each other for the first time. Finally, she said she should get some sleep before work in the morning, and it was way past the time I had been used to going to sleep at lately – which was about 7:30 at night.

The Captain and I decided to spend the day in Redding, and thanks to Kateri, we had a stack of maps and brochures explaining every possible recreational activity to do within a 50 mile radius. Our first order of business was to forage for nourishment. Holiday Market and Safeway helped us out a little bit on this end. Chocolate soy milk, vegan ice cream, trail mix, bagels, all urban-wildcrafted!

The pace today was pretty slow – no plans, no distance to cover, really nothing more than a handful of places which sounded interesting. The arboretum, the bicycle trail that ran along the Sacramento River, an abandoned mine structure which looked like a somber cement labyrinth juxtaposed by the museum and playground behind it. We explored each of them, ‘exploring’ meaning walking around and sipping soy milk while laughing at the funny stories or going off into some fantastic ‘what if…’ that would be brought up from something walked by or some comment that we overheard. Although the entire trip was pretty laidback, it was nice to have a day to completely relax. Being around the same person for two straight weeks had obviously been getting to both of us, as the half-serious vigor of each of our smartass personalities were now being directed toward each other more and more frequently. Today, we were just riding around enjoying the scenery. Eventually, we ended up riding along the Sacramento River on a trail that used to be the path that the railroad used, taking us through an old train tunnel, which brought us to the top of Shasta Dam. We stopped to take a look down at the river, and off in the direction of Redding. It seemed to be a point where the entire bike trip came into perspective, a peak to stop back from out two weeks of constant motion, and just take a deep breath and think about the fact that somehow we had jumped on our bikes in Portland and ended up here. I said before that my bike wasn’t exactly the toughest piece of work, and I had never expected to make it out of Oregon. This was one of those times where the breeze felt so nice and life looked so beautiful. I was dirty and sore as hell, not to mention the sunburns and the fact that Clif-Bars and dry Ramen made up 60% of my diet, the amount of money I was carrying would not have even paid for one month’s rent in Portland. And I’d never felt better.

I took another look around from the top of the dam, which may as well have been the top of the world, and started my descent.

**From Liberty To Capture**

Back in town, we stopped at the city skate park and found a community garden which The Captain had seen before while hopping trains through the town. We had planned to meet Kateri and her husband for dinner, but first, we decided to go back to that grocery store on highway 299 to grab some food and so that I could finish the issue of Thrasher that I started the day before. So I walked in, filled my pockets, grabbed some of those pineapple rings from the bulk section and then walked over to the magazines. The Captain walked by and said he was gonna get some tofu and that he’d meet me outside, so I walked out and waited by our bikes to make the getaway. Five minutes later, and The Captain had yet to come out. After another few minutes, I walked back in and found him… in the security office. It turns out that when he walked in, the first thing he did was head over to the soda fountain, fish a cup out of the trash, and fill it up with soda. Well, some younger employee had seen that, and as he was about to walk out of the store, that employee grabbed his arm and told The Captain to follow him to the security office. By this time, The Captain had put a couple avocadoes and some tofu into his bag, which the manager of the store found when they searched him. It also turns out that while in the office, The Captain got the talkin to by this younger employee about ‘god’ and the importance of ‘honesty’. Busted by a kiss-ass christian kid… talk about adding insult to injury.

Meanwhile, I was sitting outside hoping I wouldn’t have to spend the evening outside of the jail trying to figure out how to smuggle in a file baked into a vegan cheesecake. A bit later, one of Redding’s finest pulled up. I wondered if I should stick the tofu I had looted underneath the rest of the food in my bag just in case, but then figured that that didn’t make too much sense, as the rest of the food in my bag was looted as well. I sat on top of the ‘Monster Squad Fuckin Rocks!’ note that I had scribbled on one of the store’s outdoor tables the previous evening. After waiting a while longer, I thought it was safe to assume that the Captain wasn’t going to jail, so I stuck a note on his bike to meet me at a spot up the street. In a few minutes, he rolled up and expressed his regret at not kicking the christian in the shins. He didn’t even get to keep the avocadoes he grabbed. Now, 45 minutes and a scheduled court date later, we were ready to meet Kateri for dinner.

Kateri had called up a couple of her friends asking if they knew any places with good ‘vay-gan’ food, which turned out to be an excellent Thai food restaurant. We all talked about our traveling experiences, and the pineapple curry tofu was great. Settling into the end of our stay, Redding was nice. And The Captain and I had ridden our bikes 50 miles on what was a day off.

**The Temperate Scenic Sacramento River Valley**

Out of Redding and down highway 273. We had some friends in Sacramento, so we were heading that direction. Not too far out of Redding, we caught up with a Union Pacific train also heading south on tracks that paralleled the highway. I imagined tossing my bike into a boxcar and riding wherever the train would take me. The engineer waved and gave us a whistle, and shortly after, the highway and the tracks split off into their separate directions. It was a surreal moment.

Past the industrial outskirts of Redding lie miles and miles of highway with only an occasional town or farm to break the monotony of dry grass landscaping the valley. The temperature was hovering around 100 degrees, and there were no places worth stopping, no shade, nothing interesting to look at, and large trucks and too much traffic traveling on the highway with us. This is where I got ‘Braineaters’ by the Misfits stuck in my head – for hours. I’m into the Misfits, but I couldn’t think of any of their songs I would rather not get stuck in my head for the majority of my waking day than ‘Braineaters.’

In the evening, we found ourselves in a town called Gridley. We waited until dark, and then claimed the roof of a Safeway as our bed for the night. The Captain and I went into the store to do our ‘shopping,’ then climbed up onto their roof to share our loot and look down on the piece of city below us. We rode 104 miles today, which you could attribute to the tailwind and flat geography, but I like to credit our desire to get out of the hottest, ugliest, most miserable stretch of the entire ride so far.

Up with the sun and onto the highway. This stretch was a lot more colorful than yesterday’s. We were surrounded by walnut orchards and strawberry fields. We stopped at a roadside produce stand that advertised ten kiwis for $1. Eventually we emerged from the fields, out of the sprawl, and into the city of

**Sacramento**.

Let me say that I’ve spent some time in this city before – and I absolutely hated it. I’d even put Sacramento on a level with Los Angeles or the entire state of Texas (minus Austin), that’s how bad it was. So to begin with, my expectations of Sacramento weren’t too high. Well, we rode to the house where The Captain knew a few people, and after knocking on the door, Nadia answered and immediately invited us in and shoved cartons of dumpstered orange juice in our faces. This place was getting points already.

Rather than cruising around the city in the 100+ degree heat, we opted to hang around the house for awhile. Throughout the day, Caramel, the motherly one of the place, and Bullwinkle, one of those guys that whenever his mouth opens you know you’re gonna be rolling around laughing, as well as Ringo, the traveler who isn’t officially living at the house, but may as well be, all came home and hung out a bit. We all talked for a while – stories of Portland and Sacramento happenings being exchanged, as well as stories of recent travels, close calls while shoplifting, and treasures found in dumpsters – the usual travel smalltalk. The plan for the night was a dance party in a park. Now I had gotten on a schedule of going to sleep no later than nine at night, more often than not before the sun had even set. The dance party was set to begin at midnight, and that’s not counting the time we would have to wait in order to show up fashionably late. Eventually, we all hopped on our bikes and made our way to the park. All of the action seemed to be in an unlit cement stage with a radio and a godawful music collection. After a bit of sitting and mingling, someone put on a Madonna tape. Not just Madonna, but the dance mix of ‘Into The Groove.’ So of course the Monster Squad got into our groove. A bit later, Nadia and Ringo went back to the house and returned with some weed that they had found in a dumpster the night before. Now, I don’t do the weed, but I don’t know anyone who wouldn’t be envious of such a score in the dumpsters. Somehow, this is all it took to bring the party to us. ‘I heard you were smoking weed and drinking soy over here.’ Close enough. A couple jugs of wine soon made their way over our direction. We decided it was time to hit the hot tub. This was a beautiful hot tub – situated in a secluded corner of some condominium complex, protected by only a short fence. Ha! Scaled almost immediately and within a couple minutes there were a handful of naked kids splashing around in the pool. After a while, we made our way out of the complex and to our bikes locked outside. 3 am, a couple people partially clothed, the rest still nude, a taste of wine still on my breath, we made our way into the night, stars filling the sky and laughter filing the otherwise empty streets.

The next morning – actually, more like four in the afternoon – The Captain and I hit the record stores. One store had a nice amount of used vinyl, which, after searching awhile, I came up with two New Order 12”s. The $8 asking price was pushing the dollar-a-day budget a bit, but New Fucking Order! I got them both! We went by another store which had a huge room full of musty old records. Nice selection, but the $15 price tag for the Blondie ‘Heart Of Glass’ single was pushing it a wee bit. Later, Bullwinkle explained his theory of the store being a front for drug trafficking.

Back at the house, The Captain decided to take the evening off while Bullwinkle, Ringo and I rode to a high school auditorium hoping to see the Last Poets, a late-60’s revolutionary group of street poets who set the stage for hip hop. Tickets cost $15, and there was no way I was paying that much. The three of us began walking around the building to find alternative entrances. We decided on a side door that would be our best bet, and waited until just the right time to head over. As we walked up, a woman walked out and asked what we were doing outside. ‘ummm…’ we offered. ‘Go on in. Sorry you had to wait’ she said. Wow. At first I thought she had mistaken us for someone else, but no, she was just super nice. We went in and found some seats. Onstage, someone was freestyling. When he was finished, someone else walked up to introduce the next performer. It was the woman who had told us to get inside, she was the organizer of the show. Sweet! As for the rest of the show, I was completely underestimating what I was about to hear. Hip hop, poets, guitar players. The passion of each of the performers completely filled the auditorium, and the end of each song and poem left me with a feeling of amazement and energy that no punk show has been able to give me for awhile. The Last Poets were amazing, and the night ended when the show was pushed outside due to the school having to close down the auditorium, so a troupe of Aztec dancers danced in the street to end the night.

After the show, we went to a party at someone’s house. The high point of the party was a pool that one of the housemates was just finishing building in the backyard – made completely out of scraps he had found in the alley behind their house. I saw cardboard, old tires, and chunks of foam in there. A tarp was stapled to the frame and the pool was filled with warm water coming from a hose attached to a sink in the basement. And the pool worked fine.

From the party, a car full of us headed out to hit some of the dumpsters. From Ringo and Nadia’s stories, Sacramento sounds like it has the best dumpsters around – tons of juice thrown out every night, bags of marijuana. There hadn’t been too much dumpstering so far on the trip, so I was looking forward to that feeling of digging through trash and finding some type of edible score. We dove into the dumpsters and emerged with jars of peanut butter and almond butter, cartons of soy milk, tons of produce and bread, and a couple cartons of eggs (which were distributed amongst Taco Bell and McDonalds windows on the way home). I even found a $10 bill outside one of the dumpsters. Now I consider dumpstering in a car to be cheating, but I can get into it if it turns up not only this much food, but cash as well. We got back to the house and split up all the food, and then fell asleep with the sunrise.

The next day, Bullwinkle took The Captain and I to Sacramento’s coolest place, a rope swing on the banks of the American River. So beneath the seething sun, the nudity and swinging commenced, to the great enjoyment of ourselves, and, I’m sure, the bicyclists across the river. We swung until the sun set, then made our way home.

We got up early in the morning to head over to a community center to help cook with Food Not Bombs. Some rice on the stove and a bit of Queen on the rockbox, hell yeah! After serving the food downtown, Ringo, The Captain and I rode back to the rope swing to get some river action in before The Captain and I headed out that night for

**LAS VEGAS!!!**

Alright, so the idea of a trip to Vegas was brought up somewhere on the Oregon Coast. The Captain had a handy skill of making bus tickets, and we thought a trip to some hell-hole completely out of our way would make a funny intermission to the bike ride.

**‘Kinko’s is my travel agent!’**

So we went to a copy shop downtown and, in about an hour, had made $600 worth of counterfeit bus tickets. Now I had sworn before that I would never ride this bus again, but when you are offered a free trip to Las Vegas, you just don’t pass it up. Well, maybe you do, but we had a couple friends out there, Ebony and Rock, who we wanted to see. And The Captain had never been to Vegas before, so once again, impulse won out over good judgment, and we were on our way to Vegas!

Ringo and Bullwinkle came to the bus station with us, ready to provide a distraction in case the bus drivers noticed that our tickets, upon examination, weren’t all that convincing. But no, not even a second glance. ‘Go ahead boys. Second bus in the front.’ A wink to Ringo and Bullwinkle as we climbed aboard the bus and took our seats, giggling uncontrollably. Look out Vegas, here we come!!

**‘Fuck you! I’m from the fuckin Bronx!’**

13 hours on the bus. The ride actually wasn’t too bad, (besides the utter misery of spending 13 hours on a bus!) except for a girl who looked like she was about 11 years old, traveling with her mom. This girl was obnoxious as hell, whining incessantly, calling her mom an ass and telling her to shut up, even hitting her. Though, she had crutches next to her. This probably shouldn’t give her an excuse to be so obnoxious, but I guess maybe these were circumstances where you’d have to be a bit lenient. Though when the bus stopped and everyone got out, I saw that the crutches belonged to her mom. This 11 year old girl was a Sally Jesse-Raphael episode waiting to happen, but I guess I can’t really complain when a whiny kid is the worst part of a bus trip.

We had a layover in beautiful Los Angeles at 7 am, so The Captain and I got in line for the Vegas bus. Behind us were a couple people’s baggage and a few more people. When the bus driver started taking tickets, a Hispanic ‘gangsta’ walked up and told a white guy behind him to ‘step off, homes. These are my bags.’ To which the white guy responded ‘What, you don’t think I know that? Yous a tough guy or something? I’m from the fuckin Bronx!’ Oh yes, how I’ve missed tranquil, pleasant LA.

We got off the bus in Vegas and tried calling Ebony and Rock: no answer. So we headed off in the 110 heat degree toward the Strip. The street we were on was lined with thrift stores, which offered us an escape from the heat, as well as piles of records and books to browse through. Talk about scoring at the thrift shop, I ended up finding a couple Calvin and Hobbes book that I didn’t already have.

**Crime and Loafing in Las Vegas!**

Not yet being of legal age to gamble, coupled with that whole dollar-a-day thing, well we were pretty much excluded from nearly everything in that city. We made it to the Strip, and started walking around inside the casinos. We caught a balancing act at Circus Circus, a place that had the appearance of being flashy and spectacular maybe 25 years ago, but with the competition of performances by Tom Jones and Rick Springfield (for ‘washed-up’ novelty value more than anything else), balancing on a couple cylinders just doesn’t cut it anymore. We made our way to Treasure Island – fancy on the outside, exactly the same as every other casino on the inside. We took the sky-tram to the Mirage. The attraction here: a captive White Tiger, which wasn’t even white. That’s just negative points on so many levels. We walked next door to Caesar’s Palace, where we found ourselves in their Forum Shops, basically a huge mall inside their casino. In the toy store, we found a magician and demanded that he amaze us. He let loose with a card trick. He told us that David Copperfield was begging him to use his method of sawing someone in half. He was either very full of himself or very full of shit. At least he had the greasy Vegas-performer hair thing going on. And the card trick did amaze us.

The Captain and I made our way through a hall of naked statues and found the swimming pool where we were informed that… we needed room keys? Here’s where my striking charisma came in. ‘Umm… my parents have the key…’ Yes! She bought it! Sucka! Or else she just didn’t give a damn. Either way, we were in!

We were given an escort to our pool chairs. First, we got into the main pool. This was by far the nicest swimming pool I’ve ever been in. It had gentle warm water jets on the floor, fountains and a statue in the center, everything around the pool had a lavish Roman theme to it. Even the contemporary pop ballads playing softly from the speakers around the pool area sounded so right. We moved to the hot tub, which was the perfect temperature. I guess Vegas really does have a lot of nice things to offer if they think you belong there. So we did the next best thing and told them we did. I added the Caesar’s pool to my list of places to live eventually. Monster Squad: 1, Vegas: 0!

The sun was beginning to set, and Ebony and Rock still weren’t home, so The Captain and I wandered over to the Bellagio. This place just plain sucked. The whole casino was very upscale-oriented, and there wasn’t even anything to sneak into inside. On the way out, we found the one cool thing about the hotel, which was their fountain show. A giant pool of water sits in front of the hotel, stretching from the street to the building and from one end of the building to the other. Every few minutes, water spouts just beneath the surface shoot water about 60 feet into the air, choreographed to Frank Sinatra-esque music. I have to say the water show was nice, it’s just too bad the rest of the hotel was a dump.

Across the street was Bally’s, which really didn’t interest us, although they had a fancy moving walkway that took you into the casino. So we went. Not too much inside, so we walked next door to the Paris. This place had a daytime sky painted on their ceiling, which almost did create a real outdoor marketplace feeling to the room – an outdoor marketplace with slot machines and craps tables everywhere. Get rid of the casino aspect and this might be a nice place to hang out!

Another attempt to call the Vegas kids failed, so we headed outside to eat. There is something kinda surreal about sitting outside of the crowds, between a huge elegant fountain and the Eiffel Tower, eating dumpstered bagels. One of the Bellagio’s water shows was going on across the street, its lights illuminating the silhouettes of the people and trees lining the sidewalk in front of the hotel from one end of the block to the other.

The Vegas Strip in the evening is a completely different world. People get dressed up all classy-like so that they can go lose in 15 minutes about ten times as much money as I had brought with me for a month-long bike trip. I was surrounded by digital signs and billboards the size of my house, not to mention those being hauled down the streets on the backs of trucks. There’s just such a unique feeling about being a piece amidst this giant spectacle.

Into the Aladdin Hotel, where the atmosphere just seemed a bit… exploitive. Using a recreation of Morocco to sell Ben and Jerry’s ice cream? Hmm… Maybe it’s not too different than using Rome to sell shampoo, but it just seemed a lot more apparent here. We found the phones and tried calling the Vegas kids again. This time we got through. They’d pick us up in front of the fountain at the Paris in 20 minutes.

A couple Bellagio water shows later, they arrived and we were off into the sprawl of northwest Las Vegas. I’d never seen this side of Vegas before. Rather than the City of Entertainment, they should call themself the City of Strip Malls. We got to Rock’s house, where we ate and talked of traveling, shoplifting, books and music. We were offered a bed to sleep in, an unfamiliar place after nearly three weeks of beaches, rooftops, bushes, and the occasional floor. Maybe not the most hobo-esque sleeping arrangement, but comfortable as hell!

In the morning, we drove across town to Ebony’s condo on the southeast side of town. On the way, we stopped at one of those thrift department stores that The Captain was convinced was owned by Value Village. I scored another Calvin and Hobbes book. Meanwhile, The Captain decided that if we were going to scam around Vegas under the guise of being tourists, we should dress the part. He walked out with the ugliest pair of glowing orange Bermuda shorts and matching ‘Las Vegas’ t-shirt with a collage of all the casinos on it. No pool security would deny entrance to someone with this much style.

We dropped Ebony off at work, and Rock, The Captain and I headed to the Strip to hit the pools. Rock said the Flamingo had waterslides at their pool, so to the Flamingo it was. This pool had a security guard at the main entrance checking room keys, meanwhile the entire perimeter of the pool had not so much as even a fence around it. The least they could have done would be to offer us a challenge. Well, it turned out that the waterslides were closed, so we got in the pool on the upper deck. It was pretty mellow, old people lounging around, children sitting on the steps in the water. We went down to the lower pool. What a contrast, this was like a frat party in a swimming pool. Beer everywhere, dudes throwing a football across the pool, radios blasting from the pool chairs, people flirting with each other and spraying each other with cans of beer. We had wandered into the middle of a Tupac video. We made our way over to the hot tub, which wasn’t bad, but not particularly exciting. ‘I hear the MGM Grand has a nice pool,’ Rock said. ‘Let’s Go!’

We took the monorail over to the MGM. A little scouting of the pool entrance told us it would take more than The Captain’s sense of style of get us in. We walked through the convention center, which surrounded the pool on two sides. In the back, we found an employee entrance to the pool which wasn’t too visible to any of the lifeguards. We hopped the fence, walked to the pool and jumped in. Monster Squad: 3, Vegas: 0. The pool area had one of those circular flowing rivers, and plenty of tubes lying around the outside of it. It also turns out that people like to pay way-too-much for drinks, then drink only half of the drink and leave the rest lying around. So we took care of making sure the rest didn’t go to waste. Floating around in a tube, sipping a piña colada, there’s that feeling of luxury again. Ah, life is good.

We left the Strip to pick up Ebony from work. She worked at a mostly vegan ice cream shop, and, upon us walking in, gave us cups of Mint, Coconut, and Blueberry ice cream. Back at Ebony’s condo, we made plans for the night. This is when we met Ebony’s older brother, Corky, and younger sister, CJ. Meeting these two led me to ask Ebony if she was adopted. It turns out that CJ got a fake ID when she was 17 years old so that she could get a job stripping, and Corky, my god, where do I start? He was apparently a kung fu master with the fashion sense of Vanilla Ice. I swear the two of them share a quarter of a brain.

So the first order of business was to get food. We made a ‘shopping’ list and headed off to the store to see what we could come up with. We took Corky’s truck. Apparently in Nevada it’s legal to ride in the bed of trucks, something that has been illegal everywhere I’ve lived since I was a little kid. I’m not one to glorify the automobile, but cruising through 85 degree heat in the evening in the back of a truck with a couple friends is the best feeling in the world. We arrived at Smith’s, where the plan was to walk out and drive away in the getaway car. Ebony, The Captain and I each walked into the store separately. I started filling up a basket. A small chocolate soy milk, a couple Clif-Bars. Wait, I thought, this is all free, why not splurge? I went back to the dairy section and set my small chocolate soy milk back, and replaced it with a large carton, then went back and grabbed a couple more handfuls of Clif-Bars. Overpriced dairy-free ice cream? Sounds good! Tofu dogs? I’ll take several! Hmm, and a nice big bottle of wine to top it all off.

I made my way out the door and into the parking lot, to the waiting getaway car. I tossed the basket into the bed and hopped in after it, and CJ sped off. Some hootin and hollerin from us, some dumb looks from a couple employees, even applause from one, and we were away. I’m telling you, riding in the back of a truck totally enhances a good mood. The ride home from that store was sheer euphoria. We went to Ebony and Rock’s friend’s apartment, where we spent the evening drinking looted wine and watching Corky make an ass of himself trying to impress his little sister’s friend. The party soon died, and we left for Ebony’s, listening to what else in the car but ‘Viva Las Vegas’ by the Dead Kennedys, for a couple more drinks, and then finally to Rock’s to fall asleep.

In the morning, we took Ebony to work, and then it was Rock, The Captain and I again. We decided that today would be a bit of crime.

We went to a K-Mart so I could get some supplies, and The Captain looted a camera. We carried it out of the store in plain view and headed to our car for the getaway. No one even followed us out. I’m all for not having to deal with legal bullshit, but even a ‘Hey, would you like a receipt for those?’ would be a little thrilling. Then we went to an awesome record store called Balcony Lights. They had a pretty big 50 cent record section, where I got a couple records, including a Culture Club record that I didn’t already have. This brought my total Vegas expenditures to $2. I listened to the New Order Peel Sessions album at the listening booth, then went to the zine library upstairs to read some zines.

The previous night, CJ had mentioned that the Mandalay Bay had a wave pool, so to sample their pool we went. This was one of the newest hotels on the Strip. We couldn’t quite figure out what theme they were trying for. South American? A tropical lagoon, perhaps? Well any hotel with a restaurant called the Rock Lobster scores points with me. Classy this place was. We went to check out their pool. The place was a fortress; completely enclosed by a fence, security cameras everywhere, and we were passed more than once by security. It appeared they didn’t want us in there. One employee offered to sneak us in, but it would cost $10 each. No way! The Monster Squad pays no one! It was nice to be challenged, but it would take more than a bit of security to keep the Monster Squad out. We must have spent at least 20 minutes trying to figure out how to get in. Finally, we found a fence, visible to the guests at a nearby restaurant, visible to a security camera, and even visible to the guests inside the pool area. But we were smooth, and 30 seconds later, the three of us were floating in the Mandalay Bay river. Monster Squad: 4, Vegas: 0. Actually, the pools here were pretty disappointing. Even the wave pool was boring. We found the hot tub, next to which someone had left a partially-eaten bowl of fruit. So once again, here we were, living like kings and paying absolutely nothing for it. I could definitely get used to this city. And when everything seemed so perfect, that it felt like nothing could make it better, ‘Vacation’ by the Go-Go’s came over the sound system. Oh Vegas, I love you.

Next door was the Luxor. To be honest, this place has a pretty scary exterior, a stoic Sphinx marks the entrance to a monolithic black pyramid that has none of the flash or glamour of every other hotel on the Strip. It had an Egyptian theme going, but this couldn’t shake the image of an Orwellian dark fortress. Inside, we found the buffet. A little examination of the facilities told us maybe we should just walk in the exit. So the three of us walked in and went straight for the salad bar. I filled up a plate with some fried rice, a salad, a handful of olives and garbanzo beans, then filled my pockets with fruit. The catch was that we couldn’t sit down, or else a waitress would come check out ticket. So we each walked around the food bars stuffing our faces as quickly as possible. I even had the chance to hit the salad bar for seconds, then we casually walked out. Free pools, free drinks, free food, if only I could figure out a way to tap into some free money in this city. But then, I probably wouldn’t know what to do with it anyway.

From here, Rock had to leave to pick up his daughter. The Captain and I searched for the pool. No security! We walked right down to the pool and hopped in. I believe this brings the tally to Monster Squad: 5, Vegas: 0. The pool area was kinda nice. The sun was going down and the weather was cooling off. We got out of the water and laid down on the pool chairs, nibbling on an orange courtesy of the buffet and watching the sun fall behind a line of palm trees along a wall at the edge of the pool area. And when things seemed so perfect, ‘Girls Just Wanna Have Fun’ came over the house muzak system. Was it mere coincidence that the new wave came on the system as the sun disappeared behind the palm trees, or was it more? I may never laugh at the advertisements of the magic of Las Vegas again.

Back to the Strip to explore more hotels. For its fancy exterior, Excalibur sure sucked. New York, New York was a bit more interesting, with the indoor atmosphere actually being fun to walk through. Rock soon returned to pick us up. On the way back to his house, we decided to dive into the Trader Joe’s dumpster, where The Captain found two huge bags of protein bars. We grabbed our score and jumped back into the car before security made their rounds. Closer inspection told us that these protein bars weren’t vegan, as milk derivatives were the first ingredient. As far as freeganism goes, Rock and The Captain both concluded that the bars tasted like crap. So now we had two bags of protein bars that no one wanted to eat. What to do, what to do? Driving past another strip mall, a solution flashed above my head in the shape of two golden arches. How many protein bars would fit into a McDonalds toilet before it got clogged? We parked the car and the three of us rushed into the McDonalds with pockets full of protein bars. The answer, I discovered, is three. Not even the water would flow down after that. Meanwhile, Rock and The Captain were in the other restroom dumping in bars by the handful. There were gonna be a couple confused plumbers in the morning.

We arrived at Rock’s house, where we met his daughter, Amour, and then, after a full day, went to sleep with a smile on my face.

By our final day in Vegas, The Captain and I decided that we had had our fill of swimming pools, and Rock had Amour with him, so we thought we’d spend the day in the suburbs. We found a couple bookstores, where I was able to walk out with a small library completely undetected. Las Vegas is really a bountiful place, it’s just too bad everyone searches for this bounty in the casinos rather than the strip malls.

