SAFETY MEASURES

LAURA MADELINE WISEMAN

A solo cross-country bike adventure.

Laura Madeline Wiseman's *Safety Measures* poignantly recounts her experiences making the daunting 4,300-mile journey from Washington to Maine – alone. She writes almost lyrically about her inner thoughts and concerns as she encounters the inevitable obstacles of taking such an epic journey as a woman alone on the often dangerous and unforgiving road. Filled with a mix of fascinating minutiae of each day and the delectably written details of the day, Wiseman conquers her adventure through the unpredictable terrain, the limits of her bike, and the strangers met along the way. The prevailing undertone throughout her book shows that safety concerns remain a constant companion for all women venturing out; they by no means define the possibilities.

- Katie Krcmarik

Safety Measures by Laura Madeline Wiseman documents the wanderlust of a woman and her bicycle. Moments of tangible fear, joy and exhaustion inch you closer to understanding both the ride and the desire to ride. An empowering book of perseverance, reflection and occasional calamity, *Safety Measures* will leave you wondering what you are capable of...and knowing the answer is “anything.”

- Kaci Richter

Laura Madeline Wiseman's *Safety Measures* documents something that is dear, sacred, a safe place, a compass. Not many know what they want to do with their studies, but Wiseman knew she wanted to explore cycling and take that intimate leap to name experience. Part of the lure of cycling is self-reliance. You could be vulnerable – theft, violence. There are dangers – cities, traffic, navigating. You must gain awareness – road, weather, climate, people around you. Yet, you do it to come out of the trip with the rewards. You get intimate with your bike. You feel it in your legs. Speed, endurance, and resistance – you feel the road. Everything comes out to greet you – solitude, adventure, new friends, the road, the bike, and yourself.

- Luis Peon-Casanova

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Safety Measures

Laura Madeline Wiseman

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Safety Measures

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for Adam

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Introduction

Safety Measures is a lyric collection of creative nonfiction and prose poetry. This creative response documents my solo cross-country 4,300-mile, 59-day bicycle ride from Anacortes, Washington, to Bar Harbor, Maine.

I began long-distance cycling after earning a Ph.D. in English. I first rode my bicycle cross-country in 2017, from Astoria, Oregon, to Yorktown, Virginia, in 60 days, pedaling 4,200 miles with a support driver, my husband. After we returned, I wondered if I was brave enough to bicycle cross-country alone.

I researched self-supported touring, logistics, and safety. I trained. I planned a route to begin and end in Minnesota because my family's summer vacation was held at Leach Lake as a kid. Biking, fishing, beachcombing, and other lake events with my dad had instilled an adventurous spirit. I hoped to reconnect with the fierce energy of the young gal I once was.

After the first day of support to make sure my bicycle, Lexa, worked, I rode alone for three weeks heading east. As planned, once there, my husband arrived to drive support. At Bar Harbor, we drove west, with a few bonus miles of bicycling along the way. Out west, my bicycle, Lexa, was lost, but someone found her, and she was repaired. Then I got going again towards Minnesota. Ultimately, the 59-day bicycle journey included nine days of bonus miles. For 78% or 39-days, I biked it alone with Lexa.

The journey let me reflect on what it means to be a woman, self-supported, and safe. I felt scared, intimidated, and bullied. Harassment, threat, and being followed left me shaken. To be fair, nothing really happened. Sheriffs swept the road everywhere, making everyone behave. Semi-drivers scooted over, good stewards of littler riders like bicycles. Fellow bikers exchanged advice on the road ahead. I thanked, waved, or called, *Safe travels*, to such companionable travelers, grateful for their presence.

I kept a journal during the ride, upon which this book is based. I held to writing assignments, challenges, and intentions. I collected data with a fitness tracker watch and cyclometer. Sports technology malfunction caused some rides to be recreated online. I logged this data, as well as other data points, in a spreadsheet and online. The data in this collection is based upon this record keeping.

After the ride, I worked on the text to make sense of such a trip. I also sought to study the bicycle culture of solo adventures by ultra-endurance women athletes. A lifetime learner and a lover of education, I went back to school. I earned a graduate certificate in social media and public relations, studying the stories, strategic messaging, and communication of fitness, sports, and leisure organizations, athletes, and communities. Still curious, I applied and was accepted into a master's degree program in journalism with an integrated media communication focus.

In one graduate class, I proposed an extra credit project about my self-supported journey. This led to proposing a professional project, assembling a committee, and enrolling in credits to work on the book under an advisor's guidance. I practiced storytelling, a writer's craft, creative nonfiction, and prose poetry for those credit hours. My teachers were books, smart professors, and research. Also, for the degree, I enrolled in graduate classes in public relations, advertising, media ethics, and journalism. I took extra courses in fitness, studying self-defense, krav maga, and karate. I hoped such coursework would help me explore research studies on long-distance cycling, gender, and safety. This research became the facts and findings of this book.

Then the Spring 2020 semester began. The pandemic ended the self-defense class, though all else continued online. COVID-19 meant my karate classmates and I missed the opportunity to test for a yellow belt, the typical culmination of a full-semester class. The shut-down, lockdown, and restrictions of cities worldwide canceled seemingly everything bicycle-related, but I ordered an indoor trainer to keep bicycling. And because Nebraska remained open, I pedaled my own adventures locally. Yes, the pandemic made everything hard, but graduate school and this book were my ballast. Towards the end of the Fall 2020 semester, I presented this work to my committee and others in the college. The professional project passed. Earning a second master's degree, I graduated with the December 2020 class.

To make a book means making a story, structure, and order of experience. This book is creative – creative nonfiction, prose poetry, a story. It is from my memories, and if I misinterpreted an intention or a situation, I am sorry. My intent was human, kind, and compassionate storytelling. The book's structure follows four focuses and is written in the genres of travelogue, day journal, and travel narrative. Column one focuses on the day's ride – logistics, route, adventures. Column two discusses the after the ride – recovery, reflection, reconnection. Column three meditates on safety – gender violence, self-defense, the body, protection strategies. Column four offers ride data – route,

miles, elevation gain, bicycle trails – and gratitude practices. Research studies and popular books recommend gratitude to cultivate happiness. For example, in *The Happiness Advantage*, Shawn Achor discusses one called High-Low-Funny. Together, such practices supported my cross-country journey. In the book, it is the naming of them – fixes, fuels, first aid, shelter, facts, findings – that enables a balanced sense of the graciousness of this world that lets a woman bike through it and survive, and the adventure of such an opportunity. The book concludes with a mileage route log, an ultralight-bikepacking list, and the endnotes for the research conducted during my graduate studies on bicycling safety.

Laura Madeline Wiseman, Ph.D.

Lincoln, Nebraska

May 2021

Day Journal

Day 1: May 7

If last year, I biked cross-country with you as support, I wish to dare such a journey self-supported this year.

Tomorrow, my solo journey begins. Today, you drive support. I test the setup on my bicycle, Lexa. This trip will start and finish in Minnesota, like my summers as a girl. Everything started in the land of 10,000 lakes when my dad said, *Laura, it's dangerous out there*, then lifted my old ten-speed from the back of a truck for summer vacation at Leach Lake.

At the fort, mud, and gunk awash trails, but not the roads. You need to do a couple of things for work and leave me to them. I pedal with the trail traffic — walkers, commuters, skateboards, bicycles. The brush trumpets spring colors. Robins dash.

After a gravel section, something snaps off Lexa. I collect the carnage and text, *Bike Casualties: bottle cage, air pump harness*.

You text, *I'll find a bike shop*.

•

Where the day ends is an old river town with a dollar store, a motel under construction, and roads broken and shifted by long, cold winters. I complete the miles and stretch. You dine on the motel restaurant meal: hamburger and fries. Then the domestic tasks. Dinner. Shower. Snack. Journal. Route plan. Pack and repack Lexa. I double-check the release on the pepper spray and hook it inside the pocket of the handlebar bag. I say, *I don't have a bear scare*.