So by now, we were beginning to get hungry again, and we thought some sandwiches from the deli at Wild Oats would be nice. We waited in line only to find out that they had no vegan breads at the deli, which ordinarily wouldn’t have pissed me off, but the attitudes of the workers didn’t help. So, we were just going to have to grab a basket and do our own shopping. Juices, yogurts, cookies, baked tofu, granola, dried fruit, as well as fulfilling one of my goals this trip, which was to loot an entire box of Clif-Bars, and we walked out and drove off. The four of us went to a park and ate until we got sick.

Our bus was leaving in a couple hours, so we went to Ebony’s work to say bye to her. A goodbye over free cups of vegan ice cream. Rock took us to the bus station, where we got on our bus back to Sacramento.

**The Las Vegas Experience…**

…a nice place to visit – and scam and loot – on occasion, but I’d never want to live there. The Monster Squad went a perfect 5 for 5 as far as pools went. On the subject of pools, I’d have to rate them in this order: Caesar’s Palace – the most beautiful swimming experience I’ve ever indulged in. MGM Grand – with its river, tubes, and abundant groundscored drinks. Hopping a fence and not getting caught gives any pool bonus points. Mandalay Bay – also for hopping the fence, the actual pool was disappointing, but a thrill it was. Flamingo – a frat party in a swimming pool. Luxor – pools and palm trees at the base of a towering black pyramid, and the Cyndi Lauper sunset was everywhere you want to be! The whole excursion to Vegas made for an interesting break from the bike trip. I think I’ll make a note to return to Vegas sometime, just not soon. Now back to Sacramento! Go!!

**‘Welcome to California. What a fucked up state!’**

Back at the Sacto house, one of Caramel’s friends was arriving in town and she wanted us all to go to the airport to greet him. An old traveling friend of mine, Feral, was in town and hanging out at the house as well. So Feral and Ringo got to work on signs for us to hold at the airport to greet Caramel’s friend with. I’m sure anyone would be excited to get off a plane in a place they’ve never been before and be welcomed with signs that said ‘Good News: It’s Only A Rash’ and ‘Welcome Back From Rehab.’ The reaction from other people in the airport was entertaining as well.

Outside, while waiting for our bus back to downtown Sac, some old guy began shouting furiously from his car at an airport attendant who told him he could not park his car in the loading/unloading zone. Of course, this was an invitation for all of us to start heckling the guy who’s already angry. While yelling obscenities from inside his car, he turned to us and yelled, ‘Welcome to California. What a fucked up state!’ as he sped off. Yes! Old people cussing. It doesn’t get any heavier than that.

In the evening, Bullwinkle, Ringo, Feral, The Captain and I all went out on a dumpstering/wheatpasting ride. A few good scores. Then we rolled up to Noah’s Bagels. Ringo and The Captain went over to the dumpster while Feral and I climbed up to explore the rooftop. On our way down, we heard a couple thumps. Ringo and The Captain had found six huge bags of bagels in the dumpster and thought it would be funny to throw a couple at us. This escalated into an all-out crazy battle of everyone throwing bagels at everyone else. I could hear bagels whizzing through the air around me, bouncing off the streets, the walls and the dumpsters on every side of me. I think Ringo fared the worst with a couple direct hits. Afterwards, we cleaned up and rode home. Sore and exhausted, the ride was relaxing, and the grime all over our hands only made us laugh all the way back to the house.

One more day of cooking for Food Not Bombs, swinging into the river, watching the sunset in the community garden, and packing before The Captain and I left Sacramento.

It was off to Berkeley for us. The first day of riding was pretty gross. If any of you have ever seen the towns of Antioch and Pittsburg, then you know the scenery isn’t the most beautiful. We ended our first day of riding at a park in Bay Point. We sat on a bench as the sun went down, with our eyes on some bushes across the park that we could crawl into once everyone left the park. Our conversation drifted into the stars and the moon, as the solar system seemed to be a topic that came up quite often on this trip. Eventually, everyone left and we unrolled our sleeping bags in the dirt, with the warm breeze and rustling trees, a sky full of stars above us.

A couple days on the bus and nights of dumpstering had messed up my sleeping schedule. After laying awake for awhile, I was finally getting to sleep when a couple – a guy and a girl – walked up and sat on a park bench ten feet away from us. I tried to stay still, so as not to rustle the leaves and frighten the local folk. Give it a couple minutes, I thought, they’d leave soon. My Spanish skills aren’t that polished, but I believed those spitty sounds and chirpy giggles they were making could only mean that they were making out. This was kinda funny, for a couple minutes at least, but then they kept going. After a while, they started speaking to each other, and I heard them get up. I could finally move around. But then the footsteps started stepping on dry leaves. They were walking up into the bushes, the same bushes that The Captain and I were trying to sleep in. The last thing I heard was some startled exclamation from the girl when she saw us there, then they rushed away. Ha ha. Now I could finally get some sleep.

Morning came, and we stopped in a Safeway to loot breakfast, then rode along a bike path heading toward Berkeley. After following the trail for a bit, we turned off and headed up some hills. This part of the ride was terrible. These were probably the steepest inclines we had come to, with the wind blowing against us. Not even the mountain ranges were this miserable. This was by far the worst part of the entire ride. It finally got nice as we rode up the last range of hills before Berkeley. The whole day, ‘Temptation’ by New Order had been ringing in my head. We stopped at Inspiration Point, a vista area near the peak of the final hill, which overlooks the northern part of the city of Berkeley, although all you could see was thick clouds of fog rolling over the surface of the hill very quickly. There was definitely an otherworldly quality to sitting alone on a bench at the top of a mountain amidst the racing fog, overlooking the palisades, with the synthesized melodies of New Order throbbing in my head. It was inspirational enough to take my mind off the last four or five hours of uphill riding.

A bit further along the way, we came to a botanical garden. This would give us a nice opportunity to get off our bikes. The gardens were huge, with a creek running through the middle and plenty of quiet secluded trails.

From the garden, it was downhill to

**Berkeley**

We rode to meet up with Belinda, who went to art school in Berkeley, and had just gotten out for the summer. She was definitely an art student. Her walls were covered with photobooth pictures and black and white posters, which looked like the products of hours upon hours at Kinko’s. She also had a nice selection of 80’s records. Sweet! She explained the situation with her housemates. Ordinarily, she shared the house with one other person, but at the moment, he was off traveling, so now there were three people living/staying there, and none of them could really explain the situation much beyond a ‘…yeah, so now I guess I’m living here. I don’t know…’ Oh well, worked for me. The three housemates were Rosey, (who talked shit on every band that would come up in conversation. And bands were nearly all the conversation.) Jazz (who kept us entertained with his crazy freestyling, but was a bit too into the whole mod fashion) and Beatbox, (who could do a techno beat with his throat and hum a melody at the same time) who had just moved to the bay as a band. They were quite the music obsessive types all around. They were all into the whole emo/indie fashion too, complete with a bottle of ‘Bed Head Shampoo’ sitting in the bathroom. Though they did have an impressive collection of keyboards, (along with an impressive collection of stories about how they’ve acquired all their equipment for free) and their band is quite the new wave number, drum machine and everything.

They were out of food at the house, so we all left to go shopping. Belinda had a friend who worked at Trader Joe’s who charged us $3 for three bags full of groceries. Then we went to Boogie Woogie Bagels where they make vegan glazed cinnamon-raisin bagels that taste just like donuts. Belinda also knew someone who worked there, and we got hooked up with two dozen bagels. There’s something about being in a semi-unfamiliar city and getting bags of free food, and then topping it off by standing around with new friends and sipping a bottle of apple cider that makes you feel like a million bucks.

We got back to the house where we dove into the bagels and beer from the shopping trip. In the evening, a few people came by, and we got a little dance party going. The guy from Trader Joe’s came by, we started talking about our bike trip. It turns out he rode from Olympia, Washington down to Arcata the year before. Hell yeah! Up the fuckin Bike Punx!! The stereo was playing A-Ha and Cyndi Lauper, the people were each trying to see who could act the most pretentious. The party went on for a while, but I had been up since 6 am and was exhausted. It was probably my anti-social tendencies, or possibly my belly full of Carlo Rossi, that led me to grab my sleeping bag and head for the lawn in the backyard, where I fell asleep beneath the stars and to the drunken laughing coming from the porch in front of the house.

In the morning, The Captain and I left to explore Telegraph Ave. It’s really nothing more than a trendy boulevard you would expect to find in a college town. People’s Park was nice, with its murals, garden plots and free pile. And I did find the Steve Perry solo record for a dollar in one of the record stores. Other than that, there was really nothing exciting about the street. We headed out to the bay, where we parked our bikes and walked to the end of the Berkeley pier, which gave us an amazing view of the entire Bay Area. From there, we rode off to search for the old Albany landfill. This was a large piece of land in the bay connected to Albany by a stretch of land wide enough for two roads. It used to be used as a landfill, but has since been covered in dirt, and has a lot of shrubs and bushes growing on it. It seems like it’s used as a place for the locals to take their dogs for a walk on its dirt paths now more than anything. But apparently, a lot of people have brought in materials to build shacks and have lived in the landfill over the years. The first thing we came across was a castle built with cement and drywall, complete with a window looking out at the bay and a staircase that you could climb to get on top of the roof. Whoever built it had even spent some time landscaping the area around it. A white castle sitting on the shore, it was straight out of the pages of Sunset Magazine, only on a much more DIY level.

We wandered around the landfill a bit more. On the other side of the landfill was an art gallery, with beautiful intricate paintings done on plywood resting on stands lining the side of a dirt path. The landfill was like a place out of a book, only with a lot of mosquitoes, and I wondered why everyone in the city spent their time on Telegraph rather than a place like this. The sun was beginning to set, so we grabbed our bikes and headed back to the house. We arrived to another party at the house, which lasted until sunrise. I was able to get a little bit of sleep before morning, when we hopped on our bikes and left for the BART station to go to

**San Francisco**

Neither The Captain nor I had ever ridden around San Francisco on bikes before, so that was the plan for today. We started up Haight Street and through Golden Gate Park. Every time I’m in this city, it seems like I find myself at the botanical gardens. It’s a relaxing place, and for some reason, it always gives me a sense of ‘just-passing-through’. I think SF is a disgusting city, but I do enjoy it in one- or two-day increments. We left the garden and continued riding in the direction of the coast, and eventually ended up falling asleep in a garden beneath one of the windmills.

We woke up and went to get burritos at a small place across the street from Mission Records. Rosey, Jazz and Beatbox’s band was playing a show on the bay at the intersection of 3rd and 24th in the evening, so we left to catch that show. Though, unknowingly, we went in the wrong direction. In an attempt to cross Portrero Hill, The Captain and I split up – he wanting to be a wuss and go around the hill, and me trying to go over it. Now, this being the wrong direction, I rode over that damn hill only to find that there was no intersection of 3rd and 24th, which after a bit of riding, brought me to Daly City around Lake Merced. I thought I could now be fairly sure that this route would not take me where I wanted to go. I started back, found a map, and saw that I was on the complete opposite side of the city from where I wanted to be.

I eventually made it to 3rd and 24th only to find mannequin parts and some goopy red stuff everywhere, as well as a live goat, and some people loading equipment into a van. ‘How long ago did the show end?’ I asked. ‘Just five or ten minutes ago’. Damn, I went back to the BART station and rode back to Berkeley for the night.

**‘The Monster Squad Fucking Rocks’**

Day 30 – I woke up on a futon in Belinda’s kitchen. Today was to be the final day of the Monster Squad ride. San Francisco had been the planned ending destination since the beginning of the ride, though I never imagined I’d make it this far. So it seemed surreal to emerge from our (free!) BART ride onto the streets of San Francisco.

The pace was a lot slower today, and we really didn’t have anything we wanted to do besides just seeing the sights. From Market Street, we rode down to the Embarcadero to drift along the bay, and through the touristy little shops and cafes. We rode out onto a fishing pier to take a look out at Alcatraz. This place gives off such an eerie feeling. It appears to be so small, and people were sent there to spend years, if not the remainder, of their lives. They now sell tours of the island.

Neither of us had ever been across the Golden Gate Bridge before, so we pedaled uphill to the bridge. We crossed it, stopped to look at the panoramic view of the bay area, then turned around and went back. At the southern base of the bridge is an area called the Presidio, a huge forested area that was used as a military base until just a few years ago. It is a beautiful area, filled with trees and sparse older buildings. You can stand in some areas and stare at the Pacific Ocean, then turn around and be gazing up at a wall of enormous trees. We abandoned our previous ideas, and agreed that we would camp out in the Presidio that evening.

A couple nights earlier, we brought up the idea of searching for the Full House house. We got the inside tip as to what streets it was on, and rode across the city to that intersection only to find that our inside info was wrong. Yes, there was a park on the corner, but it was too small, it was not on any sloped streets, and, this was the clincher, the Full House house was not there. It was a disappointing experience all around.

The Captain knew of a good vegetarian restaurant in Chinatown, so we went there for some gluten curry chow mein and fake pork. With nothing else really to do, and the sun setting, we started back in the direction of the Presidio. On the way we noticed that one super-curved part of Lombard Street. ‘Let’s ride it,’ ‘Hell yeah!’ The ride down was almost scary, since this city had nearly totaled my brakes over the last two days. We made it down the hill, then sped off on the streets and didn’t stop until we got to the Presidio. We rode up a secluded hill and found the cement foundation of a building that had since been torn down to camp out in for the night.

The sun was setting and the Tour of Destruction was coming to a close. We celebrated with a final meal of dry Ramen and Bacardi Rum.

This was my final journal entry…

’30 days, a total of 1,169 miles, countless Clif-Bars looted, all-in-all, maybe about $40 spent. No serious defeats, and lots of fucking fun! I write this now in our bunker, home for the night, beneath the trees, with a crisp breeze blowing the cool air around me. This last month has been fucking amazing. This trip really has instilled an aversion toward the whole work-rent-die thing. Nothing feels better than sleeping beneath the trees and stars, a new environment everyday – new people, new places. Exploring places I have heard about, discovering new places that I haven’t. The only problem is that there is so much to do, that the fun is overwhelming. So as darkness falls, and I have to squint to see my writing, I’ll end this. This is life. No deadlines, no media, only a bare world to discover. This is living.’

So maybe that was a bit cheesy, that’s what writing with a belly full of Bacardi looks like I guess. But even without the generous helping of alcohol, I can’t disagree with any of it.

Make no mistake, this trip wasn’t all smooth. I’ve chosen to leave out the wrong turns and sibling-like bickering, and there were plenty of each, but that’s life and I choose to ignore it and jump into new adventures rather than dwell on the discomforts of the past. Besides, after all of the smartass remarks and nerve-grating habits are done, you come out of the experience with a bond so vivid that ‘best friend’ hardly even begins to describe it.

A friend once told me that this is why old people launch into fits of laughter for no apparent reason. They are remembering the best parts of their lives, and they couldn’t give a fuck how crazy you think they are when you see them in such a state. When its all over, 15, 30, or 50 years in the future, you probably won’t remember the petulant arguing, but probably won’t forget riding down from a 3200 foot tall mountain, or walking down a trail and discovering the most beautiful cove you’ve ever seen, or sneaking into the most heavenly swimming experience of your life.

There came a point, I think it was somewhere around the Oregon/California border, where he had pedaled so far, walked so many trails, seen so many beautiful views, talked to so many people, and told each other so many stories and jokes and thoughts, where we had smiled and laughed so much, that when people would ask me what we had done, it became hard for me to think of a single thing. We had seen and done so much, that the fun literally became overwhelming.

I have learned so much from my experiences traveling. I’ve had the chance to see so many different aspects of the world that I would never have seen if I hadn’t left my home. Needless to say my perspective of the world has been completely changed.

On this trip, we were constantly passed by those huge RV’s. I couldn’t help but think that this must be such a disgusting way to travel. A huge part of exploring new environments to me is making myself vulnerable to the conditions of these places, and there’s no way I could admire the beaches or forests through a window and not feel cheated. I want to get rid of that separation between me and the world, or at least come as close as I can. There is an intimacy to riding a bicycle through a town or along a shore that can never be attained by driving through the same areas, and I don’t think the overall experiences can even be compared when this intimacy is missing from one side.

It’s unlikely you’ll find it in a book, but this is something that no school or job can offer. In fact, every aspect of ‘civilized’ life only leads further away from this intimacy.

I really can’t adequately describe what I experienced, and I would say that I wish that all of you were there with me to experience the absolute euphoria, but the next best thing would be to wish all you actually did leave the comfort of your homes and the security of your jobs and go experience something like this for yourselves.

More than once, I’ve heard people say ‘I wish I could do what you’re doing,’ to which I can only smirk. You can make excuses, but I’m not sure who they’re fooling. If you wish it, then it’s up to you to put everything on the line and live your desires. If not, then there’s a life of routine and monotony awaiting you. Sacrifice doesn’t appeal to me. No promises of rewards later can make up for the time squandered, the dreams and passion suppressed now.

Time has no relevance outside of a structured, regimented society. Life takes place not on a sequential timeline, but in an endless euphony of opportunities – a harmony that the current structure does everything it can to keep out of reach. I find no pleasure in succumbing to constraints and convention, and I’ve found that when fun is presented to you with a price tag of any kind, it has been co-opted, and you can hardly be surprised when it turns out a bit less substantial than its hype makes it out to be. Like I said, we pay no one and make no apologies. We were being guided only by our impulses and whims. What was exciting yesterday will be forgotten tomorrow. We were living in the moment, the past and future so distant that they may as well have been nonexistent. Our whole world was what was before us and we were going to make that the most beautiful world that has ever existed. But then, why would it ever be any other way.

Here

Civilization

Ceased

I awoke on a hill of grass and leaves amidst a sky of a thousand hidden birds chirping. The tall lanky trees which last night stood silhouetted before a moist gray horizon appeared a dense forest of eucalyptus trees beneath a morning sky clouded with fog. The smell of eucalyptus surrounded me… eucalyptus and my own damp sleeping bag.

I looked at the piece I had torn from the newspaper last night. The San Francisco Anarchist Bookfair begins at 10 this morning. Then I realized that waking up like this – amongst trees and mosquitoes rather than clock radios and central heating – hardly gives a person an accurate sense of time. So I hopped on my bike and rode through the Presidio to a spot overlooking the Pacific Ocean, my first view of it in nearly six months, a depressingly long amount of time for someone who spent the bulk of their life so close to the beach and enjoys the feel of warm sand and the sound of crashing waves possibly more than anything else.

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So I say that it was the bookfair that brought me to San Francisco, but, really, the bookfair was mostly just an excuse to quit my job and spend some time in warmer climates, as I can’t say that this last winter in Portland can be reminisced upon as being all that exciting. Nearly six straight months of biting rain and numbing cold and employment isn’t my idea of a party. So awhile back, I decided to haul my bike with me down to San Francisco for the weekend, and then attempt to ride down to Southern California. More or less the same coastal route I’ve ridden once previously, though this time would be much less of a rush. On my last ride, I had gone from San Francisco to Orange County in five days. This time, my only deadline was to be in Ventura, a coastal city just north of Los Angeles County, in two weeks for the reservation I made to spend my birthday on an island off the southern California coast.

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California’s central coast is a potpourri of landscapes. A fusion of ecosystems where tractors plow miles of fields on palisades whose edges crumble into the breaking waves of the Pacific Ocean, mountains that border beaches, and unconquerable redwood forests that continually uplift and eat away at the meager roadwork which the roadbuilders have managed to lay down. A convergence of creatures who make their homes on the land, beneath the water, and in the skies, whose varied features radiate a wider range of color than even the most imaginative painter’s palette. Skylines stretch into eternity unobstructed by anything, with the occasional exception of masts belonging to fishing boats in the distance.

Along this stretch of coast, cloudy skies and cool moist air dominate the calendar, and adapting to the rhythm of time in this land takes nothing more than removing your wristwatch and throwing it to the depths of the Pacific Ocean.

Traveling by one’s self possesses its share of negative qualities. Safety is the first that comes to mind, and not having someone to smile with upon seeing a rock covered with playing harbor seals or after walking out of a Safeway with a carton of chocolate soymilk in your pants is the second. But on this trip, I made no attempt to invite anyone, and I was awaiting the time when I would have to make no compromises as far as time and distance were concerned. My only desire was to immerse myself in the most beautiful scenery I could find and let my daydreams provide me company. Sometimes solitude can provide the most lucid looking glass and hypnotize with the most inspiring conversation.

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The day I left Portland, Red showed up at my house in his truck early in the morning, and we left on our drive to San Francisco. Just outside of Eugene, we stopped for two hitchhikers who were also heading to San Francisco. I opted to move into the covered bed of the truck to get some sleep, and for the next eight hours I laid on a carpeted panel about a foot in width, sharing the bed with the hitchers’ large packs, along with Red’s and my own, the hitchers’ dog, and my bicycle, all beneath a creaking shell whose complete disintegration was being prevented somehow by only two fraying bungee cords. Traveling at its punkest!

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I decided that if I was going to be at the Bookfair, I could make some traveling money by selling books. So on subsequent trips to the chain bookstores in Portland, I looted enough books to fill up a large box, all of which I would sell for only a couple dollars each. I brought with me everything from books about the negative impacts of technology to histories of the Black Panther Party to Jeanette Winterson novels. One bookstore store even had the audacity to stock Abbie Hoffman’s Steal This Book… with not so much as even an alarm tag. I found the situation so ironically inviting that I walked out with both copies.

We dropped off the hitchers in Oakland and continued into the Mission in San Francisco for some burritos. Here I unpacked my bike and Red and I split off. Eventually I made my way to the Presidio to look for a spot to sleep.

The Presidio is a place of romantic and comforting familiarity to me. I could recount the details of my previous visits there, the way one can remember the most trivial details of a visit to the home of a distant friend who one sees only occasionally. I can remember the way the trees enveloped the dirt paths that I’ve ridden down in search of a place to sleep, and the way the sun rose and sprinkled down in thin rays through the gaps in the intermingling branches and leaves that canopied my patch of ground, and the chirpy whistling of some radio song that I couldn’t quite identify by a guy who walked the path alone in the morning unaware of our presence just up the slope from him. So beautiful this area is, with pockets of quiet dorm-style homes, and streets that see more traffic from joggers and bicyclists enjoying the winding hills and colorful flora than from cars. Roadside signs warn drivers to watch out for quail, but I saw only hummingbird and skunks, both within several feet of me. One was quite pleasant, but the other quite potentially disastrous. Though the combination of each being one of the reasons why when I’m in a city that so many people talk on about the culture of, I prefer to spend my time in this area, which does have its own history, but nothing so appealing as the views of the ocean and the bay that it offers.

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The Bookfair was to be held in a gymnasium at the edge of Golden Gate Park, and inside were spread rows and rows of tables offering books, pamphlets, movies… every degree of radicalism laid out in every medium. And in between all these tables was seemingly every person involved with any type of radical project on the west coast, with a healthy number of kids passing through town, living from a backpack and a practiced panhandling line.

I took the end of a table from a prisoner-solidarity group I’m involved with in Portland and put up a sign of my own, ‘Books From The Chainstore To You At Our Special Sale Price,’ scribbled on a piece of cardboard and propped up by the stack of books I had brought.

An abridged history of my life could be found in that gym. A friend whom I started a band with back in high school, spending our afternoons playing Nausea songs and our evenings walking the streets of Long Beach, these being the days when I could talk endlessly of music and politics, the naïveté of living with my parents permitting me the luxury of knowing and caring about little else. Another friend who I traveled the country with the summer after I left high school, the one who stood with me at daybreak on a rooftop in Seattle of a building on the verge of being stormed by riot police, and who was there when one of our friends, one morning, walked out of a store in San Diego with a keg of German beer that we took and drank over the course of the day at the beach. Others with whom our paths had crossed everywhere from the forests of Ohio to the small towns of Massachusetts to the trainyards of Oregon.

Nearly every piece of anarchist literature has one central them: liberation. In an anarchist bookfair, banners and books and puppets and signs everywhere made some proclamation of this theme. Many of the pamphlets and books use the same terms, repeating words like ‘pleasure’ and ‘dreams’ and ‘desires’ over and over until they lose their romantic meanings and become just another two-dimensional word buried in pages of text. All I could think was that my own dreams don’t lie in books or on signs, but in the people whom I can share a connection with. I spent a minimal amount of time at the table and more time catching up with old friends and being introduced to new ones.

That night I rode down Market Street to the BART station, catching a train to Berkeley, and then riding to Gilman, a punk club in the industrial district. At the doorway, the cool and otherwise quiet night air instantly gave way to sweaty bodies packed together in a room whose spraypainted walls reflected the din of amplified guitars and keyboards and the pounding bass drums. Quick bursts of dancing would end with a final blast of guitar, leaving a gap for inaudible conversation with the person next to you, then launch back into another burst of noise. In a scene where sound quality always comes second to sheer energy, and in a room where any combination of substances and sounds combined to create an atmosphere that few other places can contain as well as this, an intoxication of energy and discordant rhythm embracing you, peaking, and then turning you out to the street afterwards, with ringing ears and a lust to take the dreary buildings and empty streets around you and turn them into props in a world of moonlit mischief and adrenaline highs.

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From the club, several of us walked to the Landfill. This is a landscape that could only happen in Berkeley. A piece of land nearly surrounded by the bay, connected to the land by only a pair of access paths. This is where the wreckage of a past earthquake has come to live out the remainder of its half-lives. Where small shrubs grow out of rebar jungles and vice versa. Where the locals have gone through a tremendous amount of work to add to the decay solely for the sake of aesthetics. The landfill is where a fifteen minute walk down a rocky, uneven dirt trail will take you to a spot where the brush opens up and a person sits on the rocky shore looking out on the panoramic view of the bay, playing a tuba... very loudly and very badly.

We walked off the trail and into a clearing, a large grassy area enclosed by the brush and cement, that contained a cathedral of sculptures welded from old bicycle parts, and a firepit in the middle. A cool damp breeze blew over us and the rolling fog reflected the lights of the otherwise invisible cities around us. To the north were two blinking red lights, the flashing crowns of twin radio towers. In every other direction shown only the silhouettes of branches, shrubs, and intricate sculptures, in varying shades of black underneath a lustrous gray sky.

We sat down, our neglect of bringing any firewood with us placing us as shadows in each others’ vision. In these shadows flowed a conversation amongst strangers – stories of past train rides, books, ugly states, and beautiful states of mind, an anonymous intimacy of thoughts, made a little less viscous by the bottle of stolen wine being shared. Our seclusion left us in an environment devoid of any sounds or pictures other than that of each others’ creation, images painted with words and stories, and enhanced by the whispers of the midnight wind, where the rest of the world falls to pieces beneath the weight of its own gravity. Gravity is what we were defying. Those forces that pull objects from atmospheres and place them, neat and orderly. That which grips the wandering imaginations of youth, anchoring them with ideas of security and place. But we know that the systems which they build up will continue to exist at the mercy of the earthquakes and wildfires, the wild elements that will never be subdued. Those elements pump through our blood. And beneath that blinding sky, I glimpsed the fountain of youth, and found that it exists in the journey, not the destination.

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Daybreak… I let my eyes adjust to the morning light and wiped grass and gravel from my hair. The sky was cloudless, the droplets of moisture on the grass around me beamed with a shine of crystal, small yellow flowers danced back and forth on their tall slender stalks. What was only a couple of us when I closed my eyes had become about fifteen when I opened them. The ground was covered with what looked like a chaotic nest of cocoons, sleeping bags laid out in every direction, leather boots and worn packs dotted the ground and a morning-after trail of smoke rose from the crackling firepit.

Outside of the landfill, I parted ways with everyone. This morning I would leave to ride down the coast. I took the BART train to the Mission, swerved through the traffic and crisscrossed the hills of San Francisco, with the sun shining, my bike riding smooth, and my eyes set to the sea.

First, though, I wanted to fulfill one more goal in this city. Twice now I’ve explored San Francisco with the intent of finding the house used in the opening credits and exterior shots of the TV show, Full House. The prime years of my youth were in the 80’s, and following afternoons of playing with fireworks and throwing water balloons at the ice cream trucks that would circle my neighborhood, I’d retire to my home in the evening for microwave hamburgers, pre-algebra homework, and re-runs of Danny Tanner, Kimmy Gibbler and the Deej. On my first search for the house, I didn’t know where to look. On my second search, I was given bad directions. But this time I knew exactly where it was, and I rode my bike up to the park and saw the house, one in a row of about six Victorians with a sweeping view of the financial district behind it. I ran up the stairs and onto the porch and took a picture of myself in front of the Full House door. Success! Off to Highway 1.

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When I was younger, I used to climb out of my bedroom window at night. My parents asked me why I had taken the screen off the window. I told them that when I couldn’t sleep, I would sit and look at the stars. This wasn’t entirely untrue, though what I didn’t mention was that I was sitting in the park of a nearby school with my ‘girlfriend’ – or whatever you are in 8th grade. Midnight cast a thrilling hue on the city streets, and we’d walk in the fringes of the lights, treading the line between shadow and night, speaking quietly but feigning fearlessness, all the while blushing and on the verge of buoyant laughter with our nervous excitement. We wanted to be grown up, at an age where we could walk the streets – or even drive them – making the night our own without worrying about curfew violations and angry parents. We were children wanting to play adult games, believing that adult games were similar to our own. But whereas children’s games are about imagination and are played on a field with no conceivable boundaries, adult games are formulaic and confined by many walls that stand beyond a child’s vision.

This all ended one night when the tapping on my window awoke my parents but not me. They told me they walked to the window to see a couple kids running away. The screen went back up on the window, but I had already had my taste. Of places where I wasn’t supposed to go, and grassy fields and starry skies and passing train whistles in the distance, and discovering an intimacy I was told I was too young for. And since that time I’ve constantly sought that feeling that the nighttime city belonged to me… to us.

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I rode south, passing through Daly City. I turned off the highway, and through a residential area, riding along a street that paralleled highway 1. Just before joining back up with the Highway, I saw a gate with a path behind it leading to the beach. I pushed my bike around the gate and then rode to the shore. When I got near the ocean’s edge, the beauty of this area struck me. To the left was a cliff, and at the water, the cliff had been broken into a natural tunnel, with each wave gliding through, crashing against the sides and sending a small splash into the air. To my right side was a drainage pipe, held in the air by beams and planks extending out of the sand. At one time, it looked as if this pipe was the overflow outlet for the small neighborhood separated from the shore by a marshy overgrown field. Now this pipe was not connected to anything, as the visible section lay severed from its beginning and end, and what had not already collapsed altogether sat in a wretched state of decay. Beyond function and left, seemingly, only to save the city the trouble of having to haul its wreckage away.

Beyond the pipe, the shoreline stretched in a gentle crescent bend, disappearing into the cliffs of Daly City that I had rode over earlier. People walked the length of the shoreline, some in pairs, some alone.

What stood out the most about this area was the water. The rough ocean, uneven in its colliding waves that stretched out to the horizon. It had a sheen to it that isn’t there along other parts of this coastline. Porcelain white crests of crashing waves bounced off of the cliffs and rocks and through the natural tunnel. Closer to the shore, the water took on a coral blue hue. It had a radiance that boasted of a purity unfamiliar to the more developed areas of the California coast. At greater depths the water took on a more teal shade, but still a brilliant glow, showing no glare from the sun in the pastel sky.

Throughout the day, my mind had been playing with, for lack of a more fitting term, mortality. Remnants of civilization lay everywhere. Like the beachfront parking lot I passed that had collapsed into the water, or that drainage pipe sitting in half-ruin, slowly awaiting its complete disappearance. Invincibility never lasts. I was coming from an anarchist conference where people watched the clock, coming and going in accordance with the itinerary. Talking about a revolution that no two people would even see similarly. This all struck me as… unnecessary? Maybe it’s just my own revolution, but it seems silly to try to combat order with order. Empires crumble. Evidence of this surrounds me. It’s not empires that I’m interested in.

I began to ride back out toward the highway, but pulled aside when I saw a trail leading to the top of the bluffs that cascaded into the sea. I climbed and climbed, out onto a single bluff that extended further than its surroundings, and from its peak I could look out at the amazing swirls of color, the coral opaque quality, the water in all its motion below me. A sense of vertigo, as if the ground below me was pushing and pulling in every direction, a frantic disorder of movement, while I remained still, standing amidst a bed of small golden poppies. The bluff came to an end, at which point it fell straight down into the craggy configurements below. These rocks, covered and uncovered with the pushing and declining of the tide, probably stood at my level at one time. The poppies of years ago, related to but separated by generations from those that I currently stood amongst, probably once grew from these stones. Now these rocks provide shelter for shells and sea animals.

I walked further along the bluffs. As I came around the corner, a shower of colors engulfed me. At a distance below I could see a cover of the coral green waters rushing up and retreating from the immaculate soft beige sand, vestal at its untouchable depths. Concealed from me before by the slope of the bluff were the pockets of the cliffs covered with a different bloom, one which opened into millions of tiny purple blossoms, and whose branches, tiny, numerous and complex, resembling, I can only think, the overlapping network of blood vessels inside the whites of the human eye, took on a violet tone when bare. On the other side of the trail from these plants was a slope thick with green clover and complimented with patches of yellow florets. The trail sloped down, then up the face of another great bluff, I could hear only the ocean and see nothing beyond these bluffs but the sky.

I walked away, up toward the face of the tallest bluff. I scaled not so much a footpath but a dirt slope with holds carved out by past water drainage. As I neared the top, a barbed wire fence ran along the path. A fence that looked pathetic with age and rust, its uselessness guaranteed by its remoteness. I crossed it and soon found myself at the peak of the area. I saw the length of the shoreline in both directions, the town I had just come from, the ruins I had just explored. I could see my bike where I had left it, a speck against a background of eternity.

I slowly walked back down to it, and rode off, southbound, until those bluffs were only a speck, then, finally, disappeared for good.

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It grew from a relationship that was never supposed to happen. She was another phone number from nights of running around. Though, I admit, she was different from the beginning. I was beginning to feel that I needed to slow down a bit, and she was the fast-paced girl who I felt I could do this with. Our days were spent in the sand in Laguna Beach and our nights hidden in one of the rooms of her parents’ massive house watching Pretty In Pink or driving along the skyline avenues of the Tustin Hills. I had decided to take a break from the drinking and the parties. She was my first relationship that had lasted longer than a couple months. I always told her that I didn’t want our emotional relationship to become that serious. I told myself that I could run recklessly along a surface of spiderwebs and not become caught up.

We never believed in our own invincibility. If anything, it was the inevitable ending that made our time together all the more urgent and encapsulating. When it was over, all the songs on the radio seemed to make sense for the first time. They say that a candle burns the brightest just before it goes out. In our case, it burned bright until the end, when it fizzled but never seemed to die out. I feared the vulnerability and asphyxiation, but from her I learned that you can’t have a flame and a safe supply of oxygen. I spent our time together telling myself that I wouldn’t allow myself to suffocate, but the truth was that she had already taken my breath away.

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I rode by a Safeway, and walked inside. Juice, baked tofu, olives, all placed neatly in rows in their proper sections. The products of fruits and vegetables which once covered the planet, growing wildly. Each indigenous and unique to its own climates and regions. Each, at one time, picked fresh by the bands of people who would roam through these regions, who also lived wildly, who did not communicate with a written language, but could read the stars and the sun and see in them the story of the universe, and could tell this story to each other, could pass on this knowledge generation to generation without speaking a single word, but could communicate amounts of information in only a few nights which we could hardly imagine grasping over the course of a lifetime.

Now these plants grow in perfect rows. Subdued, domesticated, taken from the wild and planted orderly, subservient to man’s desire for efficiency. But now that the process has been complete, one can see that in domesticating wild plants, man has also placed the manacles around himself, being forced to tend to the plants, creating capital from abundance and routine from timelessness.

In time, civilzed man forgot the stories of the stars, forgot how to express himself fully, and learned only how push buttons and punch a time-clock. I picked up the olives, sealed inside of a glass jar, picked prematurely in order to maximize production, processed through machines, packed tightly into a container with no room for movement or breath, marked with an expiration date, and finally, with a price tag. I discreetly dropped the jar into my pocket. I had no intention of paying.

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In this area, mountain ranges touch the ocean not at a gradual slope, but at the point where the waves force entire sections of the mountainside to collapse into the water. South of Pacifica, I had to ride up a steep winding two-lane road with no shoulder. In minutes I had ascended from riding along the water’s edge to hovering hundreds of feet above it. This area was called the Devil’s Slide, an area frequently closed to traffic due to rockslides. Riding a bicycle carrying the weight of my food and sleeping bag through this area was tense, especially because the road often lacked a shoulder, which at some points had fallen into the water (at other points, the road lacked portions of the traffic lanes, which had also fallen into the water), but the sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean were breathtaking, and getting past this area was reason enough to pull over, crack open a bottle of overpriced fruit juice, and celebrate.

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I passed several towns which had neither a gas station, nor a grocery store. Towns that gave the feeling of a slow, modest pace of life, of homes with wooden fences in need of repair and small churches advertised only with hand-painted wooden signs put out front in the morning and brought inside at night. The fluidity of everyday events along this stretch felt much slower, with the exception of the stream of SUV’s rushing by four feet away from me along the highway. I turned off onto a small side-road in the town of Montara and rode toward the ocean. When I came upon a trail to the shore, I saw that the beach had little room for people to walk or sit, but, rather, was lined with tide pools. Stone crevices stretching into the water sheltered an assortment of intertidal life, and made up a foundation of arteries for the water that washed forward then back with each passing wave. Waves not loud and violent, but which also took on the air of serenity that surrounded the rest of the town.

A small creek flowed into the ocean here. Following along the side of the creek from the ocean, I found a trail that led through the lush green banks of the creek and up into an area dense with tall trees that stood bare with the absence of leaves which had still not begun to grow back following the winter. The trees grew so thick that despite the lack of leaves, the path I walked was cool and shady, unexposed to the mid-day sun. This area had a storybook quality to it. If you walked far enough, the forest would end, coming to an abrupt edge, a palisade, and 30 feet below, the sand and waves, the sun and infinity of a clear sky, stretching beyond vision, beyond imagination. I felt like the fairy tale child, wandering alone through the forest and stumbling upon the splendors of a new, undiscovered region. Though the dirt trail was well worn, there was no one around me. I sat down there on the edge. For what does one do when coming to such a place, a small slice of the world where you are quite simply overcome, where a photograph would take the warmth of the sun, the smell of the ocean, the mist of the crashing surf, a skyline that stretches so far that if you were to ask a young child of its size, they would swing their outstretched arms so far, with open hands and smiling face, that their arms would almost reach the point of composing the shape of a V behind their back; a photograph would take all this and reduce it to a two dimensional image, a representation which could be looked at as nothing more than insulting. How could one even try to write about this in a journal. The magnificence of the physical elements alone could fill a book. Then one would have to begin on the sense of freedom, of discovery, of the wave of feeling that comes from finding yourself wandering aimlessly, all the worldly possessions of your life being a bicycle and what you could strap onto the back of it, in an unfamiliar region of the country, with sore muscles that still you push further, forcing tired legs to carry you up a path into a sliver of forest, and, finally, walking to a spot overlooking the ocean, the burial ground of civilizations and the body from which new life will emerge. How could one ever try to capture a beauty and freedom that is nothing short of indescribable? But then a photograph or a journal entry would only reinforce the feeling of separation, of commodifying freedom, of taking the breath of life and trying to turn it into a postcard. I wondered the value of living the revolutions of others, or even re-living those of your own past, vicariously. And here, faced with heaven, I was content, not as a spectator or reporter of my surroundings but as part of it, to simply sit down and inhale.

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Highway 1 was less mountainous and more gradual now, the coastline along one side and farms stretching inland on the other. I came to the town of Princeton, a tiny port town, a town you would miss if you continued on the highway passing the street that looks like a lone secluded off-ramp. The port was bordered on one side by an old fishing pier, whose age gave it a dulled quality. In the port was an assortment of aging vessels with modest names like Tabitha and Amber C, amongst other small boats with names like The Codfather and La Boheme. At the edge of the parking lot for the port, the town ended and the highway continued south into Half Moon Bay.

I found a secluded area of the beach where the chirps of sea gulls and the rumbling of the waves were the dominant sounds. I laid down and was asleep before it even became dark.

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This morning I awoke to the sound of the Pacific Ocean. Fog engulfed the green hills around me, and the misty air felt good on my sunburned face. I walked down to the water, it seemed that most other people in this town were still asleep. On the shore, I saw only two other people, one a good distance away from me, sitting lazily in a lawn chair holding a long fishing pole, the other even further away in the other direction walking along the water, bending down and reaching into the surf on occasion.

The tide was low and the waves quite small. Fog hovered above the surf. I walked a bit of a distance by myself, allowing my eyes to adjust to the new day.

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Cowell Ranch was the day’s first beach access point. Just south of Half Moon Bay, it’s marked by a small dirt parking lot with a faded wooden sign describing the area’s history – the agriculture of nearby fields, dominated by artichoke, the rise of the local railroad line and its decline after the construction of the highway. Beyond this sign is a trail that weaves between fields and ends on a cliff, where benches facing both field and ocean sit, along with the lonely telescope. Below the cliff at a distance in the water, but within view of the telescope, was a large flat rock that provided a sunning and nesting area for the harbor seals who inhabited this portion of the sea. And today there were many of them, a worn shade of white, quite inactive at this hour, resting upon the rock. This is the season when they give birth to and raise their pups. The pups that I saw were nestled tightly next to their slumbering parents.

I turned around and walked back up the trail to where I saw a wooden stairway that led down to a small beach. My first impression of this cove was its immaculacy. Nothing seemed out of place. Over the course of the night the water had washed away any signs of human contact or wear, the entire cove was edged in a smooth gentle fringe of soft golden silt at the base of flawlessly vertical cliffs. Inside the cliffs were the layers of time in perfect display stretching the length of the cove. The sand within the cove lay in a gentle slope, arranged and rearranged by the small waves which rolled upon its surface, softly, as if respectful of the delicate beauty and visual flawlessness which it itself had created. Time was impossible to guess, as the sky was hazy and concealed the exact location of the sun. The sun, at the moment, may have soared east or west, either way, the entirety of the heavens were illuminated in perfect equilibrium. Photographers recreate such a light in order to conceal flaws and enunciate the overall blending of features in their subjects. And standing alone in this cove, in dreamy twilight, half-awakeness, and the cool ocean breeze, I can attest to the flawlessness of this scene.

The world swirls around me, continuing in cycles: seasons, life. It exhales and inhales: the rising and falling of the ocean tides, the blossoming and decaying of wild flowers. I stumble across this beach at a moment in time. A single moment in both its life and mine. I’ll walk away, and perhaps neither of us will have been significantly changed. The moment will have passed and our evolutions will progress – I on my bike ride, she on her slow restructuring of continents of land. I at a rabbit’s pace, trying to squeeze out every last drop from the several decades I am given. Her pace the tortoise, ever-constant, ever-enduring. Though a hundred generation of tortoise will live and die in the time it takes her to edge into these cliffs even six inches further.

I take one more deep breath, then turn and begin up the stairs. My bike waits for me, and I want to make it to Santa Cruz by tonight. If you do the math, that’s about eight hours to ride 50 miles.

Tonight the seals will swim her waters in search of food. A couple seagulls may comb her sand for any snails or seaweed which may have washed up. They’ll land at her edge and they’ll converse with each other about he people each had seen throughout the day. They’ll have a chuckle at our mortality – our time and our math and our contraptions – our delusions of grandeur. The seals will swim back to the rocks, their children and nests. The birds will move on too, to search the fields in the cool dusk air before it becomes too dark to do so. And the ocean will breathe a sigh, and then get back to slowly crumbling away civilization as we know it.

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There is a certain sense of surrealism growing up in southern California. I grew up amidst an environment of spectacle and disillusion. Of beauty salons and tanning parlors built on top of fault lines, homeless populations in some of the wealthiest cities in the country whose only possessions were a blanket and a surfboard, and multi-million dollar mansions that sit in the middle of wildfire-prone canyons. On a clear day you can climb to the tops of the foothills and see several pockets of skyscrapers that make up the different downtowns of this decentralized region. There is no time in a 24-hour city.

I was always fascinated by the natural occurrences in this area that were capable of, in the course of seconds, tearing to pieces the illusions of those who live in an area constructed upon them. Nature had a way of interacting with the unnatural objects surrounding me in a way that was simultaneously startling and sensuous. I remember many instances of fires scorching the valleys and foothills, of winds toppling power lines and traffic signals. I remember flash floods that put my neighborhood streets beneath a foot and a half of water, earthquakes that collapsed freeways, and rockslides that blocked roads.

I picture an elusive jester, I see gods drunk on wine playing jokes on those beneath the heavens who need occasional reminders of their mortality, someone who gives ephemeral transparencies to a population losing track of the line where cinematic and Disneyland fantasies end and where the wilderness of real emotions and real circumstances exists, or primitive creatures in the belly of the earth dancing a dance of reconciliation.

I remember the day that a large area of the foothills caught fire, the smoke painting the sky purple, and everything that day took on a hue of faded red, as if the day took place in an old film reel discolored with age. Another evening, I looked up to see the entire sky flash a brilliant electric green and then return to its quiet deep blue. The cause of this, I found out later, was a trail of lightning striking a streetside electrical box within a few blocks from me.

It is the act of becoming comfortable in routine, then having that routine interrupted and broken, comfort and security giving way to an unpredictable surge of adrenaline, of the wild elements which city planners and developers have not been able to subdue. I still see reflections of these events in my own perspectives, the factor often forgotten or ignored, but capable of dizzying and dazzling effects. There’s something romantic in the unpredictable, the unpreventable, in the power of being able to alter geography, to fracture routine and twist skylines, to alter, in a moment, the entire direction of one’s life. A simultaneous act of annihilation and creation, an ungovernable disorder, of sapphire skies and a quiet content smile on an otherwise tranquil night.

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I pass a produce shack on the side of the road and stop to buy a small basket of fresh strawberries. I continue riding until I find a small footpath down to the beach.

Nameless beaches outside of unremarkable towns. This is the motivation behind my bike ride. A hopeless misanthropic, this environment could captivate me for days.

I sit in the sand, feeling the breeze of salty air, watching the waves approach the shore with growing momentum, then crash at the feet of the gulls and pipers who search the sand for their evening meal. The clouds have broken up and the sky is an endless blue. It becomes so easy to lose track of the line between life and artifice. On this beach I feel like I’ve entered a world on the other side of the fun house mirror. A fairytale of picturesque settings and fetishized characters. I live the life of a thief, a stowaway, that of the traveler who searches out the geographical and emotional planes that lie beyond the confines of the map. In the world on this side of the stained glass, I carry on the life of a roaming gambler. A soul guided by a single incurable vice. Others play cards or throw dice. I’ve seen the empires and ostentation that gambling can build. My games, however, don’t involve dice.

Only when security and comfort are wagered can motion, can revolutions be created.

I see irony in those who scorn this way of life, those who turn around and go to work for a third of their day, giving up their time as if it were not only infinite, but unimportant. They’ll negotiate with their bosses their limited number of vacation days so that they may be allowed the opportunity to try to pack into a few days that can potentially be lived everyday. Such pleasures and experiences can’t be bought and sold. Not in terms of monetary worth or hours worked. I remind myself that if I choose to leave, venturing to the end of the funhouse, make believe gives way to the litter-strewn ground and miserable-looking ticket vendors once more.

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Emerson is the friend whose stories I wish were mine. He had a troublemaking tendency and the ability to charm his way into and out of the most unlikely of situations. I knew him from Portland, where, at the time, he was living in an empty boxcar just outside of the trainyard and sneaking beers to us as we sat outside the backdoor of the café he worked at. He was staying in Santa Cruz, and I told him I’d be making my way through.

The sun had melted into the water as I rode along the winding beachfront road of Natural Bridges Drive. I sat in downtown Santa Cruz as dusk and then the deep blue nighttime sky rolled across the heavens. Cities always seem smaller to me at night. When the lights of skylines steal away from the sprawl and denseness of the surrounding area with a feeling of intimacy rather than hurried commutes. At this hour, the commerce of cities is replaced by feelings of romance and seediness. The landscape changes beneath the lights, which go on when the sun sets. Colors appear even more magnificent and a sense of excitement ignites inside of me when half the city falls asleep and the other half comes alive in the ambience of nightlife.

That night we rode our bikes, tracing the moonlit shores and sleepy residential hills. In the darkness, we raced up one-way streets and down meandering hills, crossed bridges that stood quiet and still, our path lit by the light of one moon above and another in the shattered mirror that flowed beneath. The neon of storefront signs glittered in the empty streets, and not a single head- or taillight could be seen in either direction. We barreled through the stillness, our voices and laughter thunderous as they echoed from the buildings we rode past, stopping occasionally to fill our stomachs on the excess of bakeries and the local tofu manufacturer, or to paint the electrical boxes that sat at street corners, silver and dull, a shade of light which could glow with a warmth of its own amidst drab surroundings.

I lost my sense of direction in the curves and shortcuts, riding further and further into the unfamiliar, into the electrical disarray of shadows weaving trails amongst one another along the waterfront. We rode with the restlessness of runaway slaves, finding our paths through the contours of night, a revolt against stagnancy as much as hierarchy. While the city slept, we came to life, breathing in the nighttime air and humming songs that only the stars would hear.

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From downtown Santa Cruz, we caught the night’s last bus to the university. Emerson’s home was a platform that sat 35 feet above the ground suspended from a redwood tree in the forest just outside of the university. In the darkness, we leaned our bikes against a tree near the road and walked a steep trail to the base of the tree.

Horizontal branches at gradual intervals composed the steps with which we lifted ourselves into the air. The platform rested amongst the crowns of the redwoods, floating with the swaying branches in this silent forest.

The platform itself was spacious and well-furnished. On one end was a table on which were candles, lanterns, a camp stove, and a supply of water. Next to the table was a couch. Breathless from the steep trail, it amazes me to even guess how a couch made its way up there.

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Redwoods surrounded the platform, and through a small clearing was visible a cupola atop one of the university buildings. Bathed in a golden light, it sat alone beneath the nighttime sky. Its stoic solidity a marked contrast to the softness of the dirt that compressed beneath the weight of my step, and to the trees which swayed freely around me. Regardless of rain or wind or sun, it remained inanimate, immobile, lifeless. Regardless of the movement of the world around it, its lights still turned on at the nightly flick of a timer, and just as surely switched back off in the morning. I looked at the building through the shifting trees, and thought that it only makes sense for this to be a school. Where people are taught to take on the same traits as the cupola. Where the rain and sun are neglected for the comforts of abstract duties and compartmentalized movements – existence within the boundaries of four walls, confined by the safety of locked doors and closed windows, their actions set by an externalized timer. While the seasons change, while the ocean tides rise and fall, while stars shoot across the sky, while potential friends and lovers pass by, while others talk to their neighbors and travel the world and eat wild mushrooms and set fire to the office buildings of multinational corporations – while others struggle to create a space outside the constraints of a mechanized existence, students fill these classrooms and lecture halls, completing the steps from which they will eventually begin their careers. Inanimate, immobile, lifeless. I looked at the building, the walls impermeable to the fragrant songs of the birds and the moisture of the air. I thought of the wind which blew past me up on this platform, carrying the scent of the forest, of richness and diversity, carrying spores which will create new life, carrying a history, blowing the seeds of a time-etched lawlessness, blowing this through the trees, around the cascading hills, along the bands in the landscape, and up to the buildings where it hits a wall, where it is stopped by windows tightly shut, on the other side of which sits a classroom of students looking at the pages of a textbook, and falls to the ground.

I lay down in my sleeping bag and let my thoughts stray away from the cupola and the students. School has consumed too many of my thoughts over the last fifteen years already. I close my eyes and lay in an evening silence broken only by the rustling of the tarp roof.

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Daybreak… Suspended in the air, I stood at the edge of the platform. The sky, thick with clouds, stretched seemingly as infinitely as the trees around me. Branches level with the platform swayed dizzyingly in all directions, their detail visible now in this morning’s soft light.

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While we sat in the platform, two shrill whistles pierced the air. Emerson looked down and saw Blue looking back up. He invited her up and the three of us sat 35 feet in the air drinking tea from Emerson’s camp stove. I had met Blue the night before. She also lived in the forest. Emerson and Blue told me of some of their ‘neighbors,’ including one guy who lived with a generator and could be heard yelling at the football games on TV, and whose place, they said, was filled with empty beer cans. And this is in a redwood forest. Blue invited us to her tent for breakfast. She gave directions to Emerson, which sounded something like ‘walk along the trail until you see the big fallen tree, then go left until there are two sticks in the shape of an X, then its three big paces until you come to an arched log…’ We followed her to her home – a large dome tent nestled between thick patches of trees and brush, and covered in camouflage netting.

I was told that if the university police find your structure, they’ll tear it down. Once a year, they conduct sweeps of the forest to search for such camps.

Blue’s tent had the luxuries of any furnished living space – a mattress and blankets, an area for her camp stove, dishes and silverware, a large trunk to keep food in, a clothesline strung along one side to hang her clothes on, and an area for shoes and jackets, and one still did not feel cramped inside. Outside, she had set up an area for washing dishes, constructed a makeshift shower, and had a compost pile.

Outside, the morning was cool, inside the air was warm, filled with the smell of coffee and potatoes being prepared on a camp stove. I felt like a child, living in my reveries of forest hideaways and treehouses, a secret life detached from the world of mundane responsibilities, where I could watch the stars come out each night from the top of a tree, and fall asleep to the caresses of the wind.

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Santa Cruz is a city where reality fades to a dizzying senselessness. The morning sun illuminated the redwood forest surrounding me. A bike ride down a long winding hill would bring me to the coast where carnival rides and game booths stretched along the sand and the air was filled with tinny music radiating from the carrousel. Emerson’s stolen key granted us entrance to a private swimming pool and adjoining dinner buffet, a moment of knowing glances and pushed luck got us into the line for the roller coaster on the beachfront boardwalk, the neon lights of downtown made up the backdrop to our cross-town bike rides – to the grocery store to loot alcohol, to the drive-in theatre (that still shows movies!) where we simply rode past the entrance booth, to the unlicensed radio station where we played all the new wave records we could come up with, to the house show were the entire living room pulsated with the energy of the hardcore band and the dancing of everyone packed in so tightly that inhibitions disappeared with any trace of personal space. After all of this, I would find myself walking the silent trails of the forest in the darkness, or find myself in another stranger’s house, putting off sleep so that we could talk into the night, careless about our responsibilities and our guts, careless about tomorrow.

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Long smooth slopes lead out of Santa Cruz. Beyond city limits, hills and trees fade into flat farmlands. Crimson soil rolls into the crystal bay, and the smells of nearby crops contend for dominance. Strawberries, artichokes, and mushrooms all grow only feet from the side of the road. As Monterey becomes visible, I turn off the highway and onto an otherwise empty bicycle path. Fields are replaced by sand dunes. I pass the ghost-town remains of the Ord Military Installation, following the bicycle path past Fisherman’s Wharf and into Cannery Row.