You ask, *A bear scare?* I tell you about the rawhide bracelets we made during summer vacations to keep the bears away. *Did they work?*

I'm still alive.

We relax with a movie as I press the dollar store tennis balls into the knots riding makes of the body. I work them until they split along their seams. In the morning, you will leave, and I will bike the next 1,700 miles alone. Can I bike alone from Minnesota until you meet me again in Maine? Why do I need to do this, and why am I afraid?

• •

Youth Taekwondo Starts

When you broke your first board, you were in high school. The instructor signed the split pieces. You bowed. Then, because the belt test was held on the same day at the same high school as your track meet, you ran to the race's start. 800 meters. Your run time? Best. Ever.

Your coach said, *Don't let it go to your head.*

Later you will find the broken boards and the belts – yellow, orange, green, white. What made you stop kicking and punching? What made you start? Wait. Is the question, not *what*, but *who*?

Once you write the word *bully* on a board, you need to break it. Now, the question is, *How*?

• • •

ROUTE – Minnesota to Wisconsin

via Minneapolis, Stillwater, Afton, Point
Douglas, Prescott
on Minnehaha, Brown's Creek, & State Trails
61 / 61 miles
1,939 elevation

HIGH – First day of the ride

LOW – Bicycle gear casualties

FUNNY – You said, *You're here to ride, so ride.*

FUEL – Avocados, berries, deli meat

FIXES – Water bottle cage, air pump clasp

FIRST AID – Tennis balls

SHELTER – Minnesota trails

FACTS & FINDINGS – The League of
American Bicyclists' 2019 Bicycling Friendly
State Report Cards ranked states as follows:¹

#1 – Washington	#24 – Indiana
#3 – Minnesota	#26 – Iowa
#11 – Pennsylvania	#29 – Wisconsin
#13 – New York	#33 – Idaho
#16 – Illinois	#36 – New Hampshire
#17 – Vermont	#46 – North Dakota
#18 – Ohio	#47 – Montana
#20 – Maine	

• • • •

Day 2: May 8

If on the first cross-country ride, camping was the main overnight accommodations, without you, I wish for the accommodation of motels.

Will a locked door be a safe enough stand-in for you? As you fill the rental with my extra gear. I say, *I can't carry any more on Lexa.*

Take breaks when you need them. You hug me, saying, *If you want me to get stuff for the bear scares, make a list of what you need.* We wave goodbye.

I ring the office bell. The motel clerk emerges. *You're riding a bicycle?* We both study Lexa, more prairie chicken than a road bicycle, in her ultra-light setup. Straightening her bicycle safety triangle, I nod, return the key, and ride.

Spring runoff fills Mississippi floodplains. Melt swills. On the river bluffs, Lexa's tail wags. Vehicular draft jostles us. Thighs burn. Breath catches. We creep along roads. Eagles soar. Lexa waver. I ask her, *Remember the clerk?* He asked, *How far?* When I told him Wabash, he whistled. *What a nice person,* I say to Lexa. *We'll have to make it to there now to earn the complement.*

•

At the Grumpy Old Men motel lobby, everyone bustles with frenetic phone calls and focused scans of computer screens. But when I cross the lobby to bike to the town grocery, no one appears. This is my first sign of a motel culture.

After settling in, I call you, asking about work, the drive home, and things at the house. Having abandoned the split tennis balls in last night's room, I squeeze and release by hand the knots in my shoulders. Your nattering comforts. We whisper, *Goodnight.*

With the light off, the white noise of the fan hushes. Lexa guards the motel room door. Our first night alone on this adventure. What are my fears?

- Flat tires.
- Vehicles that linger or reappear.
- Running out of water or fuel.
- No place to potty.

Should there be others?

• •

Youth Taekwondo Ends

When the youth taekwondo class began, was it during high school? That's not the question. The question is, *How?* Had your friend compelled you? Had her dad driven you both from the inner-city school to the suburban one? Like everything, you paid for it from your part-time job at the nursing home. Was the class months, or weeks long?

Later something ends it. What – the school year, lack of transportation, a bully?

Once you've might've said you practiced taekwondo because you wanted to. How much of what a young person does is of volition? How much is made possible by the social support – family structure, school, community? When you wanted a job, your dad found a ten-speed bicycle for you to bike to it. He didn't give you a martial arts uniform. What would've happened if he had?

• • •

ROUTE – *Wisconsin to Minnesota*

via Prescott, Diamond Bluff, Red Wing, Lake City, Wabash
on U.S. Bicycle Route 45, Mississippi River Trail

55 / 117 miles

1,532 elevation

HIGH – Making it to Wabash

LOW – Weight of a self-supported ultra-light bicycle set-up

FUNNY – Fleet Farm's orange logo

FUEL – Avocados, dried fruit, chicken

FIXES – First day of self-supported cycling

FIRST AID – First night alone on the adventure

SHELTER – Grumpy Old Men motel

FACTS & FINDINGS – Strategies such as the Toward Zero Death and Vision Zero Network seek to eliminate or reduce traffic fatalities and severe injuries of road users, including bicycles, to create a safer environment for all roadways.² Wisconsin doesn't support the Zero Death National Strategy.³

• • • •

Day 3: May 9

If it takes three days to bike into the cyclist body, we wish her arrival on this day.

From the Grumpy Old Men motel, I ride into the blue light. Along the Mississippi, mists rise, sliding islands and bluffs in and out of view. Spring colors shift on the land. The dampness of predicted rainstorms weighs as if this journey follows seascapes. More ancient voyager-coves in an epic poem, than Mississippi stories of riverboat commerce, the water glimmers with shadows as if pirate boats lie behind every turn. Eagles ghost the stillness. Behind them, rain haunts.

Goodview's park welcomes. Winona greets with familiar grocery chains. Dresbach hails to Secluded Road – a protected, paved multi-use trail that follows the river. We lunch at a bench with a bike rack and scan the water by binoculars for birds – herons, cranes, ducks, blackbirds. Have we found her body now?

We ride highways to La Crosse.

•

At the motel, ladders, drop cloths, and paint buckets fill the halls. The clerk apologizes and offers a discounted room for \$39.17. I carry Lexa upstairs and release her clasps, settling the last of the fuel on the bed – instant coffee, electrolytes, raisins. I remove the pannier with the supplies – toiletries, second set of kit, cords, charger, massage stick – adding to it the tennis ball I found in the gutter a mile back.

With my phone, I plan a route through La Cross to a grocery. Will I have to shop daily? Is it better to shop first, then find the motel or vice versa? Is my stuff okay here? I sigh. This was so much easier with a support driver. Carrying Lexa back to the road, I commute to a grocery store.

As I recover, I read your texted photo of a sticky note. The pink paper teems with exclamation points. *I'm glad you made it to Wisconsin!!!*

Minneapolis to La Cross. Accomplished. My fingers shimmer the letters on my phone. *I beat the rain.* Is that enough of a measurable goal?

• •

Women's Shelter Crisis Line

When you are in college, you will complete an internship for a local women's shelter after taking a class in gender violence. Your work is in advertising, marketing, and public relations. You design flyers for the upcoming volunteer training – a girl with wings. She's the icon that means volunteer advocate.

Later you will complete all the training – crisis line, shelter volunteer, group facilitation. You learn about rape kits, roofies, statistics, and services. During one training, you shake, fists clinched. Advocates share glances, asking, *How's everyone doing?*

Once you're hired, you will work the shelter on overnights. You learn the protocol of morning calls with the police station, the intake checklist, and the graphic details of another woman's story. You struggle to grapple with the human representations of the studied statistics. Or rather, it strangles you, an oppressive weight to work among it all – mothers, young women, girls. How did you get here?

• • •

ROUTE – *Minnesota to Wisconsin*

via Wabash, Weaver, Minneiska, Goodview,
Winona, Homer, Dakota, Dresbach, Le
Crescent, La Crosse
on Secluded Road, La Crosse's Bob Bridge
71 / 188 miles
968 elevation

HIGH – Mississippi River Bluffs

LOW – Sinus headache from allergies

FUNNY – Beating the rain

FUEL – Lots of fruit

FIXES – La Crosse's bicycle lanes, routes, and
share rows

FIRST AID – Strong enough to carry a fully-
loaded Lexa upstairs, Lexa's bicycle safety
triangle for highway traffic

SHELTER – John A. Latch State Park, safety
of a second-floor motel room

FACTS & FINDINGS – The 2018 Benchmark
Report on bicycling listed which states have
an established U.S. Bicycle route (ID, IN, IL,
OH, ME, MI, NH, NY, ND, PE, WA), and
which do not (IA, MT, WI).⁴

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Day 4: May 10

If life's a routine, we wish to un-inhabit it.

At checkout, the clerk offers car directions out of town, *Follow the highway all the way to Prairie du Chien.*

Thanks. I double-check maps. Hunger tugs. Is it thirst? No breakfast here but coffee.

Another man opens the exit door for us. *Have a good drive!* he calls back from his SUV.

Lexa holds my hands and turns her wheel away, I say, *You too. Thanks.* Flooded trails force us among drivers on the city streets. It takes 11 miles to find the highway. The chill keeps us layered until the hills begin. Nothing stops the hunger.

Midday, the hills, traffic, and miles unravel us to nonsense. What is lost is replaced by road sign wisdom: 1) Prairie du Chien means prairie dog, 2) the Mississippi River was once mostly islands, 3) food is ahead.

•

In Prairie du Chien, a paint factory's stink keeps us pedaling from one motel to another one, farther up the road. This one offers a huge room with amenities. I check-in, drop bags, and commute to a big box – dates, tuna, mangos, deli meat, avocados, sweet potatoes, rain gear. My eyes are huge, my belly huger.

As I straighten my kit for tomorrow's everywhere rain, I call you and say, *We need bicycling rain gear, not just a coat.* I unkink the whistle on its zipper's pull. *And more food.*

You say, *Whatever you need.*

What do I need?

1. Lexa.
2. Audiobooks as companions.
3. Safe, affordable motels.
4. Groceries.
5. Time to journal.
6. A route to bike.
7. A goal with a plan to achieve it.

Could life always be as simple and clear?

• •

Academic and Club Taekwondo

When you take taekwondo as a class in college, you ask a classmate on the first day, *Are you staying in this class?*

I intend to.

Good. I need someone to make me do this.

Later you will join the club. Each weekly practice consists of a warm-up, drills, sparring, and test preps. Instead of a room of white belts like class, the room for the club fills with colored hues – yellow, orange, green, brown, black.

Once during practice, someone kicks you – a foot misdirected, a block half-executed, an athletic ferocity mixed with a lack of motor control – you will winch. *Ouch.* The jammed finger aches with the impact. You finish the day's practice but never return. The crooked finger remains as a warning.

• • •

ROUTE - Wisconsin

via La Crosse, Stoddard, Genoa, Victory, Du Soto, Ferryville, Lynxville, Prairie du Chien on bicycle lanes and share rows
69 / 256 miles
820 elevation

HIGH – Bald eagles

LOW – River hills, low tire

FUNNY – You text, *I'm looking forward to hearing about more of the adventures.*

FUEL – Refueling experimentation

FIXES – Rain poncho, rain pants

FIRST AID – A low traffic backroad to a grocery

SHELTER – University of Wisconsin-La Crosse neighborhoods, mega-sized motel room near the front desk

FACTS & FINDINGS – A 2021 study found bicycle crashes on roadways resulted in an increase in the severity of injuries when compared to crashes in bicycle lanes.⁵ Arterial roadways and urban areas were the most dangerous place to cycle, with 71% of all cyclist deaths occurring in cities.⁶

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Day 5: May 11

If our commutes have been sets of fixed destinations, we wish for the endless conjectures of summer.

This comforts.

We route plan several days out. It pours. When the rain breaks, we cross the river to McGregor, pedaling along an antique strip I once visited with my dad on our way to Minnesota. This childhood adventure mixes with ones in literary texts. Someone else's brother tangled with addiction, a long walk, and a stray from pain to hands that touch with goodness. How much of our experiences are our own? How much are they a window into someone else's words?

We ascend an epic river bluff to highways – shouldered, rumble stripped, tailwind. Still, the work of it strains – under-fueled, undertrained, unsupported, underdressed. The safety whistle sways at my throat. Each pedal stroke swishes with cheap rain pants under a grey, chilly sky.

•

In Elkader, a town with a population of 1,200, I call lodging options – one BB (\$115), another BB (\$450) – and settle on a motel (\$78). I roll 0.3 miles to it. Cold grit presses into my feet. My hands shake. Lexa leans against the office. The clerk's dogs bark. They sniff the rubber bands that bind the trash bags around my socks. Beside a jar of shells, sand, and a plastic fake fish, stands a lamp of Himalayan salt rocks. The clerk says little and rubs her face.

Once in my room, I lock it, then push Lexa against the door that faces the street. In the shower, I handwash clothes, scrubbing menstrual blood that has leaked through everything. The tap runs rusty. Outside, it rains. Another clerk walks the dogs around the perimeter.

I tell you and you say, *Scouting*. I tell you where Lexa waits, saying, *She's my guard bicycle*, and you make a noise. I tell you about my tire pressure and you say, *Have a bike shop help*.

I make a noise. Would a bike shop help? Who do I trust when you're not here?

• •

Violence Alternatives

When you're a graduate student, you will complete two classes – activism and gender violence. Each class includes an experiential component. For the first, you join an Alternative Violence Program group that visits the state prison. In the prescribed modest attire, you carpool to the prison for the activities – role play, concentric circles, group discussion. All the men wear orange, pinch cigarettes, and squint into the desert beyond the barbed wire where poisonous toads plod along.

Later you will cover the night shift at another women's shelter. Women tell you things you do not want to know. Napping isn't permitted. You catch hissing cockroaches under coffee mugs, curl under baby blankets, and await the sunrise.

Once you complete another round of training for the second class, you teach a workshop on poetry writing for trauma at the main office. Does writing help trauma? What helps the fear of violence?

• • •

ROUTE – *Wisconsin to Iowa*

via Prairie du Chien, McGregor, Elkader
on river floodplains, Iowa highways
25 / 281 miles
1,027 elevation

HIGH – Crossing the Mississippi River

LOW – Spitting rain, 39-43ish degrees, Lexa's
low back tire

FUNNY – You said, *I want to hear more about
your day.*

FUEL – Motel coffee, cans of tuna

FIXES – Clean shammies

FIRST AID – Sleep total of eight hours, eight
minutes

SHELTER – A window through the
rainstorms to keep the journey going

FACTS & FINDINGS – The Bike League
reported in 2013 a barrier for women cyclists
included bike shop intimidation.⁷

• • • •

Day 6: May 12

If *Field of Dreams* is near, wish for ghosts to play in the fields where we pedal.

With little fuel and 40 miles to a grocery, we push into it. Four miles outside Colesburg, we swallow the last supplies – tuna, mangos, coffee. If the Iowa bluffs glimmer green, the cold drills through the layers. Wind smashes into us, knocking the whistle on the coat's zipper against my chin. We stagger but remain upright. Lack of town parks, cornfields, or overgrown brush means nowhere to potty.

In Dyersville, we roll to a stop in the grocery store parking lot. As Lexa shivers hard, a gal says in passing, *Burr*. Does she speak bicycle?