The fish canneries which once lined the coast are now tourist shops, each selling similar trinkets, t-shirts, and seafood dinners. Among the pastels sit several authentic ruins – stone structures crumbling into the golden sand, metal canisters that sit rotting in grass-filled lots. People fill the streets and plazas of the city. People who all appear to be tourists, as even those who appear fashionable and wealthy seem neither fashionable nor wealthy enough to belong to such a picturesque city.

It is the coast to which belongs the most allure of this area. Crystal clarity in emerald hues. Every hidden corner reveals a new pocket of life, so numerous that each family exploring the tide pools has the run of their own private cove, with more than a few left over. Harbor seals rest on rocks just off the shore, playing so close you can nearly reach out and touch them. Great beads of kelp poke at the surface of the bay, rolling with the currents of the tide, providing a resting spot for napping sea otters. Tidal life clings to the rocks and covers in displays of radiant brilliance.

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I stole from corporations. I slept on beaches, rooftops and strangers’ floors and beds. I wandered aimlessly with no money, showing myself that economic security was not needed to live luxuriously. I saw my reflection in shattered glass, and ran quickly into the night as security alarms and police sirens filled the air. I rode my bike 1700 miles on a whim. I danced in living rooms and in the light of bonfires. I stopped consuming animal byproducts. I learned that the thought of me knowing the solutions to everyone else’s ills is as farcical as anyone believing they know the solutions to mine. I scaled the barbed wire fences and crept beneath the NO TRESPASSING signs. I tasted the intoxication of wines and chemicals, though I’ve also found that a foreign beach or an old friend or a leap from an 80 foot bridge can give you the same highs. What I learned is that following the map is the surest route to becoming lost.

I discovered the potential of my own senses in the forest, my capacity for fear and determination in the faces of riot police, the practices of economics walking past those asleep in city streets and alongside clearcut stretches of rural highways. I learned of boundaries and power and inertia. I touched the features that others know only as geology, and learned from people who others experience only as ‘cultural studies.’ I learned more in the first several months following my schooling that I had learned in the entire time of having gone. Books hold figures and theories, but it was traveling across the country that gave me tears, bruises, and the first grasp of the world outside of my own. There were no longer any controlled factors, and the conclusion wasn’t contained in a book on the teacher’s desk.

The black and white of years of text gave way to the color of the world beyond the walls, to the scent of fresh air after a rainstorm, the sight of the diversity of life around me. I recognized that the only differences between ‘domestication’, ‘subordination’ and ‘slavery’ are lyrical.

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In Monterey, I walked. Through a city that seemed to blend perfectly daylight and breeze, vista and warmth. Decaying canneries sit on display beneath a cool sun, and otters play along the turquoise bay. The detail of this city was dazzling on the eyes, and I searched even the furthest corners to see what they possessed.

The mind can take intoxicating substances in small doses and maintain a feeling of normalcy. Here I found I never stood a chance. The warmth of the sun upon closed eyelids, the illumination of the white tile balcony upon which was a hot tub, bathing me in light and liquid. The brick walkways that weave beneath immaculate Spanish architecture, patios flanked by white arches. A coastal path filled with women in warm evening dresses, children eating ice cream in the oceanfront plaza, and people posing for photographs before a background of waves washing up on the tide pools. I searched for an environment which could give me the feeling of a different reality, a world apart from what I was used to. I found that in Monterey, I was quite simply overwhelmed.

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I awoke on the floor of an abandoned cannery overlooking the bay. The sky was overcast and cool. I rode my bike to the villa balcony with the bottle of wine I had stolen the night before. The morning hid the magnificence of the bay, but the ocean’s clarity was still astounding. Sea otters drifted amongst the kelp and gulls skimmed the water’s surface in search of a morning meal. After some time passed, I re-corked the bottle and set it down on the small table next to my chair, a gift for another lucky wanderer.

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In this life you have to be your own teacher.

The first lesson taught inside the classroom or the temple is that the answers are already determined and held by another, stone in the hands of royalty. But in this life, even stone will crumble into entirely new geographies, forcing the maps to be redrawn, the histories to be rewritten.

I chose a bicycle because there was no windscreen keeping me inside a comfortable compartment, where music distracts from the solitude and the temperature is controlled to the degree. My movement rest upon the effort I made, and each hill and shoulderless stretch kept bringing back the question of my sanity. I chose a bicycle because, in terms of speed, comfort and efficiency, it was the antithesis of everything I had been taught.

The heart beats over one hundred thousand times a day, 38 million beats a year, 2.5 billion a lifetime, not resting until death. A star burn for millions of years until it burns itself out, fading from existence, its place in the heavens taken by other starbursts.

In this life, the most that can be offered is the looming shadow of uncertainty. (Beyond this life, even less.) To labor away the here, the now, to postpone the prospect of discovery, of pleasure, of risk, is to forfeit those heartbeats forever. The beast wields not only the threat of harm in its armory, but also that of comfort. All answers are ephemeral fictions, rewritten with the changing of the wind. The truth leads only to a cell.

The most valuable lessons are those that are written on the body. The merging of emotions, choices, histories, all contained within the scars that mark the skin. Each one holding volumes of tears, lust, chance. Each one holding a story that will be taken to the deathbed, where stories are the only thing you’ve got.

In this life you have to be your own teacher.

With the restlessness of runaway slaves. Never forgetting the pleasure and intensity that exists in a broken window, in rain on a sunny day, in the electricity of a touch, never forgetting that there is no authority but yourself.

The towers sit still, relics of the changing seasons.

Strike the match.

Now fucking run!

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In a different season the crests would remain beyond reach, isolated by muddy paths and icy slopes, hidden behind a veil of fog. In a different season the flawless white beaches of Carmel would stare back at this rock, the water empty of surfers and the sands empty of sunbathers. Butterflies would fill the air, returning to the Monterey Peninsula from their summer migration to the tropics. In a different season the sky would not be a perfect blue, a glimpse into heaven rare in these parts no matter what the time of year. But now is tourist season, and Point Lobos is filled with kayakers on the water and picnickers on the shores, photographers leaning over the cliffs, and painters sitting on boulders, capturing the collision of sea and rock in watercolor.

The barking of the harbor seals carries past me, floating in the gusts of wind. I walk along the edges of rocks, passing through meadows and wrapping around the forking roots of aging trees. Beneath me are coves with water so clear that one would drown if they were to plant their feet at the depth where visibility finally blurs.

The city of Manhattan was built on a landfill. Venice was constructed of the sea. The crystal desert of Antarctica today bears the flags of 18 nations.

In the grass beside me a deer feeds, undisturbed by my presence. Lifting its head for a look at me, then carrying on. In the coves beneath me, harbor seals splash in the water and sleep on the rocks. Pups lie on the shore, nestled tightly next to their mother. Their size so small that their weight itself is not enough to anchor them to the sand, and each wave that rolls by pushes their bodies up, then pulls it back out in the direction of the sea.

Man likes to separate himself from the animal kingdom. A picket fence protects us from the uncivilized, a pane of glass keeps us from the wilderness. But is it the world’s abundance which is confined by our armor?

A mouse will learn to run a maze for a slice of cheese. What lies beyond the walls is not important, for the mouse sees only a task and a reward. The mouse can learn to spend its life running mazes, as long as a slice of cheese is at the finish. How it lived any other way before is forgotten, lost in the periphery to the task and the reward.

The sun filters through the leaves, showering the ground in millions of beams of light. Then the wind shifts, leaves flutter and fall, and the patterns played by the sun and trees have changed. No one else is around now. This piece of the world, this moment, is mine alone. The barking of the harbor seals, the breeze across my face. Man can change geographies. These ingenuities are the foundations from which civilization is built. But geographies can also change man. These are the floods that bury civilization.

A mouse will spend its whole life inside the maze, taught to believe in no greater reward than the slice of cheese. Man likes to separate himself from the animal kingdom, but, so far, man is still only heartbeat and appetite.

Is it the world’s abundance which is confined by our armor?

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The setting sun paints both the sky and sea orange. A warm orange. Entrancing orange. Big Sur is a garden of abundance, its borders set by the clouds and the sea. Here is a geography in constant flux, a fringe of the world in motion. On these shores, civilization struggles to exist. Out here there is no sound beyond that of the ocean. The endless sky and landscapes, which extend in a springtime richness reflect the mind’s ideal of Eden. Lush hills roll on endlessly, an earthly rendition of the ocean that lies at its side. Here, life is primitive, slow. Here lies the end of land. Inside this garden wander no conquerors. The mountainsides too steep, too prone to the violent storms that sculpt and resculpt the landscape in perpetuity. The hills lie at the mercy of the waves and fog which often settle on the land like a blanket, and vestal mountains and meadows fall into shores paved with jade.

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I ride my bike not to escape reality but to see it more clearly. I ride my bike because I have always envied the freedom of runaway horses.

At the ocean’s edge, the lessons of the city unravel.

The biggest fault of a book is that the story’s conclusion sits written in the final chapter, set in ink, unalterable. In life, all conclusions are subject to change.

With the sword came combat, capable of altering the direction of the future. With the pen came linearity, capable of altering the direction of the past. In this world we have only the present.

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My elbow throbbed with each heartbeat that forced blood through, and my leg was veiled in crimson and gravel.

…a single unpredictable moment…

Downhill.

Afternoon tread on the cusp of evening.

Blind curve.

The rolling hills of San Luis Obispo lay before me now, the most tense portion of my ride now sat behind.

Loose gravel.

Slide.

My head hit the solid surface of the highway. A quick grunt forced its way from my gut. Within an instant a tornado of motion went to stillness.

The sky was a boundless blue. Tranquil now. My body felt weightless. Gravity had disappeared. The ocean ran ashore in long gentle waves. The sun making its way toward slumber following a full day. The clocks did not chime, time was as still as the air.

I jumped up and ran to my bike which lay on its side about eight feet away from me. The front wheel wouldn’t turn. I carried the bike to an area off of the road.

Blood ran down my leg and arm. My hip pulsed. I wiped the gravel from my back through the fresh tear in my shirt. Adrenaline blurred the pain that I could already feel with each movement. The front fork and wheel of my bike had been twisted beyond repair upon impact with the guardrail after it slid out from beneath me.

I could feel that perfect sky, now, compressed against my chest, pushing harder with each passing instant. In a moment, the weightlessness shattered, and I now had to force each of my limbs into motion, as if I was bound in a pool of water. My bike lay on the shoulder of the road, broken. I stood next to it, my condition an equal state of hopelessness. The weight on my chest now at asphyxiating proportions, like the weight of the dropping red curtain following a flawed performance. The red curtain had descended on me now. I could see it. It covered nearly the whole left side of my body.

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I walked along the stream to the ocean. The sun had set, the western horizon sat in dreary twilight, in wait for the darkness of the east to catch up to it. I walked slowly, with a limp. It was painful to sit down.

The ocean washed the pebbles of the beach back and forth. Each wave rushing over the stones like a storm, the soothing sound of a gentle violence, then meandering back out through the new topography. Behind me, cars drove along the highway, the town of San Simeon nothing but a line of motels and diners en route to wherever it was they were headed. That’s all the town had ever been to me before. Now, for the next few days, it would be home.

In life, all conclusions are subject to change.

We carry with us constantly the illusion of control. We construct costumes for every occasion, acknowledging no limits as to the intricacies and excesses of our shields, our armor. In wildness there are no masks.

I ride my bike not to escape reality, but to see it more clearly.

To wander to the fringes of the discovered world, to where the known and familiar give way to the foreign, the unsubdued, is to come upon a new geography where thought occurs in colors rather than words. Language fails here, as the mind ventures beyond the realm of literacy, beyond the noose of the symbolic.

Here one is governed by the senses, statutes being only complicated and abstract.

Majestic pebbles, remnants of time gone by.

Within this world, we have only the present.

Tonight I lay down, my armor broken, my mouth tasting of blood. I have no money, no means of transportation. This is where life begins. Tomorrow, the sun will rise, on this beach I’ll awake, possessing only a blank canvas, in abandon to the new day.

Bring On The

Dancing Horses

A story.

The Atlantic coast. Autumn. Craggy shores and the last of the blue skies.

The most accurate metaphor I’ve heard for travel is comparing it to a love affair.

Geography: a landscape, a body to explore, to learn the curves of. A pulse similar to others yet with a heartbeat all its own. To find the intricacies takes time, patience. It’s not something that can be penciled into the itinerary.

So many forget that the body of a lover can’t be conquered. It can be explored, its uniqueness tasted, its features appreciated. But it can never be truly possessed. That is when the flame dies. When the wildness is placed in manacles and domesticated.

A love affair thrives upon shattered rules and shattered roles. Upon a whirlwind that comes by surprise and leaves everything in its path upturned, transformed. Clarity in the midst of cacophony.

It requires that you give yourself in full. No shortcuts, no voyeurism. This isn’t the stock market. You cannot give a little and hope for a lot. Nothing can be touched through a screen of glass.

A story.

A romance.

A bicycle.

And the world.

A feeling beyond the grasp of science. Beyond the map.

This is where I seek to travel.

This is how a love affair begins.

This is how my story begins.

Hearts Like Wheels

The day’s first light. Atmosphere in shades of liquid, that Icelandic blue which precedes the dawn. The fringe of Lake Champlain at my feet, calm as a hush, still as glass. I roll over and sand falls from my hair, landing in my sleeping bag. At this hour the wind still slumbers. Not even the birds sing this early.

I take a sip of the wine that remains from last night and watch my breath linger in the Autumn air, hanging like a dancer, then disappearing into the chill. Artemis stirs beside me, then goes back to sleep.

Somewhere above the water’s surface, in the distance, a subtle streak emerges, a jagged edge separating mountain peaks from starry heavens. The Adirondacks stretch in shades of blue across the horizon, a velvet silhouette suspended between glass water and Arctic skies. The sparse lights of nighttime twinkle from the mountains’ surface, as if stars fallen from the night and come to rest within the folds of the land.

I walk to the water’s edge. Morning’s moisture rests on my eyelashes. Whispers across my cheeks.

Dawn’s prelude. The tightrope world between the night’s enamor and the day’s possibilities. When constellations return to hiding and the world awakes from dreams. Transition. The uncertainty that lies between the absolutes. Transience. Between the black and white is the fuchsia and gold.

That fuchsia and gold streaked the sky. The horizon becoming electric, the water crystal. A rower glides onto the lake, seeming to float across a still solid surface. In the light emerges a complex landscape of smaller mountains stretching in cascades across the foreground of the larger peaks. A single bird crosses the sky. Then several. More remain hidden in the trees that surround us, only giving themselves away with their morning songs.

The dawn reveals the colors of the trees that encapsulate this cove. Last night’s wall of black becomes a mesh palisade of deep greens, branches trembling in the morning’s first wind.

A ferry chugs across the lake. The rower has turned and is making his way back toward the shore. I turn around. Above the trees the sun has come up, its light uncovering the single path that brought us down to this sandy cove, illuminating a sky painted with clouds. Around us trees

displaying the signs of the season, leaves of yellow and amber, hints of crimson and rust. Gold as memory, red as wine.

Artemis is awake now, packing up her bags. Beside her are our sleeping bags, sandy from the night. And behind these, our bicycles, last night’s moisture clinging to the frames, sparkling in the sunlight.

The sun warms my skin, the crisp air announcing the autumn’s arrival. A new day, a foreign place, the whole of my worldly possessions lay covered in sand at my feet, and there’s not a sexier goddamn image in the world.

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It started with a conspiracy. That we would live like thieves and stowaways. That we would ignore conventional travel, that life would be fits of color and dreams. We would trace the contours of the sea, and where we stood there was fire beneath our feet.

The barbed wire fences marked the beginning of the path rather than the end. Using the ‘NO TRESPASSING’ sign as a foothold, and running into the trees and ruins on the other side. Leaving the boundaries behind, the intersection of paths marked in the ink we scrawled upon the sign.

And maybe they’ll denounce us as lawbreakers, but they said the same of those who helped in the escape of slaves. As if the concept of ‘criminal’ had any basis in justness rather than the status quo. As if those who kept others in servitude lessened their own dependency on the same systems. As if by enacting statutes to indenture others meant at all that they themselves were free.

Over time I’ve been swept by an admiration for two people: the dancer whose step is part passion and part natural disaster, who carries himself through life in a decadent tango of actions rather than justifications, alone on the dancefloor, caught up in the moment’s self-romance, untouched by the weight of inhibitions. And the outlaw gambler, who wagers her heart rather than money and will stop at nothing short of physical incapability to win the objects of her desire; whose risks sometimes leave euphoria upon others’ lips and other times leave the offices of multinational corporations in ashes.

Ours was a world of copper and sea. Of vulnerability to what lies beyond our control. But then, I never wanted a flat-lined life.

A conspiracy. A promise.

Risk everything.

There is no other way.

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Church Street. Burlington, Vermont.

The clocktower atop the Unitarian church chimes the hour, and even here, several blocks away, the ringing reverberates off of the modest glass storefronts and brick facades, echoing through the New England morning.

The slow movements of a town awakening. Children cross the brick patios, faces hidden beneath the hoods of their jackets, making their way to school. Trucks unload deliveries in front of shops whose signs still read ‘CLOSED’. Doorways are swept and chairs arranged. Up and down this street, the dressing up that precedes the performance, and as an older man carrying a newspaper greets us, his words hang weightless in the air.

A bench covered in maps and food, and somewhere in the middle of it sit Artemis and I, pointing out the meandering highways, eating bagels and hummus.

Artemis: hair flowing in fiery trusses and a way of carrying herself that, at her more unguarded moments, matches. Laughter warm as an embrace and fists prone to outbursts violent as the northwest skies that we had left behind. There was a time when the sun rose on the two of us barreling across the country, teenagers fueled by idealism and petty theft. Afternoons spent in the tree-covered plazas of San Antonio, backseats of strangers’ cars winding through the industrial necropolis of Pittsburgh, dirt paths through the seemingly boundlessness of Maryland’s forests, then waking up, in Portland, Oregon in the house that would become our new home.

In the air the shouts of kids in no particular rush to get to school. A light wind ran through the channel of this narrow street, ruffling one of our maps that sat open on the ground. Broom bristles scratched across the brick walkways, and the air echoed with the clapping of a woman’s heels as she passes us by.

Transition. Ushered in by the arriving season. Displayed by the rust in the trees, the blueberries and cranberries on market shelves, the additional layers of clothing we dress ourselves in.

A new day. Signaled by the chimes of the belltower that ring through the sky.

We didn’t know it at the time, but Portland would bring the end of some of that naïveté that we had arrived with. Celebrations and arrests, intoxications and lessons. Now, two entirely different people because of it.

Four years later, at that same house in Portland, she and I sat in the garden, peering over maps of states that neither of us had been to. The idea… to ride our bikes beginning in Vermont and tracing the coast south. She to New York, I to Florida. Food, shelter, and routes all to be determined along the way. Comfort and security we would leave back on the other side of the country.

Four years later. Two entirely different people. But through it all, still fueled by idealism and petty theft.

The clock tower ticked toward the hour of shoppers and diners, classes and work. But beyond the clock tower lay the highway. We folded the maps and packed our food back into our bags, lifting up our bikes. The next time the clocks chimed the hour, we were amidst the rolling hills of leaf-covered lake shores, racing toward mountain peaks and the eastern sea, far out of reach of the chiming bells.

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From a bridge suspended between islands we looked below us into Lake Champlain. Water a stoic gray verging on black when the clouds cover the sun, but revealing a celestial blue at each chance given the sunlight to bleed through. The fringe of the lake throws itself upon the rocks at the land’s edge. A storm is coming, we had been told, and above us the heavy torsos of the clouds pushed across the sky.

And one could be pulled by the rush of the wind, could see it in invisible waves flooding across fields of grass that swayed to its whims, in the turbulence of entire trees shaking and the surface of dirt roads spun into the air. Wooden farmhouses with steeples that stab at the heavens stand like islands in green fields, crowned by crosses or weathervanes, signs of direction braced against a whimsical sky that is anything but permanent. Anything but still.

On my face I feel the first drops of rain. The wetness feels good on my skin. My blood pumps with excitement. Faster. Faster. Static in the air, and the occasional raindrop becomes a steady drizzle. We race by homes and fields, tractors and silent intersections. Tires spinning in quickening revolutions. Past farm stands and small motorboats tied to crooked docks. Each gust of wind pulls leaves into flight, and as we ride pieces of copper and gold swirl through the air. Anything but permanent.

Anything but still.

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*…in California, we sleep in a place where the freight trains pass and the earth responds with the movement of the sea.*

*Movement.*

*It was a question. A pattern that would write itself over time.*

*We stole the fruit off of the prickly pear cactus and revealed fragments of our pasts through florid lips. We circled the city on bicycles. The city: Esperanza.*

*What I knew was the sea. Nothing, or rather, no one, could keep my attention as she could.*

*You came with nothing. We left with each other. Bound for the desert.*

---

Light tiptoes across the floor and up the walls. The night brought rain but in here we stayed dry and warm, and I lay stretched out across the empty bedroom that Artemis and I had swept out in the candlelight.

Like the storyteller prone to embellishments and grandiosity, and the story is both created and carried away by its own momentum, that is how we had come to find ourselves in one of the most haunting environments I’ve encountered.

The sun falls into treetops and the day settles into a soft exhalation. We pass an abandoned house buried in vines and shattered glass, resting loomingly in the shade of trees whose unkempt branches brush upon the walls of the upper floors.

We slip quickly off the road and lay our bikes down behind a barn in the overgrown grass. Inside the barn, amidst the fallen debris, are several old tractors and the cart of a horse-drawn buggy, all rusted with age and veiled beneath the dusts of neglect. Two other wooden buildings appear on the verge of collapse. We avoid them and make our way to the house.

Inside, the home is beautiful, and shows no signs of any recent visits. The first floor has a sun porch stretching the width of the house, appearing at one time to have been completely enclosed. Now its floors are hidden beneath the glass fallen from each of its shattered windows. In the interior of the house are several large rooms, each bare of any furniture or decorations, and instead covered in trash, newspapers, fallen wallpaper, rolled carpeting and the waste of birds who had taken to nesting in some of the home’s undisturbed corners. In the fridge are glass jars holding substances that would be unidentifiable if not for the label, with expiration dates over a decade past.

An arched doorway leads into the largest room, whose walls were still half-covered in red velvet wallpaper. I walk up a grand-ballroomesque staircase to the upper floor, the crickets go silent as I pass. I turn into a bedroom and see why the house is empty. At the head of a blackened mattress are the charred remains of part of the home. Whether it was the wall, ceiling, attic or roof could not be told, for all were absent in places above this mattress, consumed by fire. This is the only mark of any damage to the house – a charred mattress, in a room decorated in infant’s wallpaper.

We walk into another of the upstairs bedrooms, the one room relatively free of fallen plaster. A bird’s nest sits on the sill outside the window. We find a broom and sweep the floor, then lay out our sleeping bags, talking in whispers just loud enough to be heard over the crickets who have taken to living in the bathroom and the birds who nest in the attic, and the branches that scrape against the outside wall of our room.

Rain falls like the footsteps of the squirrels in the trees, present but elusive. We eat our breakfast on the back stoop, on a slab of cement buckling into the darkness of the cellar. Fallen rain gutters lie half-concealed in the tall grass. A chipmunk runs across the lawn, then comes to a pause, unsure how to approach us. Then it shuffles beneath the buckled cement, into the cellar. A few minutes later it emerges, its cheeks fat with food, alert, careful around us, these strangers at its home.

Stories and embellishments, like the records at city hall. The name to which this property is noted does not retain control. Neglect has turned it over to the resourceful. Those with no concerns of property rights and boundary lines. Cars speed along the highway outside, rarely a glance or a second thought about this home. But inside are chipmunks and birds preparing for the winter, sharing food, raising their young. Domestic existence is by its nature a struggle. With no one to trim the grass, to patch the roof, to wash the rust from the tractors, this home slowly reverts to the state from which it came. We’re just passing through, careful not to disturb anything, respectful of the stories that these walls hold. Now there’s one more. Two kids on bicycles from Vermont to New York, taking refuge in its dormant frame.

The rain has stopped. The air outside is fresh and crisp. Not stale and moldy like in here. We’ll leave now, leave these walls, keepers of the stories. And leave the life hidden behind the walls and beneath the floors, keepers of this home. A little more appreciated and a little more worn. Time take it.

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The tightrope world, when life comes out of balance. The month when the clear days and warm nights fade into the uncertainty of whimsical skies. Those skies vacant for the past season now filled in bursts of playing leaves and transient birds following the invisible maps across continents and heavens for winter homes. Crossing a landscape in flames before becoming blanketed in vestal white.

We begin the climb to Jay’s Peak. The Blue Mountains, and the highest point we’ll cross in Vermont.

I set out in search of the life that was never presented as an option.

Blame it on my childhood. On an environment of people content with a landscape of freeways and shopping malls, with deadbolted doors and obscene work weeks, with comfort. I sought the contrast, the dysfunction. I found comfort in the tears in the fabric.

We drew treasure maps on tunnel walls and threw parties on rooftops. We broke windows and disabled utilities. We tore up lawns in vacant lots and planted tomatoes. We stole from corporations to feed ourselves and our neighbors because the newspaper talked about increased police spending and corporate tax breaks to try to lure new businesses into our town but that didn’t put food in the mouths of some of our community who were hungry. We sought out others who could teach us, and passed our new-learned knowledge onto our friends. We smiled at strangers. And after all of this, we could shoot rifles and manipulate our way into a shareholder’s meeting with the same ease that we could turn a business’ excess and a meadow’s bounty into a free meal and clothing and necessities for a patio full of strangers, and ride a freight train to a friend’s porch on the other side of the country.

I set out searching for it.

I’ve never stopped.

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Vermont. Where afternoons of talk and exaggerated ideas had brought us. Unfamiliar, we had only ourselves to rely on. A wilderness of shaded streams and covered bridges, sailboats upon lakes that we stepped into when our legs became tired. Community bulletin boards that advertised pancake breakfasts at the town firehouse, rolling hills painted with shades of intensity, golds bold as nostalgia and blues like a song playing at 33 rpm.

We’re strangers here, and we walk down the streets or through the forests, revealing secrets and sighs, whispered stories and feelings that years around each other hadn’t.

Here we stand, being told we’re old enough to be adults. Sleeping like stowaways, carrying on like thieves, blending in like beggars, wandering these strange continents like children. And yet it’s here that I feel excited. Where I need to make no excuses for the vertigo, and the disguises of the city fall to the disorder of wide eyes and unexpected moments.

Ahead of us, the mountain ascent. Strained legs forced to go higher. Sweat dripped into my eyes and heartbeat filled the tips of my fingers. The homes had disappeared, and not a car had passed in the last few minutes, hours. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered right now except this mountain. The wind blew and it seemed taunting how smoothly and easily the leaves parted the sky. Every curve and the road rose higher.

I cursed the weight of my gear, the creaking sounds of my bike while I pushed higher. Each revolution a struggle and beneath my frame the cracks in the road crept by. A hot sun beat down on my face and through the panting breaths, yells pushed themselves from my gut. And still, every push and the road rose higher.

The words and allusions are everywhere. A song about “freedom” that plays over the supermarket PA, the movie about adventure that you can watch provided you pay the ticket charge.

But what I seek is not so much freedom as a sense of what is still wild. An environment outside the restraints of the jailers, a place increasingly fallen to the saw blades and farm tractors and papers of a people intent on uniformity. And if we can’t find it, we’ll create it. The alternatives make little sense to me. This isn’t so much adventurous as the only way I know.

We left the maps and intended to feel our way through. And sure enough, a wrong turn brought us here.

In my ears I hear a heartbeat. My head throbs with my racing pulse, while I seem to be making slower progress than ever. But then I see the peak of the highway, the zenith 2200 feet in the air. On the shoulder a charred rectangle outlining a car that had lost the climb sometime in the past. I cut back and forth across the road, its rise too steep to ride straight. The slope slowly became easier to pedal, until it leveled out and I pulled off at the spot where the only way, either forward or back, was down. I threw my bike to the ground and walked into the trees. With sore legs and sweaty arms I sat down in the shade atop a fallen tree. The songs of birds echoed through the dense woods surrounding me. I picked up a small stick and turned it between my fingers. Taking a breath. Regaining the emptiness in my ears where my heartbeat had pounded seconds ago.

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Stop.

There is a danger in allowing the momentum of memory to lead one to repeat the crimes of the historian. Words fall into sequence – they always have – and mask time as a linear event.

History: 1). The theft of memory.

2). The past as written by the winners.

3). Only so many stories and time.

And stories, like time, are never so straightforward as the narration leads us to believe.

The text usurps what was once spoken through festive dance and bonfire light or smuggled in code disguised as heavens full of gaseous wildfires.

But memory is a product of the floodtides and storm currents, like dust trapped in a glacier and carried across oceans and epochs, guided by external tidal flows and barriers, ruinous to ships and landmasses in its path, until the past reemerges perfectly preserved in another time and place. Linear? Or is it that the past is always contained somewhere in the present, layered and fluid as the disintegration of shipwreck beneath sea and shoal.

You see, I’ll tell you a secret I learned from several friends, some nearby, some long-lost, who continue to speak in dance and code, and that is that the pen, like the sword, is only as mighty as the power we surrender it.

Tear out the final page, like a brick to the hourglass, and where the hours fall is left to the whims of the wind.

Now begin again.

Silver Cities

I once met a woman who doted upon bridges. In morning light, as I walked with her throughout that water-city that was her home, she told me of her wedding vows exchanged atop the center of the span that arched with grandeur over the river at our feet.

In time I came to realize that we, and by ‘we’ I mean the collective of us who conscientiously or not identify with the post-industrial landscape, have accepted bridges as a given, their presence a fact, and that our mobility and consciousness is anchored to their placement. Once built, they become fixed coordinates amongst previously fluid landscapes.

Later, while afloat on a river, I came to see how sparse the bridges lay outside of cities. That in these places where the stars embraced the night like a newborn, bridges, by their very nature, are pillars of the idea of progress.

At one time, on banks too vast to leap, too wild to ford, too dense to dare, those who desired to cross were left with the challenge of how, and those who dreamt the permanent spans both astonish and scare me. For they’ve inaugurated a freer flow of goods and ideas. The bridge-builders have brought kingdoms to each others’ doors and bananas in winter. But obscured by so much momentum is the question as to whether the dangers overcome are more significant than those created. The danger that, with new horizons brought into perception, those within our grasp become trivialized or disregarded.

If there were no bridges, would we re-invent them?

If the navigation between two strange geographies were left up to us, how would it look?

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This is an old city

Built like an idea, with boundaries pressing beyond the given. Pushing outwards, rising upwards, tunneling under. It’s known that there are no comprehensive maps to this land – its levels and sublevels and buildings restless as the borders. Its skyline the backdrop of movies, its offices the whiteboard of popular culture, its affairs the smalltalk of the nation, its air narcissistic, its flesh asphalt and steel, and its eyes the most preying and blank of any I’ve encountered.

Manhattan Island.

Broken glass cracked under our footsteps as we rolled the edge of the chainlink fence back into place and stepped quickly into the shadows, to where the din and glow of the city was replaced by stoic brick walls and the remnants of a van whose interior had been torched by flame. The Captain walked ahead of me to what appeared to be nothing more than a tarp-covered debris pile in the furthest corner. But when that tarp was pulled back it revealed a gap in the building wall – a sledgehammered entryway into that massive brick building that loomed over us.

We entered the building with our flashlights on. Keys opening the heavy padlock on the chain that held a large metal makeshift door in place. Trains running beneath the city shook the building in its silence. Three stories up the stairs; the elevator was out, I looked and could only imagine for how long. The walls smelt of must, honks from the street drifted in. I followed The Captain’s light into the kitchen, lit by a lone suspended bulb.

This is an old city.

Our footsteps land somewhere between siren echoes and trembling blue stars, suspended across streets that have balanced with hyperboloid tension between deceit and desperation. Even empire needs its performance, and here is where it came to satisfy those desires when it went off the clock.

The Bowery.

Theatre and vice the two motions of its heartbeat.

In the past the theatres of this district rivaled those of Broadway, though, as is prone to happen when one’s character is based on make-up and wardrobe, over time that façade takes hold and the line between what is projected and what *is* blurs. Here, the police were frequently as criminal as those they patrolled, and the most unlawful and dangerous establishment owners were given a hero’s reverence. Transient in nature, a generation may change an entire street’s face from Jewish to Italian, or from shanty to tenement, or from theatre palaces to drug den.

Sirens echo throughout this noiseless building. Light moves in ephemeral rays through the gaps in the boarded windows. Outside the sounds of the city swirl around. Traffic, yelling from the bar, people walking along the sidewalk behind the building. The Lower East Side is fashionable now, the desperation kept out of view. Putting my bags down, we traced cavernous darkened rooms and stairwells to the roof.

This is an old city.

The theatres eventually closed. Economy, arson, incarceration, shady dealings; all weight put upon that tension. The evolution of these streets is the evolution of urban renewal. And like walking amidst a doomed populace, many of these buildings are simply demolition dates contained on paperwork atop midtown desks.

But what is paperwork to some are castles to others.

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We stood on the roof, an alcove between the top of the stairwell and the cage-covered tarpaper rooftop of the building’s spacious floors. I looked over the edge; taillights and horns blared into the intersection of Houston and Bowery four stories below. A garden stretched along the side of the building, buffering the building from the pulse of New York’s Lower East Side. Neon signs on the streets below cast liquid tones off of adjacent facades, the buildings and towers of varying heights in every direction made me imagine the view of the city from above, an ocean in the air.

‘We’d been looking around the Lower East Side for a building to squat,’ The Captain explained to me while we looked out onto the streets below fluid with movement. ‘When we first found the building, we would hop the fence into the garden, then climb their awning and into a second floor window. But then we found that we could use a door in the back lot.’

‘Supposedly Blondie played a show here back when it was a community center,’ he went on. ‘There was a kung fu instructor living and working here a few years ago, trying to get legal control of it, but he lost, and HPD [New York City’s Department of Housing Preservation and Development] kicked him out. On September 11, 2002, we took a sledgehammer to an old doorway out back and Ox, Merle and I moved in.’

Where we stood, one could see neighboring rooftops punctuated with the dark outlines of water towers, silhouettes in gunmetal gray upon a sky that hummed a dim yellow glow. The Williamsburg Bridge columns rose stoically from the buildinged expanse, and the towers of the financial district stood taller and brighter than any other. Across Houston Street, large trucks sat silent in an empty dirt lot, fenced off, the sole silent spot in a landscape teeming with lights, noise and motion in deafening grids. Across the street behind the building, a crowd milled in front of CBGB’s.

We talked a bit more, but The Captain had a meeting he needed to get to, and I was exhausted after having developed a habit of falling asleep at sundown while on the bike. I took another look around – beneath a sky where dark is not dark and beneath us swirled the neon maze of the empire city, and I followed The Captain back down the darkened stairwell to an extra couch I could sleep on in the kitchen.

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*It was the way you applied your lipstick - always a tone of heartstopping red – and wiped the excess onto the wall outside the bar. You were the seediest streets in the wealthiest of towns, a dancer on the tightrope taut between fragility and madness.*

*The time stretched the boundaries of intensity, though the boundaries were never an object. Scaled with no thought, though, humorously enough, too much effort.*

*Into the fifth story room of the palatial and long-ago abandoned hotel on the shore. As a wing of the building crashed in upon itself beneath the weight of the storm. Waking on the roof of the antique shop. We had to brush the snow off ourselves before we climbed down into those neon streets.*

*But I don’t remember the cold, only you.*

---

I was awaken by a girl’s voice and a hand on my shoulder. Opening my eyes to the pale glow of the lone lightbulb hanging from the ceiling, a plate of food on the outstretched arm of a smiling girl named Zelda.

‘I just made some pasta. You gotta have some.’

She wore a cute smile and spoke with dizzying speed. She told me that she had been living in the building as well, and as she spoke with exaggerated movements and a buoyant laughter, her wild black hair leapt from her head.

I took the plate of pasta in oil and garlic. Time was invisible in the kitchen, as it was set in an interior part of the building, removed from any windows that might let enter the light of the outside city. A clock sat blinking an incorrect hour, yet to be reset from the last time it was switched on. That single lightbulb, along with the refrigerator and a large hot plate, were wired into a power strip that, itself, was attached by extension cord run to the rooftop elevator control room of a neighboring building. And that single light was prone to dimming anytime any other appliance was plugged into the strip, or just at its own whims.

Zelda told me about the building – about the plaque beside the swimming pool in the basement dated 1922, about filling the five-gallon bottles of water at Mars Bar on the corner and then bringing them through the sledgehammered entrance and up the flights of stairs to the kitchen, of the different kids and bands and parties that the summer had brought, and the occasional police raids and the habit of having to peer through the triangular cuts in the boarded up windows before leaving the building to see that there wasn’t a construction crew in the lot at the moment. And in these words were held an energy that bled through the subtle quiver of knowing lips and brushfire eyes, that in her tone one could grasp the excitement in all of this. That there was an upheaval in the blurred lines where order ended and this pirated utopia began, and at the moment, Bowery Manor was only one of a couple recently-started punk squats in the city, and that there was an active contingent of kids who were looking for other vacant buildings that could be turned into occupied spaces for living, for hosting bands and travelers, for cooking dumpstered and shoplifted food into meals for others in the city for whom capitalism had thrust into situations of need. Others who were holding regular meetings with squatters in the city who had successfully been granted ownership of their own squatted buildings in the past.

She told me of her love for the city, telling me she could not imagine living away from a place where behind a thousand closed doors, at any given moment, there were undoubtedly acts and transactions going on that defy the definitions of perverse and insane. Where one’s excess would not exact a breath of surprise from a population where spectacle and eccentricity is the norm.

When her phone rang, she made plans with the voice on the other end to meet at 2am.

‘I should get going,’ she said to me, taking my plate to the water jug perched beside the sink. ‘But if you’re staying here, I’m sure I’ll see you around.’ I smiled back, inhaling deeply of this air of fragile tension between the overwhelming forces of this American city, of an entire culture, whose aim is to numb and dull and portray its comforts and conveniences as being the desirable choice, and this dimly lit room, in an otherwise darkened building, and a conversation contrary to those laws by its very nature of us sitting here, thieves, insurrectionaries, in the heart of the center of empire.

Everything That We Write

*I*s A Love Song

The breeze that lets dance the leaves, enters my lungs, settles in my blood.

For years I’ve had in my dreams places I’ve never been of impossible-seeming scenes with people I knew, or sometimes didn’t, to later find these scenes unfolding in waking life. Unmistakably, and for a moment it’s a shock, in the way that a dagger of lightning can appear and then go so suddenly but the tremors ignited upon the senses linger after.

I have not given much thought to why or how these parallel moments occur. I’ve only come to see it as a sign that time is cyclical. Like the seasons and tides, and each tectonic shift and flash flood that accompany them, time carries on, concurrently, in circles.

One night on my porch, a friend and I spoke of past lovers and the idea of desiring a single forever-relationship.

‘I think the purpose of relationships are to find those whose creativities and sensitivities play off of yours in a way that you make each other into more flourishing people.’

Her words made me think of my past more critically, and also of the present. Of how often I’ve found myself or witnessed friends in relationships that are so clearly unhealthy, so emotionally exhausting and consuming, and, taken to its most basic level, far more stifling than mutually enriching.

I wonder what shortsightedness has occurred that we can be more motivated by convenience, distraction or habit than by the desire to learn to develop and act in ways that contribute to the health of ourselves and those around us.

Some nights I go to sleep in the forest teeming of trees millennia-wise and insect songs, and other nights on the desert floor beneath a sky moonrise-bright and edged by mountains in silver snow. I consider the oddity of the spectacle that my presence creates, feeling my movements perceived by eyes all but invisible to me. And I think of the languages we are losing for our narrow definition of what language is and the authority we surrender to this narrow and deceptive form of expression. And maybe, beneath oral language’s hijacking of communication, there still is a part of us that can understand the subtle magnetism the weather shifts bring or the tones in the ranges numbed by lives spent entrenched in the hum of cities and machines.

Some day we will awake to eyes that have lost acuteness, to find memory and wit faded, and aches in the hands that had learned so many textures and held so many lovers, these revolutions of jealousies and breathtaking vistas and friendships and fractured bones and struggles and victories, drift away in a final exhalation before heart and lungs cease with finality, leaving for good these uncanny dreams, a finite vessel to be reclaimed as food for the owls and foxes.

I wonder if we carry these languages, like the butterflies a generation removed carry their map back to the same grove of trees, or the whales who carry the seasons half a world away. Do we hold with us all those wisdoms and souls which have lived and grown and died and broken back down into the air and the earth? After all, is it really us who is the dominant species? Or are we simply the expendable vessels for the parasites and DNA who manipulate us? Maybe the scavengers lie back and laugh and simply let us construct cities and conflicts and civilizations knowing that these poisons will be our undoing and these empires will someday be theirs to inherit.

Capitalism is frequently considered freedom by those who have never known a breath outside of its confines. That we are a part of this natural cycle – even if we don’t comprehend it – is given. It’s how we prioritize our roles in it that determine whether our relationship will be mutually enriching or parasitic.

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A frosty evening greeted us upon entering New Hampshire.

We traced the northern waters of the Connecticut River before veering back into the thickly-forested mountains and the least bold lines on the stolen roadmaps that we carried. Rural produce stands operated at the edges of farms, and when we stopped to buy ears of corn, ‘6 for $1’, and talk with the bored teenage girl who sat reading a book by herself in a landscape otherwise completely desolate of any visible signs of people, we spoke of just how foreign the pace of this isolated area was to each of us, both of us having spent our lives living in well-more populated areas.

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The question we were always met with was, ‘Why?’ Why did we decide to spend weeks on bikes? Why this rural road, this tiny town? I never knew how to answer this. I didn’t know what the answer was. It was a question both uninterrupted hours on the road and hindsight from past bike trips have let remain unanswered.

It might be because, naturally shy, I appreciate the time to retreat to the waves of textures and sensations that color thought like a drug, and the spectacle that can often invite conversation with those strangers who may otherwise have remained strangers. Or that so foreign an environment heightens the significance and connection to those intricacies and landscapes that one does encounter. Or maybe it’s simply that for as long as I can remember, I’ve chased shadows, if for no other reason, only to see where these chases would lead me.

Minutes can change lifetimes. This is the environment that I learn in, the situations that I feel most challenged by.

I think of Horehound who died falling from a tree in a forest she was trying to save from being logged. And Vole who was sentenced to prison for conspiring to set fire to a slaughterhouse. I look at the stars, dwelling on how some of them have burnt themselves out, though that message not yet having reached us.

All these synapses and nerves, these muscles and insecurities, these arms capable of caresses and crimes, and this world of endless potential and abundance, our lives that dance like candle flame, are they not too valuable to spend at a desk, allowing senses and opportunities to atrophy, poisoning the streams for all others?

If we knew that our time was limited, what would we choose to dedicate it to? And why do we not live every moment that way?

How do I express this in a sentence? What secret knowledge do these inquisitors possess too rich, too weighted, to communicate to me in these brief meetings. Sometimes all you can do is share a smile or a mug of apple cider and then continue on your way. [I suppose for the others, you can write down what you would have liked to have said and bind these words with affection and gratitude and send them out into the world like anonymous messages in a bottle just trying to apologize for these shortcomings, and say thank you.]

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We followed directions written for us on the backs of sales receipts, a road not even paved most of the way, but the man we had met told us the locals used it, and that it would bring us to a bridge half-fallen into the stream beneath before taking us back to our quiet highway.

We ate nectarines and grapefruit from the dumpster behind the small grocery store, and fiercely shoved veggie meats and pure maple syrup into our pockets at the larger ones. At a plant nursery we sat among the colorful pumpkins and fall squash with the woman who worked there who had just returned from biking around France.

And at night, squeezed tightly into sleeping bags as darkness reconfigured our worlds from rolling hills and mountain views to tired muscles and forest-smells, we lit a candle and read to each other, savoring the end of day’s decadent feast upon the senses, our breaths trailing off into the cold atmosphere.

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The modest sign said simply, State of Maine.

That was immediately followed by another sign announcing the number of deaths attributed to traffic collisions with moose.

At daybreak, the sound of rain on my sleeping bag awoke me. We rode into a vast copper landscape and heavy silver skies. The wind blew gently the train whistles in the distance, streams meandered beneath us. Air upon our skin like rogue caresses and the constant motion of legs felt so natural by now, as if floating through this amber sea of leaves that hung delicately on swaying branches or drifted with fluid-like movement through the air was our ocean and we were floating on its tides.

We could ride for miles beside each other, highway 2 empty of cars for lengthy stretches. Or fall into a line, absorbed in singing aloud songs that only each other and the whispy air would hear. Or looking beside yourself, at a landscape in motion, the sea of trees and undulating angles of land, coming to the peak of a hill to see the odd geometries of vastness stretch wide open to the horizon.

From the clouds fall the first drops of the storm as we come down a long gradual hill. We pass a house that stands atop a slope above the road. A typical wooden rural home, white with red trim. Beneath a grove of trees in the front yard is a family. A young boy flings his arms up into the air, spinning circles as if a long-awaited snow had come, as if this was the first storm he had ever experienced. I couldn’t help but smile.

My gaze back on the road, heavy clouds sail across the gap in the trees above us. Droplets of rain roll down my face, stinging my eyes that are simultaneously pounded by the sharp wind.

We pull into a rest stop, the lone development in this sparse corner of the state, only a handful of picnic tables and trash barrels. Sitting under a covering just large enough for a single picnic table, we take out food and books and wait for the rain to pass. An older man steps out of an aged pickup truck and approaches us, talks to us about our bikes a little, then laughs, saying we may as well set up camp, as the rain is supposed to last through the night. By now it’s raining so hard that if we were to leave, we would end up soaked and likely be unable to find any dry ground at all. We agree the only thing to do at this point is get comfortable.

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*Beneath us, the fish swam like silver darts beneath the light of a full moon.*

*You lay atop me and I see the stars. The moon in declining completeness. It feels as if I measure you by the new moon.*

*Beneath our feet the bed of a stranger’s truck in Mexico, that would take us to where seashells lie in the dirt atop mountains. Intertidal zone between ages rests here, between disappeared cars and agave forests.*

*Beneath our feet the blur of tracks of the Union Pacific line, a silver moon makes a silver glow of the mountains that surround us.*

*Did we choose the foxes, or did they choose us? Their images, reassuring, even in their absence.*

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There is no romance to this rain. No lights that illuminate the falling spears, nor puddles that reflect the world in its shallow pool. Here the rain is hardly visible, but for the branches of trees sagging with its weight or the leaves that rest flatly upon the ground, heavy with wet and unresponsive to the storm wind. This rain is best felt with eyes closed. The sporadic hum of the highway some distance off, us seeking what shelter we can find beneath some trees and a makeshift roof. This wetness is our shelter. The only visible sight the trees around us. Not their features, only their silhouettes, as the shade of evening autumn sky fades closer and closer to that of the surrounding forest. I imagine only a few steps from us, the wild morels coming alive on nights like this, the goldfinches nestled tightly together in high-up nests, though darkness renders these as distant fictions, and my thoughts return to the cold wind that blows across my face and that wetness that hangs heavy in my hair. And with confined limbs and restless discomfort I drift to sleep.

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The sky was blue, crisp. From behind the mountains the orange horizon burned through the leaves wavering between warmth and us. A breeze shakes the air, blows a chill breath across our faces. We were warm bodies beneath cold noses and lips.

This is how we awoke.

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For a time I lived in a city built at the confluence of two rivers, a city whose large central cathedrals emerged from twisting and meandering roads that appeared more inspired by the rivers than by the grids of other urban centers. Soon after moving to this new city, a friend pointed out to me atop a partially collapsed cathedral wall the large nests of the white storks who would disappear early each morning and return each evening before dusk. He said that when he asked others in the city about the storks, no one seemed to know of what storks he spoke.

Some evenings I would take a seat on a bench in the plaza beneath the cathedral. The hometime traffic of people on their way to bars or restaurants or kids hanging around who all seemed to carry on with nearly complete indifference to the playful flight and nested flirtations of the storks above.

It occurred to me that boundaries and borders may not be just physical or political, but also self-created, patterns that become habit whose repetition over time may become obstacle to knowing what lies outside, barrier to learning what lessons and beauties may be held over those fences. That we wander lost in self-important tediums and forget to daydream and smile, to risk new loves or be mesmerized by the taste of a new food, we forget that despite the routines and compartments we domesticate ourselves with, somewhere just outside our normal focus of vision is a wild beauty whose lives are unbound by concrete walls and imaginary lines.

What compels us to place more allegiance in economies than the health of human communities? Or place more importance in human communities than plant or animal communities?

One evening on that bench, watching the storks return, which signaled the end of the day and its labors and the beginning of night and its possibilities, I thought of how it’s not enough to desire the liberation of those communities held captive for the sake of human economies, but to ourselves not become a captive of those conventions and routines that would pull us away from the whims and caprices of the wild world. Often I noticed others witnessing with interest the storks circling the sky above the gray stone of the cathedral. And consistently, I saw, it was children who stood with gazes fixed, eyes skyward, out of step with the adults they accompanied who more often than not walked a straight line across the plaza. Maybe that is another of the intuitions we have conditioned ourselves to overlook: that those who exist in a world full of imagination and the absence of fears or prejudices are the ones with curious vision and ecstatic curiosities, as their parents give a quick nod and then guide them to continue moving along.

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The copper region has its own pace. It possesses its own time. Outsiders may try to force the land to adapt, may have even beat the constraints of distance with their cars and motorhomes, but afterward find, if they stop to look, that they have never entered the region’s pace at all.

We tried. We had our goals, our intended destinations, distances to cover. In the end, our plans never worked out; rain, mountain slopes, and flat tires conspired to hold us from the course we had highlighted for ourselves on our maps. Though, in the end, failing to meet our goals is the best thing that could have happened.

Sweet Rosemary And Steel

I woke up early and set off into the building, flashlight in hand and a feeling of vertigo from the sheer size of the labyrinthian halls, the multiple wings and adjoined church left eerily empty and bathed in dust and stained-glass light, and so much detritus from its past lives as a community center. On the third floor was the main room, lined by open windows whose glass had been removed, now letting light, noise and breeze flow lushly throughout the room. Most other windows in the building were boarded up, allowing in only a small sliver of light through the triangular wedges cut from the bottom of each plywood sheet. This made nearly every room dark, menacingly silent, and possessed of so many odd and curious details of which one could mine a litany of scenarios and theoretical explanations for.

On the lower floors were the large performance theatre and basketball court. Chairs were scattered about the floor, a painted set remained standing on the stage, and a tall laddered-platform on wheels sat in the middle of the room. It was hard to know if these all were left in careless abandonment or if they were the remains of some squatter-party, as Bowery Manor at once appeared to be both the elegiac remnants of a once-bustling community space forced out by the city of New York and a boundless playground for those who stumbled upon the shell, determined to breathe life back into it. Unfortunately, the building being closed off meant that it was illegal to be anywhere on the property, and anyone coming or going from inside Bowery Manor had to be aware of any police or HPD presence around the building. Thus, besides the metal door installed by the kids and secured with chains and padlocks, the first floor also had a large metal beam wedged between the stairs and the rollgate, the only accessible entrance to anyone who did not want to squeeze through the sledgehammered hole beneath the tarp or climb through a second story window.

Debris lined the floor nearly everywhere you looked – phone books, paper, clothes, boxes full of completely useless objects, nearly any imaginable functionless item could probably be found somewhere on the floors or shelves or in the drawers or in any of the other nooks and crevices in the building. In some rooms, you were not stepping on any floor at all but on the slippery and unstable mountains of old magazines, computer equipment, kitchen tools, CD cases. The swimming pool in the basement was filled to an even six inches below the brim, not with water but with junk.

Spraypaint covered the walls leading up the stairs. The next floor up had an isolated bathroom with an old bathtub that had come to be used as the building’s piss tub, and, as the plumbing still drained, the room didn’t smell as bad as one might assume it would. The wall-to-wall mirrors in the large dance studio cast startling reflections of flashlight at all angles. In the middle of the hardwood floor were the wardrobe racks, still full of the sequined and showy costumes. On the floor, also, was a box of old photographs, paper stained and ink browned, of dancers and performances this room had seen in decades past.

Upstairs was a maze of catwalks and rooms turned into bedrooms. A bar stood amid the debris of a damaged and half-collapsed roof on the wing that lined 1st Street. The shit buckets sat atop a quiet corridor, beside the buckets of sawdust to neutralize the smell and near a window out to an unused square of rooftop where the retired shit buckets were left.

I swiveled around in the cluttered emptiness, it was mostly the scent of forgotteness and neglect that hung in the air. I imagined how these hallways must have felt when this building was an active school and community center, when children staged performances in the large open rooms and the kitchen was warm with meals being prepared, and the huge chain-link cage enclosure covering the rooftop was for games being played across the sprawling roof and the pool wasn’t the eerie darkened echo-chamber it was today.

There are ghosts here.

Back in the kitchen, Ox was awake. Music crackled from the cassette player in his room beside the kitchen. An old friend, over spirulina smoothies he told me about having helped find and open Bowery Manor, about the sporadic police raids, giving a subtle laugh at their inability to seal the building off, and about the coming autumn in New York – people planning on coming through town and upcoming events. When the cassette came to an end, that light bulb flickered just a little brighter until the tape was flipped and the ‘play’ button hit again.

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Horns blared. Pedestrians stepped into the street, then back onto the sidewalk, then back into the street. A sea of yellow taxis and articulated busses ebbed up to the curbs. Car horns everywhere, the lullaby of this city. Traffic was at a standstill, and the two of us on bikes weaved in and out of lanes, into oncoming cars, across sidewalks. Red lights and one-way signs merely a caution, the same having to be acknowledged for green lights and bicycle lanes. Accelerator or brake are always on the floor. It seems these consistent jolts of frantic movement and motionlessness are what keeps everyone in a unity of flow. Bicycles, on the other hand, are powered by pure adrenaline.

In a city with so many eyes, it seems impossible to find solitude. No one here is modest, though there seems to be a safety in the complete openness. For what can surprise a person or a city who has seen it all? Everything is tolerated, nothing is any worse than what just occurred a couple blocks away. 16 million eyes, yet they never meet when passing. A safety barrier for people to blend in. Locked doors line the sidewalks in a city that never sleeps, never blinks. But wouldn’t this catch up with you?

The Captain and I rode to NYU where his scammed student ID card granted us entrance to the school’s computer labs. We crossed Washington Square into a din of sirens, and arrived at the library to find it closed by police, the building evacuated, and everyone standing outside, some angry, some quiet. Someone had jumped from a 12th story balcony inside the building, a suicide. They were whisked away in an ambulance.

The city doesn’t blink.