No bike rack in sight, I lock Lexa to a stairwell. I shop alone, cramming the tampons and sundries into her waiting bags after checkout.

Employees share their lunch table and directions. One leans over my offered phone and says, *I drive that way. It's paved*. Once outside, I reattach Lexa's bags and say, *They speak bicycle here, Lexa*, adding, *Let's do this*.

•

The winds push us all over the road to Monticello, but the motel clerks pamper – a drive to the grocery for supplies, use of real dishes and utensils for the microwave meal, and talk about hunter neighbors, ballroom dancing, and life in Monticello. The hot shower is a luxury. I hand-wash laundry, snack, and meditate.

I call you with, *People are so nice – take me to the store, let me eat in the employee area*.

Sorry.

For what?

You have to deal with the rain and cold.

And I get to meet kind people.

The room heater's purrs as I set the temperature. Is *have to* or *get to* the better phrase?

• •

One Day Women's Self-Defense Class

When the women's self-defense instructors show their keyrings, it will be a lesson in weaponry. *So far, this has gotten through every airport security*, she says, waving an oversized purple key, sheathed in plastic. *We have some like this here and at the studio for ten dollars*, she adds, shaking the second one shaped like a handle of a comb. Demonstrations begin. They hold them between their fingers, swing them in hard strikes, and whip them in a horizontal dash.

Later, a classmate will lean over to say, *I always thought if I got into a pickle, I'd throw my fifteen-pound cat at an attacker.*

Once you start online shopping, it will take three weeks to place an order for your own keyring. When it arrives, you secure the blade between the house and bicycle keys. The weapon's decorative icon is an owl. A friend will tell you, *Owls are the top of the avian chain.*

• • •

ROUTE - Iowa

via Elkader, Elkport, Colesburg, Petersburg, Dyersville, Worthington, Monticello
on off-route roads
65 / 346 miles
2,303 elevation

HIGH – Iowa countryside

LOW – Nothing to eat for 40 miles

FUNNY – Eagle eating roadkill, crosswind

FUEL – Fruit, meat, avocados, sweet potatoes

FIXES – Handwashing everything well

FIRST AID – Hot shower, motel room heater

SHELTER – Lunch at the grocery employee picnic table, ride to the grocery store from motel owners who dance

FACTS & FINDINGS – Advocates on winter cycling recommended transportation design to promote safety because most cyclists feared traffic accidents and women cyclists had an added fear of gender violence, harassment, and rape.⁸

• • • •

Day 7: May 13

If I bike the day, I wish to erase the night.

•

The sign on the motel lobby says, *No refunds*. I touch the door to bring Lexa inside. The clerk scolds. I push Lexa back outside, scanning the street – heavy traffic, broken concrete lot, glass scattered sidewalks, parking overgrown with weeds. *Is it safe?*

He nods. *I don't speak English*. He leads me in, takes my debit card. *No tax, okay, or anything*.

As I enter my assigned room, the odor of shit hits me. *Sewer?* I turn on the shower, then clean up and dress. I'm surprised when the clerk appears at the door, *Is it okay?* I say it is, then ask for the Wi-Fi password. He spells it real slow, then gazes up and down my body, *Very nice. How many miles?*

72.

Nice. How old?

I'm 40.

Oh! Very nice. His gaze lingers – legs, crotch. *60*. Bob, he says, touching his chest.

My dad's age. I extend my hand for a handshake, but he doesn't shake it. He inclines his head to it and holds it softly, then kisses it.

I lock the door, shaking. The shit smell overwhelms. A fly buzzes. I text you. I sort gear. I can't breathe. I try to refuel. I scroll reviews of the motel. All the ones written by women terrify me. A woman barricaded the door with a chair. I scan the room.

Trying to calm down, I pull back the bed's comforter to meditate, but the bedding is slashed. Knife holes rip through the sheets.

I text you. *I'm getting out of here*. Within minutes, I'm in the parking lot. Bob reappears. *A better room?* He points to one nearer to the lobby. When I tell him I'm finding another motel, he asks, *Where?*

• •

Self-Defense Mini-Class: Week 1

When the class starts, it will begin with qualifications – all-state wrestling, black belt degrees, martial arts mastered. You will blink at your hands. Here you will begin again, but why? What bully dogs you, now? What friend do you need? Your friends will be people who hit others with sticks, or have spent an adolescence tackling, blocking, grappling, and throwing. When you search the library, scores of books on fighting appear. Does everyone fight?

Later, the instructor will teach the fighter stance. The class will practice – shift weight towards the dominant foot, blade the body, tuck the chin, hands at guard. Homework will be assigned: practice the stance in the mirror.

Once you complete the homework and several workouts online – cardio kickboxing, fusions, martial arts strength – the fighter stance starts to become a place of rest. But rest from what?

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ROUTE - Iowa

via Monticello, Onslow, Wyoming, Oxford
Junction, Massillon, Lowden, Bennett,
Muscatine
on farm roads
74 / 420 miles
1,942 elevation

HIGH – Longest day biked of the ride

LOW – A knifed mattress, a motel clerk

FUNNY – Pre-dawn riding, Iowa countryside

FUEL – Sweet cherries

FIXES – You say things like, *You can go
somenwhere else if you don't feel safe.*

FIXES – Unused poncho returned

FIRST AID – Big box supplies

SHELTER – Another motel

FACTS & FINDINGS – *The Gender Policy Report*
from the University of Minnesota found in
2019 female cyclists were 3.8 times more likely
than male cyclists to be encroached upon by a
motor vehicle.⁹

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Day 8: May 14

If one motel staggers a woman plus her bicycle, wish for better ones.

Biking means managing. Physical needs – food, water, rest, sunscreen. Maps and plotted routes against the outed bridges, closed roads, and construction. Inclement weather.

Today? Headwind. The wind shivers grasses and leaves. The mugginess grows muggier. Lexa holds me on the drops. Farmhouses provide occasional windbreaks that break up the low-profile hunker on the drops to stay aero. This goes on and on. When a road sign announces, *Detour. Bridge out*, we keep going the same way. Some signs don't mean bicycle. No outed bridge appears – see?

In Cambridge, we ask a gal walking the sidewalks, *Is there a free water fountain in town?*

She says, *There's a water fountain in the park. If they've turned it on yet. It's getting hot so they might've – in the park.*

•

Miles later, I recover – shower, stretch, meditate. As the shopping list is created, I research fuel options. What's microwavable – eggplant, chicken breast, eggs?

But in the dishware aisle at the big box, the idea of carrying something else on Lexa deters me. At the check-out, I buy only food.

In the motel, I eat everything. When I call, you tell me about your day, while I press the tennis ball into each muscle's knot. You say, *I love you, and I'm helping you. Are you okay? I mean, last night...*

I say, *I like talking to you on the phone. It's like we're kids again. Let's talk about RAGBRAI. Are we going this year?*

Planning on it.

Are bullies needed to understand what's sweet? Do we hinge on contrast?

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Self-Defense Mini-Class: Week 2

When the self-defense instructor teaches combative, you will practice a combination. *Kick, one, two*, the instructor says, meaning front kick, jab, and cross. You kick and punch the mitts on your partner's hands for sixty seconds. *Alright, switch.*

Later the instructor will add to the combination. *Kick, one, two, three, and knee*, meaning, front kick, jab, cross, elbow, and knee. Mitts on, you take turns. Sometimes your partners are similar in size. Sometimes not. Your hands and wrists smart with the aftereffects of their blows.

Once combinations have been established, the instructor adds to the homework. *Find a mirror and practice the sequence. Ten times. Multiple times a day.* The mirrored wall holds a classroom of glances. *Practice your bread and butter.*

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ROUTE – Iowa to Illinois

via Muscatine, Buffalo Prairie, Reynolds, Sherrard, Orion, Cambridge, Kewanee on Mississippi River bridge
79/ 499 miles
377 elevation

HIGH – Windmills, charming towns

LOW – Headwind

FUNNY – Smile at people and say, *Hello.*

FUEL – Eggplant, fruit, free water

FIXES – The unsafety adventure of this

FIRST AID – Big box across the road from the motel

SHELTER – Potty breaks in knee-high bushes and at the edges of dormant fields

FACTS & FINDINGS – RAGBRAI is the oldest, longest, and largest bicycle event.

RAGBRAI reported 31% of riders were women. It has ended in Muscatine six times.

Its Ride Right program teaches safety commands such as *Bike On, Bike Off*, and *Stopping*.¹⁰

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Day 9: May 15

If Lexa's tires have dipped into rivers and oceans, wish against mud-closed roads, against mud.

A few miles in, a backhoe and exposed rebar make an announcement. We dismount in mud and push up an embankment. We squeeze through barriers. Mud washes over the road. Mud drops from us in smacking plops. Puddles loosen some of the mud from us. No search turns up a stick to clear the rest of the mud from the brakes.

The mud dries by Streator into a pale, encasing sheath on Lexa. I squirm against my full bladder as I roll through the business district. What's first – find a motel, get food., wash Lexa? Why is there no place to potty?

At the first motel, two clerks bully Lexa from the lobby. *Is she safe out here?* Traffic buzzes.

We have 16 or 18 cameras. Signs boast gambling and alcohol. The air reeks. I ask about a package you mailed ahead. They bring it, already opened. *Do you want a room?*

•

The parking lot is near empty at the next motel. *We're booked*, this clerk answers after I ring the bell, *but there are hotels up the road.*

How far?

Twelve miles. I squirm again, asking if I could use the restroom. *We don't have a public bathroom.* I blink. *You can go to Walmart. It's just down the street.* I push Lexa down the motel's wooden planked ramp and breathe.

I call a third motel, asking, *Do you have a hose I could borrow to rinse off my bicycle?* She doesn't. *Would it be okay if I brought her inside to wash her in the shower?*

That would not happen.

We call motels and bike to the big box. At the only motel that will accept us, the clerk says, *You're just tired. It's okay*, and hands me a watering can and little bottles of shampoos. I lean Lexa against a tree to let the dirt become mud again and weep.

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Self-Defense Mini-Class: Week 3

When the self-defense instructor will ask, *Remember what we talked about on the first day?* The class blinks. *Awareness.* You press against the wall's red padding. Did you miss that day?

Later you will reread your notes from the women's self-defense class. The instructor called it, *Shark eyes*. She split two fingers towards her own and jabbed, demonstrating the lesson.

Once you practice awareness of others – crossed arms, torsos that lean in or away, fingers that patter with a flushed, insistent quiver – you uncross your arms, lean towards friends, and still the hands. What awareness do you seek to cultivate?

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ROUTE – *Illinois*

via Kewanee, Osceola, Bradford, Henry,
Wenona, Streator
on farm roads
82 / 580 miles
1,138 elevation

HIGH – Illinois River, Bradford's park

LOW – Lost sock, clerks, locked restrooms

FUNNY – Muddy embankments on closed
roads and road closures don't mean cyclists

FUEL – Peaches, asparagus, deli meat, coffee

FIXES – Sponges for Lexa's de-mudding bath

FIRST AID – Watering can, shampoo bottles

SHELTER – State trooper keeping traffic at
reasonable speeds

FACTS & FINDINGS – The *Engaging More Women in Bicycling Report* noted barriers for women cyclists such as social norms, expectations based on gender, and double standards for women and men. Another barrier was a lack of social support.¹¹

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Day 10: May 16

If introverted, wish an extroverted ease.

On the road, we hunker once again in the headwind, sitting up for windbreaks of farm trees. No choice but to ride all 80+ miles. Towns appear – Cornell, Odell, Loretto – and vanish. In Kempton, we ask a local pushing a stroller where to find water. *Tom's Tavern. They have a pop machine right inside. I work there.*

In Ashkum, outside a c-store, my phone recharges. Two locals nod towards Lexa. *Where are you from?* They confirm the answer with, *A cornhusker. We're Illinia. You by yourself?*

Yeah, I lift my phone and tap Lexa, but I have help.

The last miles begin without a shoulder. Lexa drops from the edge into gravel. We crash. Knee scrapes. Knickers rip. Road rash oozes from the pucker. Lexa's bike computer pulses, *Emergency!* We hop up to pedal, canceling the accident detection.

•

After I wash the wound free of grit at the motel, I call. *I met a teacher today who's planning a cross-country ride by motorcycle with her 80-lb dog in the sidecar. I tell you how she told me where to refill my water bottles at the c-store. She said, 'Inside in the bathrooms. The water is the same. They won't mind. They give me the teacher's discount on pop.' Then she shook her refill cup.*

I want a teacher's discount on pop.

Me too. I tell you about the clerk who greeted me while sweeping gravel from the lobby's portico. As a teen, he and his mother made a pilgrimage to an Indian temple. *He wanted to go to Boston.*

And walk the red line.

Yeah, that what's I said. 'Walk the red line.'

I shut off the lights and pull up the covers as we say goodnight. Why didn't I tell you about the road rash? Are some accidents better unsaid? Or has the cyclist body arrived?

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Self-Defense Mini-Class: Week 4

When you learn in class to say, *I need you to calm down*, you will step back, extend one arm, and place the other hand at your chest. *Sir, I need you to calm down.*

Later you will duck for haymakers, throw a hammer fist into a pad, and use a bag to practice roundhouse kicks. But after all the drills, the lesson remains – *I need you to calm down.*

Once you learn this, you practice keeping hands at your heart as if to fiddle with a ring or a charm of a necklace, a subterfuge to conceal you're readying for self-defense. *Mama, I need you to calm down.*

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ROUTE – Illinois

via Streator, Cornell, Odell, Loretto,
Kempton, Ashkum, Watseka
on farm roads
86/ 667 miles
597 elevation

HIGH – Vast Illinois farms, talking to locals

LOW – Headwind

FUNNY – Windbreaks

FUEL – 4:15 AM pot of motel coffee,
microwaved garlic bulb, avocados

FIXES – Sticking, jammed gears

FIRST AID – Promise of grocery in the
morning

SHELTER – You said, *I can book your motel if
you know where you'll end up.*

FACTS & FINDINGS – The Bicycling and
Walking in the United States: 2018
Benchmark Report listed states that have
adopted theme-focused strategies to improve
bicycle safety such as education (IL, ID, ME,
VT), engineering (ID, WI), or both (OH, PE,
WA).¹²

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Day 11: May 17

If domestic tasks are daily, wish the day's places makes them easy.

By a post office a white-haired rides a mower.
The shade welcomes Lexa. Should we mail extra stuff home – socks, maps, gloves?

A woman steps onto her porch, *Do you want ice water?* I nod, laugh, then blush. Was that meant for the mower? But she returns, handing me a plastic cup. *Bring it back and I'll give you more if you want.*

With our bottles refilled, Lexa considers the post office's bucking flag. Another local asks, *Do you want a ride somewhere?*

We're good. Then another local asks where we're going. *Logansport. Is that how you say it?*

Logan. He nods. He slides a letter into the mailbox. *I could never do what you're doing.*

You could. With pressed lips, he shakes his head, turns, and walks to his SUV.

•

If the journey began with the trouble of a Lexa's awkward weight, it shifted to layering gear for the cold and rain. If the journey stopped betting on safe accommodations, it moved to booking motels online based on location and without reviews half-starred by women's terror. If the journey now stumbles and slurs with locals aware of all strangers, including ones on bicycles, it finds reprieve by alternative routes. If today's journey was all headwind and a landfill's stink, the motel's confirmation number soothes. If the 95-mile journey ends with legs that ache as if beaten by two-by-fours, Lexa's bag fails to hold enough replacement calories for what's been burned.