A woman rushes up to a man standing next to me. She hugs him, crying.

Someone on his cell phone across from me says, impatiently, ‘I don’t know. This is bullshit.’

16 million eyes with blank stares and impersonal glances.

We sit down on a park bench. The park, surrounded by highrises, itself more concrete than green. Everyone owns a phone. Everyone walks the streets in conversation with someone who isn’t there, a ghost at the distant end of a satellite. Everyone has the ability to transcend space, physicality. It seems that with so many people passing each other on the streets, the only words exchanged are with those not there. Distance has no relevance, presence has no relevance. Not here.

16 million eyes and they all possess blank stares.

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I sweep out the mechanical room atop the elevator shaft. The only room in which one is forced to walk across the roof of Bowery Manor to get to. My doorway is perched eight feet above the rooftop, requiring one to make use of the steel ladder protruding from the wall to get inside. The mechanical room has a skylight with a bird’s nest nestled in one corner of the outer side. I spend a fair amount of time carrying a smaller mattress up from the lower floors, and stuff some sheets also found downstairs into my bag to take to the Laundromat the next time I leave.

The machinery atop the elevator shaft sits beside me, a large metal pulley wound with thick steel cords. The elevator is silent, nonfunctional, and if you stand on the grating atop the shaft in the daytime, you can look down several floors to the elevator sitting motionless between the first and second floors.

I choose not to run any electricity up here. The skylight and open doorway let the daylight in, and the night light-noise of the city cast enough of a glow for me to navigate my way. I make a plan to steal candles for when I want to read.

I decorate the walls with objects found inside the building: grainy black and white photographs, Donna Summer and Human League record sleeves. Then sit on the doorway ledge, looking at the lofts along the Bowery. I christen my room The Crown.

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The sushi dumpster at closing time, the meeting spot each night for those who find their food from the excesses of the city.

‘It’s not a dumpster, it’s an event.’

A while after closing, the workers would bring out their trash to lay on the curb, and then hand out bags of the sushi rolls and wraps that had not sold, always thoughtfully kept separate from the actual trash and nicely bagged. While we ate, kids wandered up two, three, six at a time. A nightly gang of squatters, punk kids and assorted others who would set off on the restaurants, bagel shops, and health food stores concentrated in this part of lower Manhattan.

One grocery store had set out several crates full of ice cream, which upon digging through provided a few cartons of soy ice cream – still frozen. By now we were accompanied by a shopping cart that Holden kept padlocked to the street by day, but now had a radio blasting pop punk while he pushed its contents of fruit, vegetables, pizza, pastries, and electronics that had been scavenged during the evening’s walk.

Several of us split off to head to a gourmet health food store in Soho.

After sifting through their bags, while waiting for everyone else to catch up, we were looking at the graffiti of a building across the street. The walls were painted along the ladders and balconies of the fire escape, several floors up. Next to this building was another building that towered above every other building on the block.

‘We should climb the fire escape,’ I said. The Captain, thinking I meant the smaller building, didn’t express too much interest. Then I pointed to the taller building next to it.

‘We *should* climb it,’ Zelda said. We crossed the street. The ladder at the bottom of the fire escape was held just out of reach by a hook. I jumped and grabbed the bottom rung, then started pulling myself up, legs dangling, until I was able to swing my feet up to the balcony, unlocking the ladder and lowering it for Zelda who came up after me.

The two of us ran upwards, crossing diagonal stairs, horizontal balconies. Out of breath, creeping by lit up windows with tenants consumed with their dinners and laptops. No one seemed to notice us. We finally got to the last short vertical ladder that took us to the roof. At the top I looked over the side. A breeze blew across the roof, through my hair. We stood above most other surrounding buildings. Sitting on the edge, legs hanging 14 stories above the city, no grips other than the flat tarpaper roof. Everyone below a tiny figure from these dizzying heights. Each draught of wind would make my teeth clench with a rush of tiny bolts of fear, a simultaneous repulsion and urge to give myself to the fall. Zelda simply looked down and laughed. A devilish laugh. One of a familiarity of nights ruled by straddling the edge of limits.

Inches before us, just one wild gust of wind away, a fall that would unquestionably render ones body into a pulverized state, but around us the lights of all of Manhattan. The spires of the Chrysler Building bathed in golden glow above, the Empire State Building rose like a compass point. In the other direction, the financial district, the lights of lit windows standing above us, spread out beneath us. New Jersey’s skyline rising from the further bank of the Hudson. Turn around again, the columns of the Manhattan Bridge, lights running along its cable trestles, a line of white lights next to a line of red lights of traffic in perfect line to our perspective.

We walked across the roof, climbing atop the water tower, which, itself, stood two stories above the roof. The top of this building was flat, with a ledge on which to lean, to take in the varied topography of the grid canopy of Manhattan. To connect rooftops would give you a varying surface that would look like the surface of a stormy sea.

She turned to me and said it was moments like this that she wished she carried a flask of whiskey in her garter. I was in awe of the city from this angle. Underneath us. As canyons rather than walls. As stepping stones rather than sheer facades. I was in awe of her. Of someone who could so easily, so eagerly, stand at the building’s edge, walk to the fringe of the plank simply for the thrill of it, spitting inhibitions to the wind, or rather, down the side of a highrise.

From down below we heard the whistles and yells of the others. They echoed up the building, fading into the noise up here.

We cling to the recesses of the city. A mountain that the city can’t climb. There was no rush. Even if they were calling us back down. The wind was soft, the city at our feet. We were above it now. Running recklessly on a cloud of steel and silence. Laughing. Screaming. Breathing.

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I return to Bowery Manor. It’s a Friday night, and rather than continuing on with the night, I’ve decided to get some sleep. I expect the building to be empty, but am greeted by Valencia, a girl who also grew up in the same area of California as I did, who has been staying at Bowery Manor as well. We talk about the mutual people and places we know from our pasts, and I cut up a plate of fruit for us to share.

Rather than sleeping, we go running through the building, gathering and moving more items for my room – candleholders, a dresser, a desk and a chair. With her help, we lift everything up the flights of stairs, across the open rooms, and into the crown. The room begins to look inviting, and we climb up, light the candles, and sit while the breeze floods through the doorless threshold. The flickering flames and old machinery throw off unimaginable shadows, and the chipping yellow paint glows in animate texture.

I walk to the doorway. The city below bustling on a Friday night. But I’ve found my space now, away from the empty gaze of the 16 million eyes. My space where I can sit with a stranger in the candlelight, removed from the governance of clocks and time, and talk away the end of another day.

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I carry these maps while wondering how to stage a jailbreak from their deception.

The journal pages written here, the shoeboxes of grainy photographs taken with disposable cameras, only make linear and underwhelming the convergence of so many coincidental explosions, the way the photo album is guilty, over time, of replacing the memory it seeks to preserve.

Inside any given city there are countless more.

Is it possible to be infatuated with a place with the same sort of feeling that one could be taken with a person? That one could bare his or her vulnerabilities or questions to a place and expect a response? Can one find in different locales an independent and unique set of filters of introspection and [self] reflection in the way that the visible blue of daylight varies so greatly across separate geographies?

In my own life, I notice that recalling specific events leads me to remember them as being during the period of a certain relationship, or during the time of living in a certain place, as if the timeline of my own memory is marked by these two infatuations.

A story is told as much by what is absent as it is by that which is present. A map as revealing by that which is omitted.

I want to undo the damage of the maps; to be able to place more emphasis on being than understanding.

Could we find this place we’re told is the sole arena of lovers in the world around us?

Autumns And Dusks

I open my eyes. Sleep is light when you risk arrest for it.

Stars swim over half the sky, keeping watch on those not yet touched by dawn’s indulgence. Atmosphere of cobalt fade into pink. With squinted eyes and sleeved layers unable to keep the full breath of cold out, Artemis and I walk to the stone wall that separates sleeping town from salty shore and sit upon its misty ledge.

Bar Harbor. Mount Desert Island. The continent’s edge.

At moments like this it’s easy to feel a tiny intruder stumbling accidentally upon scenes of such ungraspable grandeur. Face to face with the ocean’s infinity, as the wave of transition sweeps across the heavens, as if for a few fleeting moments the world makes visible its soul.

On this stone ledge, the two of us are the only people to be seen.

Slowly the sky turns to light. The still-invisible sun turns a corner of the sky a rich orange and red of ripe mangoes, illuminating more wholly the shore below us. Jagged rocks hold the smell of kelp and the still collected puddles left by the retreating tide. Birds hop upon rocks, picking at the crevices of land’s craggy hem.

A few lights of nearby inns still gleam in the near distance, at the hidden end of the footpath we’ve broken off from that winds to and then disappears behind spruce trees and red berry vines.

One string of my family traveled to this continent, leaving, only a couple generations back, from a volcanic island in the Mediterranean Sea. Another branch crossed the border and took up residence in what was, at the time, the lush, arable and predominantly Mexican neighborhoods not far from the heart of downtown Los Angeles. A couple of my only memories of my relatives are a great grandmother who never learned to speak English and a grandmother who would constantly sit me on her lap and read books to me from the shelves of her apartment in her coastal city. I was born in a city whose hills look down over the expanse of the ocean, and, facing in the opposite direction, at the snow-capped line of mountains that rise like a command over the landscape. When I was younger, I would frequently walk away from my classes and ride my bike to these hills. And, later, out of the city altogether and into, both, mountains and beach.

The geological and meteoric forces that we ingest through the food that we eat, the air that we breathe, I believe it shapes us as much as any amount of nurture relationships can.

I realize now that upheaval and tumult is literally the food that my family ate and the air that they breathed, that it was constantly present in the geological forces that shaped their land, in the cultural imaginations of every stop along the path of their displacement, first from having to adapt to a new country so near and so far from their own, and then see that new home change even more and their new culture swept away by a flood of urbanization. The air smelling of the tumultuous landscape ripe with ocean winds and wildfires being the oxygen that went into the lungs and blood of my childhood.

I’ve been accused by those close to me of needing extremes in all facets of my life. And I know that I’m drawn to the transitional, the unstable. The autumns and dusks, the mountains and coastlines, the pursuit more than the goal, and the risks more than the temperances. But I feel that, just as the salmon keep with them their way back to the river forks of their births, somewhere inside of me is held a deep-rooted comfort in the spaces of geological and cultural upheaval.

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The musty sherbets lengthen over the horizon. A deep voluptuous pink appears in the clouds that drift from the south. And soon there are no stars. They’ve become engulfed too, by the dawn. Their cue to rest for the day. And the currents in the water have lost their cloak of dark, the restlessness of the water’s vast motion of peaks and valleys swirl below. It’s day now, on the edge of this atlas, at the tip of Maine.

I’ve heard addiction defined as habitually carrying on an action past the point of there being negative consequences for that action. But, if you can excuse the oversimplified definition, wouldn’t it follow that this would apply to inaction as well? For instance, if one’s inaction permitted greater negative consequences to occur than if one were to act in a way to minimize or halt altogether those consequences, wouldn’t that inaction be a sign of unhealthy choices?

We leave Bar Harbor, following the road as it leaves the water’s edge and begins to weave through birch and spruce groves. Groves whose leaves tint the beams of sunlight a golden green. Groves who spread, dense, into infinity on either side of the road. It’s still early in the morning.

The road climbs into the air, until we look down upon those trees from arid heights, then descending again along granite edges of road until we’ve come back to a sandy beach. I sit on the shore and let the ocean mist blow across me.

Like so much noise, we set out to find the frequencies that others tend to ignore, that convention has cast aside. Having fully embraced punk, first as a music scene, then as a scene that encouraged one to create their own set of ethics, to dream huge and make creative use of your resources to get there. Artemis climbed the rocks toward the water. Over the previous years we had cooked house meals from food that had been cast aside by the giant health food stores of our city, or from the greens and berries that grew throughout our neighborhood. We had ridden our bikes through the nights, sneaking into high school and apartment complex pools, refining our methods of looting food from chain stores and otherwise avoiding work as much as possible in order to spend our time volunteering at the infoshop. Over time, things began to change. Artemis had got a boyfriend and would dedicate more and more of her time to the gardens not only in the backyard, but now in the front as well, and discuss entering into an apprenticeship in carpentry.

I had become tired of the direction that my city was changing, feeling that the sleepy feel and inclusive scene was growing far more pretentious and exclusive, overrun by people who had no respect toward the communities and neighborhoods they were moving into and altering the character of, and I was ready to leave Portland, Oregon behind.

It was with this that we put our squeaky bikes into boxes and left for the far side of the country.

Huge rocks shelter calm tide pools. Breaking waves crash onto rough stone, sending white foam into the sky. We veer past parked cars and tour busses congregating in parking lots and ride up the gravel carriage trails that climb into the interior of the island. Pine trees now line the sloped forest floor and scent the air. In the interior, we come upon only a few people, trading smiles as we pass. We stop to eat beside a lake.

The ecology of sea and cool air has been replaced by a hot afternoon in a dry mountainous landscape. From here one could no longer see the ocean, only the peaks of the surrounding rim. Now wearing only a t-shirt, eating the wild apples we had picked from the trees, my eyes are caught by a bird that flies out over the lake. A bald eagle. I take another bite from the apple, and consider, for a second, the chance atlas that has replaced the emptiness of the maps.

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*It wasn’t clear if I followed you or if you followed me. But I would have traveled further if not for the promise I had made to meet a friend in Rome. That last morning, I watched you walk out. Then run back one last time.*

*They’re funny, the maps. The fluid plotted out as absolute. We carried different ones, and in private I asked the constellations to deliver my messages for me.*

*The letters I wrote you are still there, time not having washed them from the walls completely. But words are to be lived, not written and read.*

*I would leave the words to sit, until the day when you might read them, until the day when our maps would overlap.*

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We should have known what the night held when we walked to the secluded bay and were swarmed upon by dinner-hungry mosquitoes. Or when on the first trip carrying bikes and gear down from the road I was stung in the hand. And then I nearly slipped walking down through the wet grass.

The spot was a finger of sand that would keep us afloat above the high tide. We considered sleeping inside one of the boxcars a short ways down the tracks, but decided that we more wanted to just lay down at the nearer of the two and let sore legs and sunburnt skin recover.

They were so persistent that we gave up on eating and, instead, climbed inside our sleeping bags. Bug spray didn’t deter them, and zipping myself completely into my bag made me so uncomfortably hot. Their presence was a constant high-pitch buzzing in our ears. We didn’t feel all of them, nor always felt them in time. And if we did swat some of them, there were always more.

This seemed like it went on for hours, this suicidal battle against the clouds of mosquitoes, and at whatever sleep-deprived hour I had just begun to fall asleep, I soon awoke to raindrops falling on my sleeping bag.

Artemis and I set up her tent in the dark, exposed to the ceaseless mosquito swarms, and crawled inside. Listening to the tent covering fly off and flap around in the wind, falling asleep, finally, to the rain falling through the mesh and onto our faces.

Morning, and rain gear on.

After a few miles it becomes clear that the storm isn’t just a passing burst.

A few more miles and our shoes are soaked through and our maps are shredding.

A ways further, as we ride down a hill on rain-slicked streets into a town, my rear brake cable snaps. Late afternoon, we sit on the stoop of a business shuttered for the season, out of the rain for a moment. We decide to rent a motel room for the night. It doesn’t feel like a relief, it feels like accepting defeat.

He was a shipbuilder in the City of Ships.

Walking beside him, he seemed to know everyone in that town. Greeting those he passed smiling warmly as he introduced us, and then apologizing to us as we continued on. Though these interruptions were so good-humored and genuine, it endeared us to him even more.

He had approached us as we sat on that stoop, pathetic after the day’s downpour with our snacks of vegetarian chili straight from the can, and told us we were welcome to stay at his home. A moment of hesitancy. Always a moment of hesitancy. Skepticism: where fear and habit have taught to distrust until proven otherwise. We consciously wanted to avoid those traps. For a moment we wondered if this could be another one. What kind of upside down culture creates an atmosphere where a distancing instinct from others is the survival impulse over seeking bonds with those same strangers?

We locked our bikes to a rack and drove with him away from the downtown and onto the backroads. His name was Aerie. He told us that he had been in the navy years ago, and now builds ships.

‘This town really took off during World War II. At the time we manufactured more destroyers here than were manufactured in all of Japan. About one every two weeks. The docks were working 24/7.’ And now? I asked.

‘It takes about two years to make one from start to finish. This town now averages about 1¾ ships a year. They still christen them with a bottle of champagne. Until a couple of years ago they were launched the old-fashioned way, where they were built on a ramp and then the day came and the ship was pushed down the rails. The whole town would come out for that, take pictures. It was an event. Now, though, the ships are lowered into the water. It’s like watching snow melt. People still come out, but it’s not the same.’

He told us that he and his wife, Celeste, had crossed the country on motorcycles, and were helped by the kindness of strangers. Since then, he and his wife have taken every opportunity to offer their own help to those who might need it.

His home was nestled into the woods, a view of the ocean through the trees. He and his wife had plans that evening to cook a dinner for their daughter and her partner, and for his wife’s aunt who was visiting from Baltimore. His wife immediately hugged us. She would be happy to add some veggie burgers to the meal.

The bedroom we’re led to is full of Naval awards, college degrees, shipbuilding honors, and books. Books on gardening, several F. Scott Fitzgerald volumes, books on feminism, a collection of books about several different religions and spiritualities.

Over dinner they told us about their home, their past, their lives. I’m touched by their connection to their place. To this landscape and its rhythms. They can speak of their appreciation for it, accepting its faults, acknowledging other cities and seas, but the feeling one is left with when all the words have been spoken is their happiness with where they are and for whom they’re with.

In the morning, on the drive back into town, Aerie presents to us the town through his own eyes. A map of the city redrawn. The YMCA that he volunteers at, the ship manufacturing dock. The most unassuming corners of the town become landmarks.

‘That shop is where Celeste’s parents met each other. It was a drugstore at the time. And about 20 feet away, beneath that storefront right there,’ he pointed, ‘is where I met Celeste.’

Soul unravels from brick and stone.

He left us at our bikes, said goodbye, hugged us. We were in awe.

As I recall this, I still am.

There is a rhythm that envelops you on a long bike trip.

A moment where the day before feels like it took place in the distant past, and the road ahead of you no longer looks menacing or hard, nor the mountains daunting.

The movement of legs feels as if it takes place separate from the rest of the body, propelled by a simple muscle memory, as the mind dwells upon all nature of thoughts with trancelike fecundity.

Like the swelling sea, with its surface of white crests, peaking simultaneously, and disappearing, only to move with unpredictable clamor into and from other ephemeral summits.

The mind is free to wander – to daydream scenarios and conversations, to reconstruct the past and make wishes for the future.

And the climbs, the blood rushes your heartbeat to the ends of fingertips, and the drops, where the wind blows intensity into your lungs and back out watery eyes. And your bike nearly an appendage to be exercised as any other limbs that carry you through the fields.

The past another lifetime, the elements all in reach and the endless array of directions on the road ahead, simply, what is.

We veer from highway 1 to take the meandering roads nearer the coast. Mist hangs on my eyelids, rolling down my face when I blink. We pass a lake, still, reflecting in perfect clarity and unbroken stillness the copper and rust trees that surround it.

Copper and rust. We slowly come closer to the edge of the state. The slow-moving trains that frequently crossed our path, like the leaves swept from the trees by autumn breath and thrust into dance across quiet roads. Wooden buildings shuttered at the side of the highway – some, we’re told, will reopen in summer, or when the radiant fall brings the tourists, but others will not, and the chipped paint and decomposing facades will remain, marks of an ecology where serenity is a more dominant force than economy, until taken, finally, by time.

We trace the shore, the road elevated from the breakwater barrier lining the sea’s edge. A storm has sent the waves crashing wildly into the rocks, throwing spray completely over the two-lane road. We have to avoid vines of kelp lying prone in the road. A heavy fog rolls across the water, rolls across those who have come here to watch the force of the storm, rolls across our sweat-stained clothes and day-worn skin, and we continue, in low gear and ecstatic spirits, to make our way south.

The sun drops behind clouds in the western sky. Light breaks in spears through the textural heavens, traces the outlines of purple atmosphere in neon. Between the infinite night and us only the opaque cascade silhouette of Cape Cod. Boston lies in the dusk at our backs.

It will be dark when our ferry pulls into Provincetown harbor. The accumulated dizzyness of the past weeks having lost any anchorage to a perceivable sense of time.

A Field Guide To Trespassing

When evening came to the city, we swept out the basketball court in the lower floor of Bowery Manor. As usual, there were a handful of people in the squat that night, and with a few extension cords running up to the next floor (no doubt dimming the light for whoever may have been in the kitchen), we had an indoor basketball game lit by floodlights and a radio playing NWA and Crimpshrine tapes. There were kids enough for two teams – east coast against west coast – with a rotating bench stocked with Ballentine’s 40s and dumpstered fruit juice.

It was this way that the night grew late, a few of us ended up in the large main room upstairs sitting around the candlelight, the cool summer air blowing through the large open windows high above our heads. A flask of gin was passed around, and in the flickering light we could make out only each other as everything else faded to a darkened background that made the rest of the room feel a forest. A revelous delirium of heavy eyes and intoxicated laughter. The air smelled of the euphoria hours of a late summer night along with the musty presence we came to know were the disaster-histories emanating from the time-drenched walls and crevices of this reclaimed castle.

The question arises, ‘if there were no capitalism, what would we replace it with?’

I consider the friends with whom we cook up elaborate meals inside steamy kitchen windows, with whom we share bottles of wine made from the pomegranates grown on backyard trees, whom teach each other how to gather the Echinacea that grows wildly near our home and then put it into tinctures to battle the colds that can creep in, or the strangers who have pulled over and let a strange kid standing roadside with a poorly written sign that says ‘ANYWHERE’ into their car.

‘That’s the amazing thing about the punk scene,’ a new friend passing through town told me, ‘you can go anywhere in the world and have a place to stay and someone to talk about records and travel stories with.’ I know the feeling well. Though I’ve also heard of NASCAR and Star Trek fans talk of similar communities.

It seems that people are already engaged in a system of exchange outside of capitalism. That the generosity that occurs amongst people who feel a certain sense of community, sometimes even amongst strangers, is something currently happening.

Capitalism has been successful in dividing communities, in creating identifications with abstract clusters of people based on common (consumable) interests, but has distanced the attachments between those within the immediate vicinity. To replace capitalism, one must rid themselves of the idea that a global market that views all life outside of its immediate interests a resource is more desirable than a web of communities made up of all life.

In replacing capitalism, I think that I would simply get rid of the idea that time and rivers and interactions and human and non-human communities can be summed up in quantitative statistics on a screen, and then get rid of those screens altogether. That would be a good start.

We were soon on the roof looking out over the financial district, speaking of the ghosts of Bowery Manor. That there was an intensity in this building was something that was felt by everyone who stepped inside. That these walls teemed with life, had stood silent sentry through recitals and dances, spiritual worship and battles against city agencies intent on shutting it down, had left an energy that none of us could interpret, but that was felt, that blanketed the nights and held silent post in those hallways we stepped through. Those pasts that we will never know, all of those coincidences and actions that bring us to this slightly unsettled night. There are ghosts here. It was all I could do to think that nothing would excite me more than to surround myself with those passionate enough to live their lives this way, with all of the energy and electricity of storming the gates of the off-limits world and making it into the geography of our own design.

The dawn light first changed the color outside, reflecting off of the puddle that had made a moat of the roof at the bottom of the steel ladder leading to the crown, entering the room through the doorway and falling through the skylight. Everyone had gone to sleep and Zelda and I lie in the sheets together. We didn’t need the candlelight now. Her curled black hair and blue eyes, metallic as an arctic dawn, were all visible, her smile pierced the morning calm.

She breathed recklessness. Zelda of the devilish grin. Zelda of the suckerpunch. Sheets became tangled. Her presence like a tornado, like movement that can upturn calm. For a moment you find yourself at the eye of the storm, the briefest view of a world teetering precariously on the brink of disaster. And the next that storm has taken you, and all that is explainable is also swept up, swirling through the air, a world upside down. Until the storm has passed, and the calm seems otherworldly. And one must look around and decide how to navigate the altered topography.

Only the uncontrollable is constant.

When we woke up it was 2pm. My face reflected in her eyes. Her lips soft now. Manhattan echoed from below, hung in the hot seamy air that breezed through the room, causing the large still elevator cables to creak in the shaft below the grate. We had cast the sheets aside. Out on the roof, beyond the moat, the sunlight wavered off of black tarpaper. Slowly we got up, thumbed away the heat from each others’ faces, found our clothes, and went downstairs for a breakfast of dumpstered tofutti ice cream.

With whom do we identify?

I may say that I love the sea, the wild bison, the rivers whose waters I’ve spent days floating on and whose banks I’ve spent nights lying in, eerily amazed at my own insignificances reflected in the vast skies above. But would I defend them as unflinchingly and vigorously as I would a family member or anyone else who I loved?

The language I speak is weighted with the baggage of not merely human-centric thought, but urban-centric thought. As if civilization, industrialism, interaction

mediated by machines, the freer and greater flow of economies are all not only to be accepted, but promoted, believed in as progressive movement, equated with well- being and accomplishment.

But, once again, I wonder where that mutually enriching relationship is that my friend spoke of that night. How much of urbanism, of economies, of something so basic as the gathering and preparing of food, occurs in a way that benefits, rather than exploits, those other communities with whom we share the world with? Is it fair to refer to these separate species, forests, bodies of water as *other* communities? Or is that revealing our perceived independence from what, in total, forms what simply is *our* community .

I wondered this, on another morning, as I sat at my desk just inside the doorway in the crown to write a letter to a friend a continent away. The room’s thick brick walls keep a cool air inside while the warm day blows in gusts through the doorway and the crack in the skylight. My quiet space, adjusting slowly to a day well into progress in the busy streets below.

It was as I was finishing the letter that I heard the pounding.

‘You can’t go back.’

This is the response from anyone who champions this idea that equates economic productivity with human progress, that equates capitalism with freedom, that anyone who has come to accept industrial civilization as the only way, even if that is not merely unsustainable but completely destructive to every community it touches, including human communities, including every person inside those communities.

The pounding echoed up the elevator shaft and into my room. Strange, but rarely was there not some strange sound or ambient occurrence emanating from the invisible mazes of Bowery Manor if one remained quiet within its walls. I wondered what in the building someone would be hammering. But the pounding was persistent, growing even harder, and I realized that someone was trying to get in from outside.

I rushed down the ladder from the crown, jumping over the rooftop moat, and hurried down the stairs to the lower floor, until I stood atop the first set of steps, watching the empty beer bottles that rest atop the steel beam buttress wedged between the rollgate and the inside stairs rattle and move slightly with each deafening hit against the other side of the gate. On the other side, voices speaking to each other between hits. Though the rollgate didn’t open up to the street, but to the hallway of an adjoined apartment building. It wasn’t likely these were some kids or junkies just trying to get into an abandoned building. Whoever it was was obviously pretty intent on getting inside the squat.

The infrastructure upon which industrial cultures exist on a day-to-day basis is responsible for poisoning the water that we, and everyone, depend on, for poisoning the air that we, and everyone, depend on, for poisoning the land that we, and everyone, depend on. What threshold must be crossed before we aggressively fight to defend it? What communities must we witness being affected – the trapping and slaughtering of the last purely wild bison, the rivers dammed and polluted by industrial agriculture runoff, our families, or those we love, ourselves – before we defend ourselves? Before we defend our community?