When I call you, I don't tell you about the water. I don't say how today, two cups of iced water didn't slake my thirst. It went down soft and round, tasting funny. Made me feel funny.

Was the water funny?

• •

Self-Defense Mini-Class: Week 5

When the instructor is absent, the teaching assistants will do their best. When they speak, the class listens as if crouching. When released to practice, the abandon has an edge and grows percussive. Limbs make wild sweeps. A few students slouch over their phones, idle with talk as if nothing is happening.

Later, the instructor returns to repeat lecture points on post-fight logistics – police, arrest, legal rights within the law, courts. Young men ape with antics, amped up on testosterone, athletic prowess, and alpha displays. Whenever the instructor turns, they mock the lessons.

Once the instructor clinches fists, puffs up the chest, and sways with arms ready to swing, the lesson will be detecting the prelude to a fight. *It's called wolfing.*

When someone wolfs, who is the wolf who wins? The hungry wolf or the fed one?

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ROUTE – Illinois to Indiana

via Watseka, Iroquois, Brook, Foresman,
McCoysburg, Buffalo, Headlee, Royal
Center, Logansport
on Panhandle Pathway Trail
95 / 762 miles
682 elevation

HIGH – Nice people in the motel

LOW – Headwind

FUNNY – Blueberry juice smears on my
cheeks, nose, and chin

FUEL – Fresh fruit, frozen blueberries, deli
meat, sunrise, big, gorgeous trees

FIXES – Time to think on a quiet route

FIRST AID – Pre-dawn grocery shopping

SHELTER – Landscape becoming treed

FACTS & FINDINGS – To improve safety,
recommendations for cyclists included
wearing safety gear such as a helmet, gloves,
and bright clothing, doing a bike check before
riding, and not riding after dark.¹³

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Day 12: May 18

If not a century yet on this ride, wish for at least a half in inclement weather.

We roll after a 4 AM breakfast – five hardboiled eggs, nine clementines, one banana, three coffees. The lack of light signals the new time zone. Cold, headwind, and showers are our companions. Limbs stay numb and dumb for every mile. Trees, valleys, and towns help us battle it. Squished and unsquished worms fill the road. Above every tree line and hilltop, wind blasts. The rain stops and starts. Every time I whisper to Lexa, *Okay, let's push on to the next place*, it blows, spits, and needles.

In one downpour, Lexa shivers beside a farm building. The bicycle safety triangle drips, coated with grit. When the rain slows, a man with broad shoulders emerges. I fumble to repack her gear, calling, *Thanks for the shelter*.

Need anything? Water?

I glance at the sky.

Just waiting out the rain?

•

When it cuts loose, near a motel and big box, I give up. After check-in, I pace with unused energy as Lexa guards the door. Motel nonsense runs circuits beyond it in the hallway. The air conditioner lacks a fan for white noise. The bathroom lacks a ventilation fan for white noise. The television is never my white noise.

Doesn't matter if I haven't had a short day since last week. Doesn't matter if I'm blistered or sunburnt, my lips are cracked, and my hand is half-numb. Doesn't matter if the road rash itches and my muscle are stiff. The list goes on and on. I refuel without adding to the motel's thrum and crash.

Tell me about your adventure, you say when I call.

Tell me about your adventures in Nebraska. I push a tennis ball into the knots along my ass.

Well, you begin. Trigger points release.

How much distance does each day need?

• •

Self-Defense Make-Up Classes

When the instructor says, *You can make up a class any time – here, at my studio, or in my Sunday class*, you will find the studio and with a shiver, enter the door. You sign a release to join a novice self-defense class. Warm-up. Sparring. Kicking.

Later you will return – another class to make up. After the drills, the instructor teaches armlock defenses. Halfway through the practices, your partner pops your wrist. She says, *Did I pop your wrist?* You nod. *Is it okay?* You shrug to play nice. She says, *Okay. Good. They won't let me play if I hurt anyone.*

Once home, your wrist aches for two weeks. You signed the release and waived your rights. Should such a studio class be named *Beginning Self-defense*? What is beginning?

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ROUTE - Indiana

via Logansport, Huntington
on Nickel Plate Trail, country road rollers
54 / 816 miles
1,171 elevation

HIGH – Dual biking talking, a half-century is still a good day's ride

LOW – Rain, 15-17 mph headwind

FUNNY – Hunkering in a motel on a forced rest day listening to the motel culture

FUEL – Water offered by a fit man

FIXES – Mini bungees, carabiners

FIRST AID – Hot shower to thaw chilled extremities

SHELTER – You booking a motel for me

FACTS & FINDINGS – In the United States, about 1% of all trips were taken by bicycle in 2018.¹⁴ Though women were 24% of all bicycle riders in the U.S., they took 30% of the trips.¹⁵ In Germany, women accounted for 49% of all bicycle trips. In Denmark, they accounted for 53% of all trips, and in the Netherlands, 55%.¹⁶

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Day 13: May 19

If locals watch bikers, wish for un-locals.

At breakfast, I ask the clerk, *What's the protein?*

The clerk scratches her steal-streaked hair, *We have danishes. And there's raisin bran?*

At 5:15 at a grocery parking lot, one bike rack is wedged among patio gear. Lexa slows. An employee smokes by the door.

Could we just come inside real quick?

You can bring it up here. Tapping Lexa's handlebars, I blink, *It?*

After the day's miles, a person getting coffee at the motel asks, *Are you dropping off?*

We set down a handful of brochures. *No, just looking for stuff in the area. Is there decaf?*

I think it's from breakfast.

That's okay. He pours a cup, handing it over. *Thank you, that was nice.* He is the clerk.

•

I recover and call. *Tomorrow, maybe the year's first century.*

Did you get rained on today?

I tell you about the ride – Huntington's blue light, but Bowerstown's gnats bombard. *They stuck to my face. They flew into my mouth. I had to tilt my head down to keep them from smacking my eyeballs.*

Fun.

I had to wipe them out of the corner of my eyes. I tell you about a closed route and outed bridge, how I carried Lexa around the debris. *Then when I was out of water, a local kid and his brother offered to fill my water bottles at the library, but it tasted funny – too slippery, too soft.*

Funny?

How much water is necessary to ride?

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Krav Maga Mini-Class Starts

When you learn the word *telegraph*, it will not be the definition for the antiquated messaging machine, sending dots and dashing across the wire. The instructor's fingers will quiver as if to strike. *Don't telegraph*.

Later you will listen to a podcast on the word *ostensibly*. How have you been alive this long without understanding basic vocabulary?

Don't telegraph and *ostensibly* – they're nearly the same. And the self-defense and krav maga classes are nearly the same too, only they're not.

Once you make a friend in class, you whisper, *This stuff does good things to my head*.

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ROUTE – Indiana to Ohio

via Huntington, Bowerstown, Zanesville,
Yoder, Hoagland, Monroeville, Payne,
Paulding, Junction, Defiance
on State Line Road
85 / 902 miles
315 elevation

HIGH – Tailwind, rivers

LOW – Bonked or roofied, bullied

FUNNY – Biking in Ohio

FUEL – Motel freebies, currants, cinnamon

FIXES – Defensive city biking

FIRST AID – The scent of Ohio

SHELTER – Talking to you while biking

FACTS & FINDINGS – According to the Bike League's 2018 Benchmark report, some states required their state driver's license tests to include a question on cyclists and motor vehicle driver's responsibility towards them (ID, IN, ME, MI, MT, NH, PE, VT, WA), while other states did not (IL, IA, OH, NY, ND, WI).¹⁷

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Day 14: May 20

If no century yet, wish today to be the year's first.

Lexa sets up to hustle – delicate fuel in front, sturdy fuel in back, and everything else in the pannier. Fruit becomes the fluid source.