I ran through the downstairs floors to warn everyone I could find. The Captain’s room was empty. Ox awoke with a groan and gave a mumbled response. Valencia and Carolina rose quickly from their loft beds below the large main room’s open windows. Though most people who had actually taken rooms in the building found the more hidden rooms in the more elusive wings, and even in the time I had been there, I had still not learned where everyone was living. When I heard the pounding stop with a final crash, I took the further stairwell to the basement to find a place to hide.

From the flashlight-lit hallways, a level beneath the rollgate, I heard the steel beam pushed aside and voices consulting one another. I came to a room I had never been into before, one whose doorway was obstructed with a near-solid pile of loose-lying doors, broken beams, discarded heaters, sinks and desks, and I wedged myself through the small gap that remained of the doorway.

I turned off the flashlight and listened to the footsteps proceeding cautiously through the building’s cold halls and up flights of stairs. To metal being pushed aside and the indecipherable crackle of radios.

Why isn’t the perspective, rather, ‘we can’t go forward; taking more from the land than is put back, believing that the mentality that brought us here will somehow stop or alter its own trajectory, expecting a healthy reciprocity while the culture surrounding us acts petulantly and destructively selfish’?

I turned off my flashlight and squatted in pitch darkness behind a large metal tank. I let my eyes adjust and saw that the room I was in held all of the building’s furnaces and the pumps for the basement swimming pool. The room connected to another room even further back, one beneath the church whose doors faced 1st Street. The room’s only light fell through locked grates in the sidewalk above.

I walked back into the furnace room and sat. I happened to have climbed into the room directly below the door that we had used to enter and leave the building, and could make out bits of the conversation between the HPD officers speaking to each other directly above me. Words about us having put on our own locks and chains.

In the darkness I heard voices and radio crackling coming down the staircase, then saw traces of light as flashlight beams entered the basement. I knelt as quietly as I could behind the base of a large metal tank that concealed me from the doorway. The voices stopped outside the doorway, and the flashlight beam slowly scanned the wall behind me. With held breath and deafening heartbeat that I was sure would give myself away, the beam moved across the furnace just inches above my head. I traced the light with my eyes, noticing the uneven shadow edge cut into the beam by the large bolts atop the tank that hid me. And then the beam left, the voices stepped away from the doorway, and dark enveloped the room once again.

I walk along the river, its banks a series of concrete piers, weathered structures. The same is present on the opposite bank, where a city skyline touches down. I realize that I couldn’t even imagine what this landscape looked like when it was a healthy ecosystem. I’ve never known intimately a landscape untouched by civilization – the forests I’ve lived within are second-growth, the river I’ve lived beside no longer has communities of salmon so thick that you could walk across them as the passed down stories go, the desert I’ve lived in possesses its mining scars seemingly no matter how deep you venture into its patient expanses.

I wonder of history’s zero-point and the role perspective plays in it. How our understanding of an event is created at the moment we enter it, and the past tends to be obscured, unknowable.

Above me I heard the hauling in of materials, the tools going to work to barricade up our entrance. And then there was quiet. I stayed in that room for a while longer, crouched in the darkness trying to listen for anything that might tell me if they were still inside the building.

After some time passed, and a long period of silence on the floor above me, I got up and crept toward the door as quietly as the fallen metal, dirt, and broken glass running the length of the floor would let me, treading an obstacle course of creaks, cracks and scrapes, stopping on occasion and turning off my flashlight to listen for any movement in the building. I ran up the staircase and to the ladder leading up to the crown. I gathered my journal and unfinished letter, then hung from the ladder and peeled back the chain link fence to stand on the edge of the roof, jumping a gap onto the rooftop of the next-door building, walking into their roof access door and walking down the stairs, until coming to the floor and the city workers who carry tools from their truck parked on the street through the hall and into the momentarily stilled walls of Bowery Manor.

Looking at these industrial riverbanks, realizing that I am more familiar with a synthetic world than a sustainable one, that I am more familiar with unhealthy relationships and cheapened perceptions of community than I am with thriving, functional ones, realizing that I may never know what it is to live confident in a healthy ecosystem to its fullest potential, I think that there is no question in my mind that, in hindsight, these conditions should never have come to exist to begin with. That, with the clarity of hindsight, it’s become clear that those who could have toppled the viaducts that allowed for agriculture to have altered the gathering-hunting cultures into a more sedentary way of life, one that in turn required more land, more resources, more specialization, more necessity of defense against neighboring societies or appropriation of resources from those neighboring societies, should have. And that, later, those who could have refused the economy of the industrial revolution should have. And those who could have used any power in their means to put an end to the belief that one could act in ownership of other human beings on the plantation system should have.

And today, standing within a culture that will see every tree cut, every bit of gold mined, and every person on this planet thrust into a synthetic environment, desensitized and infected with cancer, I hold no doubt for a second that each person with a means to challenge this in any way possible must.

With whom do we identify?

Of course you can’t go back. Is a person who fights cancer attempting to regress? Or are they attempting to rid themselves of that which hinders their growth?

Time is cyclical. We push forward, carrying our lessons in an accumulated wisdom. I don’t believe that progress is based on the refining of an inherently destructive pattern, but rather is movement in a direction away from the destructive tendencies, the power games, the short-sightedness; in a direction where all of those present can make each other into healthier and more thriving beings.

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*The Gold Coast, where the drivers talk of god and weed. Where we compete for rides with sleeping fugitives. While others bring us firewood and tell us of the stones that these waves wash up.*

*We breezed out of the old cannery as casually as we breezed in – and on the street, in the newspaper vending box, read the headline that Reagan had died.*

*With the two cans of paint we found, we spread the news.*

*Another season brought us together – a halfway point inhabited by javelinas and saguaro and the cities that gold had left behind. Train whistles could be heard through the night. The momentum too fast to slow down, at least without crashing.*

*Another season and another goodbye. Another train whistle and then we were going in different directions. It would be some time before I found my way back to Esperanza.*

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That night, a few of us will walk back to Bowery Manor. Certain that they had bricked up our entrance, we come into the building through a different entrance – the garden entrance along Houston Street.

We had come from a gathering at one of the Lower East Side’s radical bookstores, where one of the city’s older and more well-known squatters had presented some of his art; intricately drawn slides accompanied by a harmonica, telling the story of a girl who had come from the wild into the gritty mechanizations of the city, ending with her and others facing the towers, cranes, and tanks, carving out a space within the steel landscape where her group was able to live and prosper amongst each other.

Tonight the building seemed unusually quiet. As if missing were not only the laughter and the smells of meals being cooked on the kitchen hot plate, but the feeling that anything could happen which this building had come to possess. The equally likely possibility of walking up the stairs to find a dance party in full wardrobe going on in the kitchen to that of seeing an old friend from a different corner of the country sitting amongst others on the roof.

I’ve always believed that a smarter security system will only create a smarter person willing to get around it. That the passionate and determined can always find a way to beat those to whom stopping them is merely a job.

We looked for any damage. The kitchen was untouched, the electricity still wired to the neighbors’ elevator shaft and functioning. Downstairs, we saw that they had carved out part of the frame in order to get in through the rollgate, and that they had begun to build a new brick barrier over our entrance. But there was still a large enough space for us to get in through. And beside their work they had also left a pretty substantial box of tools, which would not be there upon their return. The worst actual signs that they had been inside at all were a few knocked over shelves in bedrooms, and the five kids still in jail with trespassing charges.

We immediately began coming up with ideas to re-secure the building – welding the rollgate to the foundation, moving into more hidden rooms. It was Saturday night, and we could assume that we were safe until Monday.

That night I slept on the loft in the large main room, with two large windows open to Houston Street at my feet, and all night I could hear the traffic outside in crestfallen contrast to the unusual hush inside. There was a nervousness in the air inside the building, as some of the others had begun finding different places to stay until things could cool off. It was probably about time, I thought, to continue on my way down to Florida.

The passing days would bring dinner parties in Brooklyn, crashed NYU events, and fake-unicorn meat at the vegetarian restaurant in Chinatown. When the five of our friends were released from jail following the raid, we took them to a café on Avenue B, our group filling up several tables inside. Zelda and I had plans to sneak into Fame on Broadway, but too often found it impossible to leave Bowery Manor under any type of time constraints, and often, when we did, ended up becoming caught up in racing around the city’s shadowy edges, or stopping in the gritty bars and diners open all night, endlessly amused at the contrasts of so many pasts and cultures all coming to an intersection in this city. The perversities and wealth, the desperation and excess, and the spectacle and redefined notions of convention that come together here. We compare memories and stories, of what a lawless carnival many parts of the city had been in the past. That government-by-chaos is still there, but recent efforts to clean up the streets and the city itself have moved that lawlessness out of the visible city, deeper into the darkened corners and behind closed doors. In a geography where highrises are constructed by bankrupt billionaire businessmen, lower east side hipster bars overrun what was once tenements for the poorest of the city’s poor, and family entertainment complexes sit upon the piers that were once the abandoned edge of the city – the no man’s land where New York’s fringe populations gathered, schemed, cruised, shot up or wandered to find relative solitude in this city of blank stares.

We sought refuge in the 24-hour taqueria that we shared with the couple of others who came in at the relative-quiet hours. The woman working came to know our order without having to ask us and didn’t mind that we drank from our flask at their wobbly and sticky tables. Still we couldn’t help but wonder for how much longer this taqueria could last in a city where the grittiest of neighborhoods were always the next to be preyed upon by developers, constantly speculating on other peoples’ lives, forcing more and more people out of the city and into the outer boroughs. Or we looted food from the Whole Foods, the sign that a neighborhood was now safe, a watermark of a well-off yuppie population and the visible corner of a disappearing page.

Each night, it was the sun rising over Brooklyn and the East River that brought the chaotic traffic to the streets and sidewalks, that reflected off of empty wine bottles at our feet in East River Park, that marked the last legs of the trash collectors’ runs and signaled our time to haul our bags of produce, bagels and occasional vegan deli sandwiches that we had just pulled from those trash bags back to Bowery Manor. To try to get a little bit of sleep before being roused by the opportunity of the new day.

Between kisses we spoke in whispers. The quiet broken only by her cackling laugh. The single thing that is unforgettable of Zelda is her smile – the way her teeth show, how her eyes light up, the tops of her cheeks rising and the corner of her eyes squinting, giving her smile a conspiratorial glow. Devilish. And even more beautiful in the light of a candle.

She asked me to describe Las Vegas to her, taking a particular interest in the Paris. Saying that she’d love to get a job wearing a button-up white shirt, short black skirt, fishnet stockings and heels.

‘Do they have a job where you just walk around? Maybe I could be a cigar girl.’ She said she’d settle for a cocktail waitress, and that she’d live in a trailer at the edge of town, driving her convertible to work each day.

I’m attracted to her because I can’t keep up with her. She’s always running wild ahead of me. I hold her in my arms and still grasp for more, for the chaos of her. We talked and grasped one another until the sun rose, and the light of the crack in the window drowned out the flickering candle. I was planning on sleeping but by now I should know better. When she is around there is no sleep.

The room was cold, the missing glass providing no barrier from the dawn air. We held each other tighter. Quiet caresses and kisses underneath the one blanket that we did have. Finally we slept, though with me waking after only an hour or so. She continued to sleep quietly. Her breathing gentle, her lips slightly parted and relaxed, this being the only time she wasn’t wearing that grin. I lay back down, she wrapped her arm around me. In the next few days I will leave this. She told me that her relationships are intense, and then die. Mine tend to be the same. I can only hope that this one may reach its full intensity before I leave. Then maybe I won’t be tempted to continue chasing after her, trying to keep up with someone who may be attainable, but is untouchable.

From The Ground

We awoke in the Foss Woods, near the tip of Cape Cod. Coming out of sleep to the sun falling into an air illuminated by the sea, and rising to pack our clothes and bags back onto our bikes. Then, leaving our bikes leaned against a tree, we walked deeper into the woods.

I’ve heard of people riding coast to coast on bikes in just over a month’s time. I’ve seen people clad head to toe in the swankiest gear, following the routes plotted out on cycling association maps, riding bicycles costing what I can live off of for months. I realize that I don’t really understand what exactly the desire is that motivates these cyclists.

It is the sensation of becoming lost and vulnerable that we chased. Setting off on questionable bikes with state road maps and simply an idea of our destination – everything would be determined along the way. Maybe we’d get there – when you have all the time in the world and a bike underneath you, you tend to move in the direction that you want to go. We chose to follow the smaller roads, the thinnest of the gray lines on the map. But if someone on the way suggested a road we might like, or a town that might be worth visiting, or even a particularly scenic lake, most often we would abandon any other ideas and follow their directions. Maybe we would ride miles out of our way to find a simple covered bridge, or find ourselves on a gravel road alone beside a mountainous lake as a bald eagle swoops from the higher branches of a nearby tree. Maybe we’d find ourselves waiting at a Laundromat for the older couple who told us to sit there for a few minutes, and then left, returning before too long with fig bars and coffee which we shared sitting outside the storefront on creaking wooden benches while talking about their approaching winter migration to Florida.

Traveling on bikes isn’t so much about a destination as it is casting out into the world without the enforced separation and isolation of a windshield, without the speed of an engine that turns the endless complexities and wild stories of the landscape into a silent film reel. And without the distraction of so much noise of the city’s mundane entertainments and media barrage, the abstracted, disregarded, or even entirely forgotten world outside of your own reveals itself to be the unbroken community that urban culture so meekly tries to re-create.

At the end of the woods was the shore. Long grasses gargoyle-still in the morning air, needle-leaf trees edging the sand. It has caught us each by surprise; that we’re here, at the tip of Cape Cod. For it always rest in the back of our minds – that the rain would come and maybe we’d just hitchhike until we were in sunnier climes, or that my $2 bike would decide that one of these hills would be its last. But here, at the edge of the shore, the giddiness of the whole situation rose from somewhere within us. That as we stood at the land’s end, and the orange of the dawn gave way to the day’s lazy blue, as we laughed with each other and wiped peanut butter from each others’ faces, this was our lives. Let work and the cities and the illusion of control be damned. If we couldn’t escape capitalism, well we could still refuse to let it dictate how we spend our time. Somehow, we had climbed onto our bikes in Burlington, Vermont and made it here, to Provincetown. Maybe not far in terms of mileage, and not even comparable to some of those cross- country stories we’d heard, but today it was euphoric. There, on that small beach, it hit me that we had accomplished everything we had set out for.

And maybe we would have to return to jobs and bedroom walls, even if we were able to minimize them and spend that time cooking meals from the wild harvests within our city or spraypainting the windows of a few particularly lame businesses. Until the day comes that we can watch capitalism fall, and live in reciprocity with the uncivilized elements rather than at war with them, these trips to reaffirm our own vulnerability, to walk amongst the systems that are larger, more healthy, alive, and far more sustainable than anything civilization has ever had the ability to construct, are the moments I will choose to engage in, the risk I’ll always take.

Artemis and I looked at each other and considered our day for a second.

‘Fuck yeah!’ we thought. ‘We’re going to the

beach!’

I see my breath, waves of steam in the morning air.

Old County Road winds through the hilltops overlooking the shore, hardly wide enough for a single car. Though most of the traffic stays on the highway, and we have this silent ribbon to ourselves.

The sun flickers upon the eyelids like a strobelight through the dense canopy of leaves. Sand and pine needles line the street and I notice the faint line in the grainy layer of sand left by Artemis’s wheels ahead of me.

Waves crash in line. Birds walk across the shore leaving tiny imprints that wind and water will cover up later.

Moments are endless but time is limited. How could we not spend our lives doing this? How could we accept the boundaries that are given to us, cooperating with the jesters that act as if what we’re given composes the entirety of what is.

For years I’ve had an issue with the concept of ‘rights’. Feeling that for one to possess rights means that there is another in a position to grant or restrict them. That to demand or struggle for rights is to appeal to that outside authority for the luxury.

The days bring rain. Pouring rain. Rain in buckets, that catch you when you’re not expecting it. One moment you’re riding your bike along the shore with pockets full of dumpstered party store toys, the next the sun has snuck behind a cloud and a shadow rushes over you, spilling itself on you before you can make a run for it.

The nights bring 30 degree temperatures. The two of us and all of our gear nestled tightly inside a tent meant for one. We won’t fall asleep to the stars tonight, but to a tight space and a lingering odor of wet nylon. When the rain breaks, we hear the sounds of the highway. That highway that we jumped the fence to escape earlier in the evening – struggling to pass our bikes over the chain link fence before climbing it ourselves, walking across the surface of a closed bridge, one whose asphalt road had buckled into the air or fallen into the water, whose wood-plank pedestrian path had large gaps where the wood, too, had rotted and fallen.

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*Those foxes returned to Esperanza. Illuminated by the firelight in which we made our meals, while the music of old pop standards played on the radio and you knew every word.*

*Have you ever stood on the brink of freefall, the contemplation of the drop something you have to force from your mind? I looked into the fire, paused, consequences by damned. The next moment broken glass lined the street and we ran into the darkness.*

*We lived in excess on the excess. There was fire in everything that we touched. When we awoke on the cliffs above the beach, and danced to bands that sang of revolution, and threw ourselves in abandon to the January ocean.*

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Over the fence signed ‘No Trespassing’, across the bridge falling nearer and nearer to collapse, over the moat left by the recent rains, and beyond the overgrown ruined foundations of a block wall stands a garden. One not plotted into rows or tended to by any gardeners, but an edge of development in recovery. Frail trees shoot into the air, and, below, are saplings and shrubs, growing at their will, breaking apart the asphalt that once lie here.

At our entrance, the squirrels had raced off, across the mulch of downed wet leaves, or leaping onto branches. Now, inside our tent, we hear the dull thump of falling acorns.

Maybe it is that the trees and squirrels don’t want us here. Communicating our intrusive presence through the buckled bridge, the torn asphalt.

I think for a second that we don’t mean to trespass, that we’d prefer their company to that of the strip malls and roads. But the acorns continue to fall.

Through the trees we see the streetlights have come on. As though the cycle of night and day was nothing more than an inconvenient habit to overcome, if the night sky was absent of stars worth contemplating, absent of its own stories. A celestial garden also bound from view, padlocked behind a cacophony of city lights.

For these glances I will always leap the fence. Like the parrots escaped the cage that now fly in flocks over the city sky, or the mink broken free from fur farm pens that continue to live in the wild, I want to believe that people are capable of that too: of reading the stars as a language, the rivers as having wisdom to impart, and seeing the halogen lights and paved streets for the manacles that they are. That somewhere, held in synapse sensation and engram memory, we can remember what it is to be free from cages.

Another acorn drops. And now, again, so does the rain.

Maybe that is why the city has erected those fences across the bridge, and why the garden continues to bend the ground, until there is nothing left of the development. Maybe both know that those who identify with the stars and the saplings cannot simultaneously be the ones harvesting their food in supermarket aisles, that both cannot coexist in peace.

Tonight I lay silent, squeezed tightly into a tent under siege by the distemper of the feral garden, dreaming out loud of the day that we are part of the ecology rather than trespassers within it, quietly cheerful at each fallen bridge.

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I sat on the steps of the Providence City Library. Artemis was inside checking her email. The sun hidden behind the brick and steel of downtown buildings. Chill air. Reading. A woman walks by. I smile.

A few minutes later, the same woman walks out again. Another brief smile.

‘What was the book you were reading so intently earlier?’ she asks in a slow, slightly broken English.

‘Oh, it’s just a book of short stories by Jeanette Winterson.’

She asks about her and I offer what I know. Then she begins to ask about me…

‘Are you a student? A writer? Are you an actor?’

‘No. Uh, kinda. No.’

She begins to talk more, about her own writing. About a writers’ group she had been part of. About wanting to start another one.

‘Where are you from?’ she asks me.

‘The Pacific Northwest,’ I say.

‘Oh. I went to Seattle once…’ she starts off.

With the absence of the walls, you don’t even need to ask; the stories find you.

Away from my own plans, obligations, in an unfamiliar town, one thing that comes easy is to sit and listen. Breathe in the air. The river. The curves of the streets, blinding sun, and sloped sidewalks.

She has a Russian slur. Short and flat-nosed, white hair held out of her face with pins, clutching a bus pass in her hands. Talking. Telling me about her husband, her old job, her son, how she probably talks too much.

She tells me of her favorite short story, what she describes as the most beautiful passage she’s ever read, describing, simply, an apple tree blossoming. She says she’ll send me a part of the book that she’s working on, a novel of a Russian woman in the Thomas Jefferson era.

Her smile reveals brown stained teeth and accentuates the wrinkles around her face. Every part of the conversation leads her to recall another story: a hike across Vermont, a job in the language department of a university, Irish mythology, her own genealogy.

The sun sets, and the streets are busy with those getting their weekend night underway. Meanwhile, we talk about pomegranate trees and violets, and as the days grow cooler, springtime buds from the lips of this small Russian woman.

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Less than a day’s ride from New London, Connecticut, and a ferry to the outer tip of Long Island.

Picture it:

Tired eyes that haven’t seen a full night’s sleep in a while now. Racing down the backroads, up the hills, tracing the contours, deeper into the maze of those deciduous forests.

Thrust by momentum, propelled by excitement and the occasional tailwind. Sore legs that somehow drink from a bottomless well of energy. Wind whistling in our ears, blowing tears from watery eyes. Faster. Faster.

Through meadows and lakes, through the rustic colors of New England. Crisp air and chilled gloved knuckles gripping tightly to handlebars. Rushing, singing, absorbing. Those colors in the periphery. The season changes, pacing autumn on bicycles. We have all the time in the world.

Near the mouth of the Thames River, past the old industrial downtown and the estate-looking homes nestled between the even-more-grand spruce trees, we came upon Ocean Park, an amusement park and shorefront pier stretching to either side of the ebbing cove. This time of year only a single table on the large café deck is occupied, and the sand holds only a couple families clad in sweatshirts and long pants. The length of the boardwalk has only a few walkers and joggers. Over the water one can see the town of Groton on the other side of the river, and Orient Point at the tip of New York’s Long Island peninsula.

Pushing bikes along the boardwalk, past the silent waterslides that hover above the outdoor swimming pool whose turquoise waters have been overtaken by the gulls and from whose gutters grass grows. Past the boardwalk’s edge is a trail in the sand, one that leads to a grassy bluff beside a stream. It was here that we laid down our bikes and unpacked our sleeping bags.

At our feet a stream that rippled through the wetland marsh and wove its way to the nearby sea. This evening, dinner was on everyone’s mind - the fishermen who sat at the end of the rock jetty casting their lines to the sea, the larger fish in the stream who chased the schools of smaller fish, sending them shooting away in escape, shots of mercury exploding through the water’s surface, the feral cats who slyly tiptoed to the edge of the stream, sitting in wait for those fish to swim a little too close to shore.

The late afternoon sun melted the sky, the horizon a palette of electric pinks, fiery oranges. Liquid below reflecting heavens above. Mercury bullets still shooting out of the whispered notes of the restless water. Tall grasses rustling in the sands around us. And the whistles of the distant ferries bound for harbor islands are met by the cries of gulls and the din of ducks migrating over land’s end in v-formation. And finally, all has faded to a soft gray, the cradle of night.

In the darkness the senses run wild as boars, and the subtle details are alit. The air’s sighing moisture, the softness of sand beneath your step. Imagination feasts on the world absent of hard angles and straight lines. The shore a seduction of varying colors that verge into dreams.

I look out of my sleeping bag and the sand has become blue, colored by a moonglow so bright that its light penetrates my bivy sack.

Our bikes cast shadow imprints on the uneven sand, as if viewed through water. I resist sleep and for a few moments look at the night sky dotted with stars, with the light of eons.

In this odd state of half-sleep, I wonder when the stars fell from sight. When people began to see predominantly in such narrow terms. Where ‘vacant’ is the description affixed to any place devoid of man-made constructs, and ‘empty’ used to describe landscapes mostly inhospitable to human habitation but whose rhythms are of the most dramatic imaginable. The past literally builds upon itself, layer over layer. But we tend to see only the most recent past and imagine that it is the story of forever.

I seek perspective in the blind spots, definition in the history-narratives not yet succumbed to the melting pot wave of cultural inertia. Resistant to ideas of adulthood where it seems so clear that it is adults who glance at the sky and see merely stars. I dwell on the explorers – who feel most comfortable in the unfamiliarity of the world beyond their vision – that look to the sky and see a compass, indigenous people who see a history of the world, children who see wishing objects, runaway slaves who see a map to free spaces, and singers make these stars the subjects of songs that impart longing, nostalgia.

Friends of mine from the middle states often say that leaving the stars was the hardest thing about moving to coastal cities.

Occasionally I have moments where I don’t take it all for granted. I think of how impossible-seeming it all is. And I walk flashlight-off through forest trails, stopping in the dark, looking at the wedge of the sky visible through treetops, and the stars say to me that only the impossible is worth the effort.

Here, beneath the heavens, near the continent’s edge, is the lighthouse, built when economy surpassed celestial navigation, and time signatures were needed to compensate for the expanded world. Built upon a stone island, each solid wall of its three stories facing a true compass point. Tonight it remains dim.

Ocean vessels are guided by GPS now. And the lighthouse remains a relic of a time before physical location was seen as a set of coordinates pinpointed by satellites, or when one could step through a doorway and, hours later, re-emerge through that same doorway continents away.

That relic rusts now, patiently ebbed away into the uppermost layer of the past. An ebbing away of memory of a time when faith was not placed entirely upon personal pocket-sized industrial technology. Will be absorbed by the sea that holds sunken ships and mountains past, who has come to possess the geography of glacial ages and the footsteps of those who stood at its edge only a few hours ago. The tide will take both away, out to the sea that carries the secrets of the past, as well as the reflection of the night’s starry skies.

Tomorrow we will take the ferry to Orient Point. Beginning our ride across Long Island, to JFK Airport where Artemis will board a flight back to Oregon, and I will meet a friend in New York City.

But tonight…

I close my eyes and the stars don’t disappear. They become more intense.

Every Point

A Vanishing Point

We split into groups of two or three. First we’d need to climb a chain link fence, then walk past the guard shack where the night watchman sits listening to his radio.

When we’ve regrouped beneath the first large billboard faced to catch the traffic on the West Side Highway, and see that everyone has made it, we pull out beers, take a look over the Hudson River, and continue up the overgrown track bed of the abandoned Chelsea Highline, a set of elevated tracks that cut right through the heart of the Chelsea neighborhood. Every so often we encounter a hastily-built brick wall, put up by the city to prevent people like us from continuing up the tracks, as, on a previous visit, The Captain and I learned that many of the buildings adjacent to the disused railroad loading docks could be accessed from the tracks. Though each of the walls now had holes knocked into them or spaces dug beneath, and after pausing to help each other through, our group, who included The Captain, Zelda, and several others, continued through the elevated tracks through the west side’s hidden heart.

After a while, Zelda and I splinter off from the group, who has taken to lounging on a lit ledge overlooking the Union City skyline across the water. We climb the rickety ladders and tread across questionably stable catwalks above the docks. The tracks do not skirt buildings, but pass through the very middle of them, creating tunnels that stand three stories above the ground with loading docks on either side. We pause in an open area nestled amidst docks and solid brick walls of the neighboring buildings, bathed in the hushed glow of the city’s ambient night lights. I tell Zelda of my plans to leave after Halloween. She tells me if I stay one more day, she will take the day off from work.

Our bodies meet each other in the cool recesses of the tracks.

Hands on hips.

The metal of this industrial detritus creates a low groan in the night air.

Kisses in the crease of neck.

Overgrown grasses shake in the gusts of breeze, scent the air. I take my eyes off of her, the lights and silhouettes of surrounding towers streak the sky. An island of dark, lifted above city streets, joining one building to another.