If a drug deal sends us off route awhile, we pedal lone roads without feeling watched.

On route, towns sport facilities – water, restrooms, bike repair stands, benches. We bike the trails in Grand Rapids. We pedal through Bowling Green's campus. In Gibsonburg, we rest at Birchard Park that teems with visitors. Shoulders tense with the weight of the miles. The more tired, the more paranoid. On the North Coast Inland Trail, people fish, and joggers spook. We nibble avocados at a park. A couple lingers, ogling. We pedal among those that loiter everywhere. We mutter, *Where are the facilities?* and unravel more.

Near the century's end, we call. *Help us. Motel. Losing it.*

•

Though I'm nearly out of food and the motel is in a food desert, I find on the map a big box 26 miles into tomorrow's ride. The motel clerks at the desk assure me, as they assured you on the phone, I can have breakfast at 4 AM – hard-boiled eggs, fresh fruit, coffee.

As they go through the check-in, they jabber and fidget. Lexa tightens her hold.

In the room, I roll Lexa inside and set the air conditioner's fan to white noise. The curtains ruffle with a moldy stink. I turn off the fan and shower. The stink remains. I open the window and meditate. I refuel and keep otherwise still. 109 miles. Second longest ride. Ever. PR: 118.

Until tomorrow, 26 miles stand between me and a grocery store. Food: a sack of raisins. What else? Motel's breakfast at 4 AM.

How much food is necessary to ride?

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Gun Defenses

When the krav maga instructor says, *Remember, the first thing with a gun defense is to get out of the line of fire.* Plastic guns – red, orange, yellow, black – will be held by every other student. A defense is taught. *Get out of the line of fire,* the instructor scans the room, *Okay, go.* Plastic guns draw lines.

Later this will become a permission. A truck races through a red light, and you step back onto the curb. A creeper who always corners you appears, and you stop to blow your nose. A holiday party with the standard range of weirdos, and you keep your head down, voice low, out of the line of fire. And so on.

Once you have permission, guns point everywhere. Most waver blindly, aiming at whatever. Some are all bravado. *Look here!* they shout. If maybe one or two shots aim at your skull, most seek out any available target. The victim. The bystander. The volunteer.

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ROUTE - Ohio

via Defiance, Florida, Napoleon, Grand Rapids, Tontogany, Bowling Green, Pemberville, Gibsonburg, Fremont, Avery on North Coast Inland Trail, Grand Rapids trails

109/ 1,011 miles

502 elevation

HIGH – Birchard Park, people fishing in Gibsonburg. New PRs: 591 miles in a week, first self-supported century

LOW – Mosquitos, apples, moldy motel room

FUNNY – Motel clerks

FUEL – Apples, coffee, dates, raisins, tuna

FIXES – The promise of breakfast tomorrow

FIRST AID – Baby wipes

SHELTER – You said, *You've done so many miles.*

FACTS & FINDINGS – In the United States, 22 states prohibited all drivers from using handheld cellphones while driving in 2020, while 37 states banned their use by novice drivers.¹⁸

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Day 15: May 21

If big-city anonymity is a known, wish it now.

After the moldy motel's breakfast – eggs, oranges, apples – we pedal into a predawn.

Known problems: 1) no public facilities, 2) no water fountains, 3) harassment – stares, following, catcalls, blasts of tailpipe smoke.

Today, a new problem to know: 1) windshield wiper fluid. It happens like this:

We push. Not one place to potty for thirty miles. Out of desperation, we squeeze behind a guardrail, a fenced utility station, and brush to squat. When we emerge, a gold-trimmed, white Lexus pulls alongside us, idles, and turns on windshield wiper fluid. Astringent stink arches through the morning light. The driver adjusts the rearview mirror and idles off. We wave, smile, and check for droplets. Not a splash has hit us, but our eyes sting with a chemical burn.

Don't be sad, Lexa. Or mad. It just is.

•

If I lose it and find it later, the clerk's welcome shifts my mood. *Glad to have you here again.* What?

The efficiency comforts – stove, fridge, sink. I putter with domesticities. My hands fumble, slow with the task of cords and clasps. When did they lose their dexterity? Or are they tired?

I call you, praising all – big box, highway biking, parks with facilities. *I took a nap, and no one bothered me.* I describe Lakewood Park – playground, little kids, lakefront, trails – how I draped my legs over Lexa's, used my helmet as a visor, and meditated while all passersby stayed strangers. I describe Edgewood Park – hang gilders riding thermals, tourists arriving for a Cleveland sign. *So many selfies!* I describe road signs – *bikes may use full lane and change lanes to pass.*

Oh?

When I did, vehicles let me.

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Instructions

When the krav maga instructor will speak the *wah, wah, wah* of unfamiliar terms, the instructor calls it, *Peanuts cartoons*. You call it, *Gobbledygook*. Sometimes the instructors' words clarify as they say,

- 1) *Gobbledygook*.
- 2) *Control the weapon*.
- 3) *Gobbledygook*.

Later you will practice with rubber guns again. Socked feet struggle for control. You back up with the pretend gun and fiddle with the check.

Once, you will whisper to a friend in class, *This stuff is codified*, tapping your phone where inside is a krav maga eBook. There, black and white photographs flash under your finger – elbow strikes, chokes, punches.

She cocks her head. You say, *These drills*, waving your phone towards the front of the room, *have names*.

...

ROUTE - Ohio

via Avery, beachfront towns, Cleveland
on Dillion Harrison Trail, Lakewood Park,
Edgewood Park
77 / 1088 miles
623 elevation

HIGH – Being alone in the city. You always
tell me, *Have fun*.

LOW – Sprayed by windshield wiper fluid

FUNNY – Biking around little kids in the park

FUEL – Plantain chips, apples, oranges

FIXES – Dry and clean clothes

FIRST AID – Toothpaste, wet wipes, razor,
batteries

SHELTER – Free public restrooms, working
fan, kind clerks at the motel

FACTS & FINDINGS – The National
Transportation Safety Board recommended in
2019 separate bicycle lanes and intersection
safety to enhance bicycle networks.¹⁹

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Day 16: May 22

If bicyclists are strange, wish for estrangement.

We detour from the bicycle route to explore Ohio's bikeways. An officer rolls by as we start the ascent. We nod, wave, and breathe. We pedal. Scattered showers keep all muggy, wet, and sweaty. In a downpour, we hunker under an awning of a stand for maple syrup and fruit. We try to press the phone to listen to an audiobook. The buttons flicker. On Wilson Mills Road, we find a porta-potty in a baseball field. At Hambden's town park, we find another. Beside Rome's fire station, we find a third. Each time, random vehicles don't suddenly appear, strangers don't start talking loudly, or groups don't start walking towards us. On Western Reserves Greenway, the pests are all insects. A territorial bumblebee claims the underside of a picnic table as hers. A few yellow jackets hover above a bridge. We toss orange peels over the railing as bait.

Why must the solitude of being alone be sought?

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I roll into Conneaut and find a motel after 5 PM. The clerk gives me a discount because of the construction. I navigate the hallways of paint cans and ladders to a wing I have to myself. After I recover, I call you. Together we listen to the creatures outdoors. Outside the window stands a cypress and an empty swimming pool, the concrete rough with cracks, stains, and chips. Oak, Maple, and fir trees ring the motel, and beyond them, twilight.

Is it a raccoon or a bird? you ask.

It's fine – the second harassment all day, I say.

What was the first?

Heckles. Nothing. I don't tell you about the stranger who stuttered an awkward, *Thanks for stopping!* in Kingsville. Had that jolted utterance signaled disability?

We listen to the creature for many minutes. *It's like there's one in the pool and the other in the woods.*

How much clearing is needed to name it?