Lie down. Cold knees. Fingernails run down back.

Forgotten Manhattan. Abandoned Manhattan. To the gamblers go the dynamic colors, the euphoric triumphs.

Light catches in the band of her silver hoop earring. Let my breath warm you.

In danger there is present something, desire the same as wildness. The skipped heartbeats…

Faster now.

…the choked breath and nerves on end, the quickened pulse, acute vision…

Take my hand.

…taste of blood, that this is what we can feel; these sensations, this moonlight…

Take it.

…This is what is potential. The reaches that leave the city hollow, empty. That reinforce that the world is ours.

Now kiss me.

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We walk back along steel rails that shine beneath grasses that scratch at clothing. The others have begun walking back to the ground level. We’ll catch up. But first we stop at the edge of a building, alone, before this stolen view, before this hollow city.

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Halloween day. The Captain meets me at Bowery Manor and we join others in scavenging the rooms full of old theatre clothes for a costume. We then set out for food and a bike ride through Riverside Park to the Cloisters.

We stopped to look over the Hudson, at the site of what was once Palisades Amusement Park.

I wondered how much longer it could all last – living within the cracks, the overlooked corners. Thinking aloud about the relentlessness of the developers, the chain stores. Of how when one manages to create the space that one desires, there still remains the fear that another will fight to take it away – to build condos on it, to open another Duane Reade or Gristedes in the space where there was previously an independent business, to brick up a vacant building that others had turned into a home. Often the tables are slanted in their favor to begin with. Was it possible to continue living fulfillingly in a way contrary to seemingly every present convention? Within a landscape that wants you to shut up and buy, that would take the magnificent days and paint them into shades of gray?

Palisades Park was deemed more valuable if the land was sold to developers. The city re-zoned the land for residential highrise towers, and the Ferris wheel and lights that crowned the New Jersey palisades were dismantled and removed. In their place was built three unextraordinary residential towers.

I imagined the cliffs with their Ferris wheel lights and roller coaster screams, a scene that sparked romances and songs, shimmering across the mantle of skyline that composed the horizon for this empire city.

I looked at The Captain, who was looking at the ground. They can tear down the amusement parks, I thought. They could brick up our vacant buildings, fire tear gas into our impromptu street parties, post uniformed police officers near the exit of every corporate retail store in town. We’ll make our own amusements, find another way into the buildings. If the corporations want to manipulate and exploit the communities and landbases that we’re a part of, we’ll live at the expense of those corporations. And if they seal some of the cracks, we’ll find others.

The demolition of the amusement parks don’t destroy imagination, but only one commercial outlet of it. And the corporations, no matter their ad campaigns and greenwashing, are destructive by their very nature. Despite some people’s good intentions and ideas, no city is sustainable. All of this will crumble one day.

Maybe living as scavengers can last, I thought. Knowing that not everyone can do this, but if we can, then we have a responsibility to strike at capitalism’s vulnerabilities. And all of our wits and creativities not dulled by numbing work weeks and banal distractions exist for the sake of us living out our wildest dreams, of us putting a stop to those entities that hurt those that we identify with.

The Captain and I left the Cloisters and raced down Broadway, passing stopped cars, weaving between busses and taxis and sidewalks, navigating our bikes through the night-time day-bright lights of Times Square, keeping hold of the crown of leaves that was part of my costume.

We rode to a party in Brooklyn. Inside the house, bands played. The back patio became a swirl of dancing. Bottles piled up on the ground. People were squeezed tightly throughout the too-small space, bleeding out into the late night streets.

The last band unscrewed the metal panel and plugged their keyboard and amp into the streetlight outside. Everyone flooded out, the dance-y discordance echoing off of stoic walls, indecipherable vocals screamed to the skies above, and the street was awash in the most ecstatic dancing of the night.

When the cops pulled up with their sirens on, their hesitancy was all it took. The band launched into the next song and people moved into the street to dance in the beams of the car’s headlights, writhing across the hood as the lone cop inside waited for backup to arrive.

One final burst of noise. Beer bottles flying across the roof of the car, and then the band unplugged just as another two police cars pulled up. Now the officers got out of the car and charged toward the house. But by then, kids were scattering, racing away on bikes, staggering with arms around each other down empty streets, walking away in various states of costume and undress, laughing loudly into the vigil sky.

It’s my last night in New York. After pushing the day later and later, I realize that I need to leave before winter’s storms throw inclement tantrums over the whole of the east coast.

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*But time is capable of playing tricks too.*

*We had fantasized about living in an abandoned casino. There, on the shore, with the banner ripped from the Stone Pony, we moved into the upstairs room – you in silhouette, heels, formed pants, teased hair, lips, straddling the handrail before the sepia tone of boardwalk light. The burnt out lights say CASINO.*

*The warmest day becomes the coldest night.*

*We made our home in the river. The flood tides pushed beneath us while autumn burnt all of the trees along the embankment. But rootlessness on a river does not leave one still.*

*And stories that will never be told.*

*Impact left breathlessness in its wake and everything upturned when it settled again. It took a crash to brake the momentum. On a new day, tearfully, we each left Esperanza.*

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Zelda and I walk from the N train to Coney Island. It’s raining, November now, and the boardwalk is completely deserted given the circumstances. We walk out to the end of a wooden pier. The pier stands silently above the Atlantic Ocean. The flow westward, the ripples making it seem we are standing above the flowing layer of clouds. I step away from her and walk to the pier’s end, and when I turn around I see only her silhouette, black with a halo of orange, by the light behind her. Her curls stand in the air, and her black skirt flows from her hips. In the light I can see the mist blowing through the air, the projects stand in the background.

She lifts the glass to her lips, her shadow moving in gentle motions and all light plays on the crystal of the glass. I hear nothing except for the waves against the shore. Coney Island stands in darkness. Brooklyn stands in silence. Only the air and the water move. She is close, but not close enough for me to make out her features.

Maps. State maps. Bike maps. Subway maps. The maps brought us this far. Paper representations of scale. Two dimensions representing three. But geography is fluid, and ink is not. I look out at the maps. I have a destination and do not want to get lost. But here, on this pier, perched above the vertigo of the Atlantic, the maps won’t reach. The water flows, the heartbeat quivers. One cannot map the cities of the interior.

You set the glass down on the pier’s rail. The rail lit in a line of orange light, the moisture glows. You walk over to me. The coordinates shift. The pier and beach are empty, the time is anyone’s guess. But who wants to guess.

Four weeks ago, I wanted you but you didn’t know it. Three weeks and we were kissing on the roof. The coordinates shift.

You keep walking and now I can see traces of your features. My sunglasses on your head that you won in a bet. Moisture clings to the lenses. The outline of your nose. That devilish grin.

In Atlantic City, everything changed. In the dark of our bedroom, everything changed again.

Fluid coordinates.

Fluid geographies.

Over time your kisses grow softer, yet more intense. You showed me the New York that you love.

Again the coordinates shift.

You were drawn to the madness, the electric. Nothing in my sight shone more intensely than you.

The maps can only capture so much. On that pier you stood on top of the railing, wind blowing fog across me, across your outstretched arms. I could do nothing but watch. This wasn’t like the literary conflict where you hope for a climax. I wanted you to climb down, but I understood I could say nothing. And I watched you in awe. You only flung your head back and laughed. Then you sat on the rail, facing me, inviting me into your arms, kissing me, then pulling away and smiling, looking into my eyes. With my arms around you, you told me to hold on, then quickly flung all your weight backwards, your body leaning as far back as it could stretch and me shoving all my weight on your legs to keep you from falling. You lost your balance, and with my arms I could feel you struggle. A couple seconds, a couple minutes. The ocean flowed beneath, flowed for centuries. The ocean is no indication of time. Finally your arms grabbed my shirt and you pulled yourself up to me. You looked into my eyes and laughed. Then you kissed me.

I know you can’t trust the maps. They’ve left me lost and directionless. But for some reason I followed you. I knew what direction you would lead me. Away from the city. Away from civilization, its clock and grids. But I never knew how far. I couldn’t have guessed I’d follow you to the fringes. Where geography meets the sea. And then further. Naked, into the Atlantic.

I became helpless. The way I felt when you stood on the rail. Two options: leap to the ocean or climb back to safety. This was the first time I had ever witnessed you choosing the latter.

I couldn’t track my own coordinates. I couldn’t even guess at them anymore. I felt like the ocean, the tugging and pushing of so many directions, though this tumultuousness was still bound to the tide.

We left the pier. I told you I wanted to walk on the beach. And we stepped into the sand and walked toward the water. Toward a rock jetty, like the one in Atlantic City that we had walked to the end of and got soaked by a crashing wave. We stepped out onto this one, but only to a point where the waves were small, and you turned and held me. In an unspoken somberness our words didn’t have their typical recklessness. At the ocean’s level the sound of the waves buried all other noise, and your silent face and gestures moved to the soundtrack of the surf. When I held you all I could see were the waves crashing upon the rocks on which we stood. When we kissed all I felt was the warmth of your lips in the chill moist air. Your hair was matted with the rain and your gloved hands tracked wetness down my back. We were still, and the ocean, the air, the sand moved around us.

You pointed out the size of the Ferris wheel. How it dwarfed everything around it. And it did.

Only the land was stationary. At our feet the ocean pulsed. The collision of sea and rocks sent white water splashing into the air. As each wave passed, the level of the water gained and dropped. My back to the land, my eyes on yours. Everything was fluid. Everything in my view pulsed.

There were no other people in sight. The amusement park silent, the beach empty. The weather discouraging, but not to us. The air wet, the ocean wild. And I reel from the last month’s intensity.

And then we left the jetty. Spinning circles in the sand. Trying to force movement into our legs but only wanting to hold each other. Even with a solid surface beneath my feet I still felt dizzy. There was no light on the sand, but when she spoke I could sense the expressions on her face. I knew them well now. She pointed to the Ferris wheel again. Saying how she wished we could have ridden it.

‘Next time,’ I said. Unsure if there would ever be a next time.

And we walked toward the amusement park, leaving the beach at our backs. Beneath the Ferris wheel, the air still cold, the ground still in puddles. Stepping up to the platform and the waiting N train. And then sailing, noisily, back toward Manhattan.

Morning. I put the last of my things into my panniers. Zelda left, then came back into the room with a breakfast of spiced beans and toast, handing a plate to me and turning on the radio to the oldies station.

Words failed me. All I thought of was leaving. Not so much leaving New York, but leaving her. Leaving the disorder of her that I had grown accustomed to.

We climbed to the roof, and spoke of insignificant things. The city was a different entity during the day. The night’s towers of lights, its blue and gold neon, were in the daylight simple cold brick facades and peeling storefront signs. The crown sat empty at the far end of the roof, unoccupied since I had moved my things into one of the downstairs rooms with Zelda. Earth movers continued clearing and shaping the large pit directly across Houston Street, sending the noise of engines and reverse warnings echoing into the streets.

I said goodbye, and walked back down the stairs. Part of me, the part connected to that lump in my throat, that pit in my stomach, wanted to stay in the city. The feelings lingered. Saying goodbye to Valencia and Ox, and then pushing my bags through the hole in the wall. When the downtown highrises and street commotion flew by me, all I thought of was her. The Staten Island boardwalk, the bridge into New Jersey, that longed-for feeling of gliding through new unfamiliar streets, but all I thought of was her.

Swimming

The ferry terminal in Cape May, the southern tip of New Jersey.

I lean my bike against the terminal and walk along the boardwalk to a fence that looks out upon the mouth of the Delaware River. Sun hovers in the sky, water washes upon rocks. I breathe the ocean. Everything on my mind seems so elusive, mercurial, but with those breaths I remember simply how much the sea anchors me. I jump the fence and walk down the rocks to the intertidal zone. The water pulses back and forth, burying and revealing stones. The sun descends slowly.

Transition. The autumn is cold now. Out of the city, the leaves fall once more. Yesterday, one landed in my lap as I rode through the pine barrens of southern New Jersey. The wind blows at my back, and birds circle in the sky above me.

The coordinates have shifted again. Movement alters perspective. I don’t sit and dream of the past. The turn lanes are misleading. There is only forward.

Cape Henlopen, Delaware.

Awake at the first sign of light, I walk my bike to the shore. Hair blows into my face, hands numb with wind chill. It’s beyond the point of just another layer, now it is calling for my winter jacket.

The currents thrust themselves on the shore. There is no break in the roar, water rushes cathartically into land.

She was on my mind all day. I wondered about myself. If I take the casual situations too seriously. If I imagine what is not actually there.

The rain comes, and by afternoon I’m soaked. Riding in an uncomfortable jacket and slightly-less-than-watertight rain pants, my shoes slushed with water. My gear sandy and drenched. I don’t keep track of the miles. My mind alternates between misery and the desire to just pay for a ticket to Florida.

Before sundown I found an abandoned home, completely stripped to its core, behind a layer of trees. At a gap in traffic I rode down the overgrown driveway and lifted my bike through an open window. I swept broken glass out of the way, hung my wet clothes on several rusted nails, and lay my sleeping bag down on the cement floor, falling asleep to the sound of raindrops on the slanted aluminum roof.

In the morning I look into a mirror and hardly recognize the image before me. My face is dark from weeks of sun, eyes red from wind. My hair lays down for the first time in years.

Day brought sore legs and skies that verged on rain. A relaxed pace over gentle rolling hills, more falling leaves, large shoulders, abandoned motels to explore, and friendly people along the way. I rode upright, singing Belinda Carlisle songs to the day that grew progressively sunny. My mood led me to pedal faster. The clear day bringing a wave of euphoria over me, as I raced southbound, leaving Delaware for Maryland.

Then came the burst. The shrill sudden pop I’ve come to recognize instantly as a burst tube. I pull into the parking lot of a gas station to fix the tube. The clear day moves toward dusk in soft exhalation.

As I kneel down to look at the wheel, I see the tire’s sidewall has blown out. Patch the tube and attempt a makeshift patch job on the tire. When I fill the tire with air, both tube and tire burst again. I try another repair and use a new tube, which pops again. The sun has gone down, twilight settles over the gas station parking lot and the quiet roads beside it. I’m told there are no bike shops in town, the only suggestion is that I call the Wal-Mart in a neighboring town.

I look at my map and decide to walk my bike a few miles to the road that puts me in a better place to hitch to a town with a bike shop from. And while I’m pushing my bike with an irreparable flat rear tire – the wheel that also supports the extra weight of all of my gear strapped to the rear rack – searching for the road that isn’t quite where the map makes it out to be, growing more tired as the hour grows later, it begins to rain.

I walk my bike down empty streets. Lights inside homes are all dark. The empty church and auto shops I pass give the situation the feeling of utter desolation.

A man passes me on the sidewalk, the encounter seems odd. I say hello and he greets me back, keeping a suspicious degree of eye contact. A couple seconds later he asks if I need a new tube or something.

‘I need an entirely new back tire,’ I respond. He tells me his name’s Cornell. His driver’s license has been revoked and he just needed to make a phone call up the street, so he’s out walking on these empty streets. He tells me he might be able to help me out. It’s late. I follow him. Despite my exhaust, I’m trying to assess what’s going on.

He turns into the darkened driveway of the only house on this side of the street. He’s explaining that he just works in his yard as an auto mechanic.

‘A mechanic with no license?’ I laugh.

He doesn’t.

He walks to the furthest corner in the back of the driveway, motioning for me to follow him. Suddenly the unkempt yards and trash-strewn lots conspire to tell me something. I lag cautiously behind, my hand on the knife in my pocket, wondering how legitimate this situation is.

Then Cornell emerges from the back with an old 12-speed bicycle. He says he doesn’t know bikes that well, but I’d be welcome to use any parts from this one, and he stands back, offering his help in any way he can.

He tells me that he lives with his wife and kids inside the house, three girls. He tells me their names. Then explains that there’s nothing to do in this town.

Too often fear can lead to ghettoes perceived as security.

I exchange my tube and tire with those on his bike. He watches attentively, jokes around about having these old bikes but never riding them. When I finish, he asks only if I have a couple cigarettes. I hand him a few dollars and thank him repeatedly. Then I ride away, once again, a little more optimistic of people’s tendencies toward generosity.

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The moments pass, leaving me even more confused.

I consider the shattered reflection that has engulfed me. The way that what we thought we knew of ourselves crumbles in the midst of such a rush of feeling. A rush that comes like a storm, and then goes, and we are left to pick up the pieces.

I verbally remind myself how alien, impersonal New York City is. How the police raids, the rumor that Coney Island was bought out and has only a couple seasons remaining, the post 9/11 security shutting down the places we had gone in the past to explore, all made it feel as if our hole-in-the-concrete way of existence was in its endgame. In fact, even in its recent boom periods, the island of Manhattan felt as if it was gradually sinking – the compartmentalized lives that were continuing to go up in cost, the influx of hipsters occupying Brooklyn and all this new hype about Williamsburg pushing my friends progressively further and further out on the train lines, and the more time I spent in the city, the less convinced I was that life within its bubble wasn’t just completely disconnected from the rest of the world. It was as if the skyscrapers were tilting, and uprooting any graspable semblance of living in tune to any type of natural rhythm. The artifice was suffocating. And I felt that when all I wanted was to topple the columns carrying such illusions, of this fantasy of being able to carry on this mental and ecological unsustainability, there were bulldozers and cranes gunning their engines constantly, ready to reinforce the columns. There were the police, the uniformed doormen, the razor wire fences, this idea hanging in the air like a noxious gas that this is where the elite meet, dine, ink deals, speculate on property in ‘up-and-coming’ neighborhoods, all of them erecting more columns, reinforcing this world that carries on disconnected and separate from the ground beneath it. A city in the sky, tunneling underground. But its landmass is literally garbage. The rivers that touch it nearly lifeless. And all of those people, technicians and complacent bystanders in this alien world, continue to walk across this island of pavement, indifferent, speaking on cell phones to ghosts not present.

Or maybe I was just rationalizing my leaving; painting a disgusting image of the city in my mind to more easily accept that I left friends, the risk of actualizing life outside of a rental agreement, a relationship that had just scratched its surface, and was, instead, on a bike bound for Florida, or some abstract future destination.

I wasn’t sure what I wanted anymore. All I knew was that things seemed as if they were taking place beneath the surface of water – where you reach for an object only to realize that perspective has been thrown off, and that object you seek to grab eludes you.

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I stood at the apex of the bridge, looking down at the water, at the rippling blue mass that could remain both calm and perpetually in movement. Again, I was leaving solid land, for an island on Maryland’s eastern shore. I had wanted to ride here, this enigmatic landscape, since leaving Vermont. And so it was that I came to this island, to the brisk winds that blew the autumn chill wildly over the land and left the sandy dunes and grass-filled salt-water ponds nearly empty of anyone else.

I bit at my chapped lips. Having left my bike somewhere back at the single dead-end road that entered onto the island, I walked against the wind. My chest felt like an hourglass shaken, sands disturbed from sequence and then left still.

Moments can change lifetimes.

A sign tells of the shipwrecks buried beneath the island. Most are several centuries old. And despite the knowledge that these wrecks are there, somewhere below the surface, many can’t be located. It is only when a particularly violent storm hits that they are uncovered, and then, often, only temporarily, until the sea and wind bury them once again.

This land is not still.

One night, while sharing a bottle of wine at the edge of a vast and temperamental river, my friend spoke of her risks: ‘Maybe I’ll realize it was all wrong, but what if I don’t try it, and I never find out either way…’

I walk down to the water. The Atlantic an amazing sea of turquoise, the sand dunes that slope up from where the waves roll in white crests onto the shore, from where I stand, an immaculate beige, the surface of sand sculpted flawlessly in the onshore wind.

In a moment the wind shifts, becomes soothing. The colors of the sea appear magnificent, encapsulating, crashing like a dare under sunlight that melts the late afternoon sky. Subtleties that went unnoticed before appear vivid now.

Time doesn’t change, only its substance.

As I turn back toward the top of the dunes, I look across the shrubs that stretch out before me. That’s when I see it. A streak of auburn that catches the waning sunlight, then disappears. I stand still, waiting for another glimpse, but see nothing. I climb the dune, stepping through sand and shrubs in the direction that I saw the streak of color. I get closer, climbing a small sandy hill, standing in a grove of young conifer trees. That’s when I see the horse.

I’ve courted disaster. I’ve chased storm and heartbreak. I’ve run until my tires have worn through, until the trains have sidelined.

The horse stays still, looking. Not at me, but at something else closer to it. Auburn and white, its attention remains fixed on this invisible nearby object.

I’ve run until mudslides have blocked the roads, until snowfall has buried them. I’ve run up mountains, swam out to sea. Running until the sun rose over us in the sand in front of the Atlantic Ocean.

Their origins here are vague. One theory is that a Spanish galleon wrecked off of this coast, and that these horses have descended from those who fled their captors, swimming to the shore, living a feral existence from that time.

And then I see what the horse is looking at. Through the branches steps out another horse. This one solid brown with a dirty blonde mane. Eating from the grass on the ground. Then I look closer and see another horse behind a shrub, out of view unless you focus on its subtle contrast. Soon a fourth walks into view. And finally, through another gap in the shrubs, I see a fifth. I sit down. I fill my lungs with air, and for the lifetime I have no desire to be anywhere else.

Then I realize, when the city is built beyond all logical bounds, from empire to ashes, it is the scavengers who most prosper, who retain the knowledge of how to live through excess as well as its disappearance.

With whom do we identify? I ask myself. Because for all of my doubts and faults and questions, if I could create my own world, act out my life with my own agency and authority, what would that world look like?

Beyond the road’s end, I continue walking. Shadows stretching longer. The sea washes up in pools of emerald, and when it flows back out it leaves the sand beneath a fragile sheet of coral. The cacophony of waves overtake my thoughts. I bend down and put my hands into the next wave that washes up.

Because when it comes down to it, what else do you have? If I am here now, what reason would I possibly have not to fight tooth and nail for what I want this life to be?

I kept walking. Miles. Moments. Lifetimes. Until I found a spot in the dunes. No signs of civilization. Only the sound of the ocean in the near distance, and the grasses and trees that whistle and dance in the wind. The sun has fallen out of view. To the west, the relaxed hues of pink and orange stretch out across the horizon. To the east, the full moon sits, appearing to be in reach if one were to stand atop the sand dune just beneath it. The air is cold. I pull my sleeping bag around me.

‘Maybe I’ll realize it was all wrong, but what if I don’t try it, and I never find out either way…’

Breathing in the end of day, I looked at the sky. Always what it returns to. Me and the sky.

I want a healthy community, I want relationships built upon sustainability.

First one shooting star crossed the heavens.

And I want an end to all those forces that threaten and harm those that I love.

And then another.

Why did I leave? I wonder. Is it worth giving up the presence of those whose company, creativity, energy you enjoy for plans that were made previously? To live like stone in a fluid world?

Shooting through the sky – like spectacular crashing planes. Heavens tumbling out of balance.

Out of balance.

I made a wish.

The city is a disguise, a veil that humans possess the unpossessible, a collective construct of selective beliefs, that humans have control. I don’t believe this. I feel that we only have agency and risk, and everything else is left to the complex web of ecologies and uncertainties. But in a cyclical time, every moment can be the ending point, the breaking point, the starting point. Each morning we awoke, left free to our devices to make a feast of the new day. If risk is all that we possess, then I would embrace it. What would that world look like? There is no other way. In the morning, I would turn around.

If granted one desire, I wished to spin silk back into silkworms, the wheat fields back into prairies, the gold and copper back into mountain ranges, and to see the cities once again become the floodplains and deserts and forests they once were.

Like a love affair. Like a drug.

And my second wish… to always remain vulnerable.

*And this is how it all began…*

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*All the dances and tears*

*Wither on the vine like twilight*

*Before falling to the ground*

*Brittle hearts like fruit*

*Whose time has come*

*To no longer witness the sunsets or the floodtides*

*But to become a part of it all over again*

*A part of it*

*For the dusk wind to blow away*

*Stay forever wild.*

First I’m Gonna Make It…

-postscript-

[but first, a warning:

Once a story is set in ink, it becomes unalterable.

In life, however, there are no conclusions.

In this book, I have written my memories as best I could, though, respectfully, I have tried to acknowledge that stories are shaped by the invisible events that occur outside of the narration, and not define these memories to the point of stone facsimiles.

I fear that, culturally, the urge to know has grown stronger than the desire to imagine, or quite simply, to feel. That in this modern existence, we are surrounded by information, but none of it is leading to a less domesticated way of life.

Only physical interaction with the world around us can do that.

What lies in the following pages only remains consistent with the linearity myth that plagues our cultural perspective of the world.

Here is as good a place as any to tear out the final pages. To replace the ink narrative with your own.

The choice to break the seal is up to you.]…Then I’m Gonna Break It…

We took the train into the city from her house in Brooklyn. On Houston Street, I helped her over the fence, and then up through that second-floor window.

A year had passed. It had all changed. Plaster fell from the walls and ceiling of Bowery Manor. Everything was covered in the dust of neglect. We climbed the stairs to the roof only to find the rooftop doorway completely bricked up. Our entranceway on the bottom floor had also been sealed, the cut chains of our old door lying amidst the other moldy piles on the ground.

It makes me uncomfortable, this building that I’ve come to associate with that devil-may-care season. With her. This building that once stood alive and intense now a relic exuding the still breath of lifelessness.

Out on the grid of streets, the city was in the process of spending millions of dollars to turn the old Chelsea Highline into a park. Around the corner, CBGB’s had lost their fight to stay open and was now an art gallery.

Our old bedroom showed signs of use, by who we didn’t know. But our old empty bottles and scavenged photographs, a little more dusty, remained on the shelves. The old cassette with the Harry Nilsson songs was still there, as well as the pieces of the checkers set we had won at the Coney Island arcade.

Early the next morning, I climbed out of bed. Walking through the main room, past the piano, the couches, the paintings, I climbed the loft, leapt across the gap and sat on the ledge of the large open space where the window used to be. A monstrous building, all glass and polished metal façade, now stretched across the horizon right across Houston, where that large pit had been the year before. And on the ground level of that building, stretching the length of the block, was a Whole Foods.

She came over and sat on the ledge next to me, kissed me. It was then that she told me that the day I had left, she had sat upon that same window ledge, watching me ride my bike down Bowery, away.

We left Bowery Manor, climbing back out of that second-floor window, jumping back over the fence. It was early, the brisk chill of an autumn day. In a few days she and I would be leaving New York to hitchhike to New Orleans. But this morning we walked back down familiar streets, toward Avenue A, and a glass of wine.

…Til It Falls Apart

The next time I would see Bowery Manor would be in a postcard The Captain sent me of a picture he had taken. In the picture, a bulldozer sits in a dirt lot, that back lot through which we had peeled back the fence and snuck through in order to get to our entrance. The brick façade of the building’s rear stood in an incomplete state of demolition.

I rode my bike with that picture to the cement ruins at the river’s edge of the town that I was living in then. Climbing and sitting atop those ruins, I wondered of the ghosts of Bowery Manor. Of where the ghosts go when all that is familiar to them has been taken apart.

Recently I walked back by Bowery and Houston. Only the community garden, the neighboring apartment building and Mars Bar remain of the days when Bowery Manor stood in dominant sentry over the block. When I walked past, it was a new high-end condominium building and wine bar that stood where the old building once did. The ghosts, I thought, I could only hope that they were now sipping and spilling fancy bottles of wine after hours each night and jumping on 1500 thread count Egyptian cotton linens in the penthouse apartments overlooking the heart of the lower east side.

I took a breath, then continued across Houston Street, and into the Whole Foods, where I picked up a snack for the afternoon, and then, ignoring lines and registers, walked back outside.