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Rules

When the krav maga instructor explains the rules, it will be what's legal based on which sport. Sometimes a sport rules, *No strikes behind the ear. No punches to the kidneys.* Other sports rule, *Ear biting, eye gouging, groin strikes – all allowed.* Self-defense rules include lessons like, *Watch 101 ways to attack the groin.*

Later you will find, *Watch 101 ways to attack the groin.* More spoof than reality, the vlogger jogs a memory. During a stage performance of a college play, you kicked a friend in the groin by mistake. He lifted you. You tucked your knees into a ball. On stage, he flinched. Offstage, he limped away with knocked knees. *Sorry*, you called, *an accident. Oh, sorry.* Did that count as a groin attack?

Once such rules become optional, you will remember the women's self-defense class. You practiced knee to the groin. The instructor had held onto a pad, saying, *Grasp my shoulders and drive.* You grasped shoulders. You drove your knee into it. The instructor said, *That's your power move.*

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ROUTE - Ohio

via Woodmere, Chardon, Hambden, Rome,
Rock Creek, Austinburg, Ashtabula,
Kingsville, Conneaut
on Western Reserve Greenway
76 / 1,164 miles
1,719 elevation

HIGH – Off-route solitude, your sweetness

LOW – Short day, lost Lexa's bicycle safety triangle

FUNNY – Birds/raccoons

FUEL – Figs, currants, dates, canned chicken, instant coffee, electrolytes, grapes

FIXES – Bike repair stations, phone dried out

FIRST AID – Aloe, sunscreen

SHELTER – Porta-potties

FACTS & FINDINGS – Another barrier for women cyclists was street harassment.²⁰ The 2018 Benchmark Report found 65% of women have experienced street harassment in the United States, with most harassment occurring on the street or sidewalk.²¹

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Day 17: May 23

If weirdos harass bikers in Indiana and Ohio, wish for keep-to-yourself locals in New York and Pennsylvania.

At breakfast, we ask the clerk about routes. *I want to make sure to avoid gravel.* Her red hair shimmers as she scratches it. She shuffles her pink bathroom slippers. *Cool slippers.* She answers with numbered highway. We thank her and ride.

The morning fog and shouldered road welcome. The lake winks behind hills that glimmer golden with vineyards.

We stop to selfie at every state sign.

- *Goodbye, Ohio.*
- *Hello, and goodbye, Pennsylvania.*
- *Hello, New York.*

We tailwind. We work on posture, alignment, and breathing. At a Barcelona pier, vehicles keep to themselves. When one lingers, we roll behind a sign to refuel, turn away, and play an audiobook. The vehicle moves along.

•

At the motel, a twelve-year-old greets me, turning from the guest computer. *You want to check in?* He disappears through a set of padded satin doors. Stale cigarette smoke perfumes the unvacuumed lobby. I lean Lexa against the scuffed wall and examine brochures curled by humidity.

A college-aged man slouches to the desk. His hipster cocked cap, baggie jeans, and XXL tee-shirt shifts through the business. The boy opens doors for a room without amenities and three entrances. I lean Lexa against one door to guard it, then return to the lobby.

Another clerk attends the desk. I lift a sweet potato to ask, *May I make dinner? Is there a microwave?*

You can use the one in the office. With hipster flare, he vanishes. Returning with it, he says, *There's an outlet in the stairwell.* We open it but, the splattered inside reeks.

Do you have napkins? Or does it have a plate? The clerk ducks into the men's restroom to wash it.

• •

Run. Hide. Fight.

When the instructor has been absent again, the next lecture will be on active shooters. The instructor talks about groups or companies that hire for such lessons. The lessons begin, *I'm not going to teach you how to fight. I'm going to teach you how to hide.*

Later the instructor will offer *Fight Club* as a realistic example in film of damage done to the body during a fight.

Once these have been established – *Fight Club* (damage) and active shooter protocol (hide) – you will remember reading *The Contender* for middle school geography class. What had been that lesson? Most days you colored maps or wrote in labels to fill in the blanks. Blue means rivers. Green means land. Some days, the teacher clipped his nails at his desk. Clip. Clip. Once you were done with coloring, the next task was to read. Clip. Clip.

Hide. Don't fight.

...

ROUTE – *Ohio to Pennsylvania to New York*

via Conneaut, Erie, Barcelona, Fredonia
on Z bike route
83/ 1,247 miles
1,486 elevation

HIGH – Tailwind, Erie Lake marinas and
lighthouses, three states in one day

LOW – Sinus headache

FUNNY – Hipster, college-boy clerks

FUEL – Tim Horton coffee, grapes, deli meat,
motel microwaved sweet potatoes

FIXES – Wi-Fi at Tim Horton

FIRST AID – Vineyards, lakefront, hills

SHELTER – You say, *At least I got your motel
booked.*

FACTS & FINDINGS – In *Women on a Roll:
Benchmarking Women's Bicycling in the United
States* included the following myths about
women and bicycling:

- Women don't like bikes
- Women aren't interested in riding
- Women don't spend money on bikes
- Women account for very few bike trips in
the United States.²²

....

Day 18: May 24

If trails to the border crisscross, wish an easy U.S.-Canadian crossing.

The border prickles with silence. Offering a pressed-lip smile towards the surveillance, we hunker on the pedestrian-bicycle path, but it ends at a closed sign. No bridge for us, Lexa? We call the posted number. A voice asks, *Where are you?*

At the border – the American side.

Wilson building? Is it a big stone building?

Maybe? When the van arrives, the driver helps secure Lexa. On the other side, I fumble to reattach Lexa's bags. *Sorry, the dexterity in my hand is off. All the biking, I guess.* He tells us to go to Lane 5. There, I hand the agent my passport secured inside five layers of plastic baggies and duct tape.

What's this? I gesture with open palms and with numb fingers and ask about scissors.

Maybe next time just try one Ziplock baggie.

•

I call you from the sunset light show at Niagara Falls. Tourists *Oh!* and *Ah!* in many languages. Mists flicker across the spray. I tell you about the day's wonders, how outside the motel this morning, a World Traveler biker stopped me, talking a Pittsburgh furniture store day job, weekend trips of 520+ miles, and logistics of motorcycle travel. Rubbing his sliver-streaked hair, he'd said, *You can join me.*

I talk about biking in Buffalo, how a clerk at a fitness center verbalized directions – *Highway 5. Hoover Road. Ship Canal. Trail.*

I talk Canada, how the park's shade refueled me, and a widower with a puppy welcomed me. *Smokey is my new companion.*

You, *Oh?* Then *Oh!* Then, *Oh.*

I could complain about my hands or the lack of amenities, but why bother with what's become the norm? Instead, I say, *Remember when we were here together?*

• •

Knife Attack Defense

When the krav maga instructor will teach a knife pick attack with the word, *Redirect*. You practice with the class. Grab shoulder. Redirect knife. Trap arm. Break elbow. Class over. Bow. After class, *redirect* comes with you like a lover, a friend, or a kindness.

Later *redirect* will become a game. You practice redirecting a discussion by a topic switch.

Once *redirect* is a skill to master, what else might there be? A teacher will say, *Whatever you practice, grows stronger.*

• • •

ROUTE – *New York to Canada*

via Fredonia, Hamburg, Buffalo, Niagara Falls on Buffalo trails, Peace Bridge, Niagara

Parkway

78 / 1,325 miles

715 elevation

HIGH – First solo border crossing by bicycle

LOW – Tummy trouble in the morning, no restrooms or water in Canada for miles

FUNNY – World Traveler motorcycle guy, border patrol van ride for bikers across the border when the bridge walkway was closed

FUEL – Fruit, coffee, turkey, sweet potatoes

FIXES – Tossed out moldy dates purchased

FIRST AID – Permission to use the locked dining room to microwave dinner

SHELTER – Evangola State Park, Hamburg Fitness Center, residential porta-johns

FACTS & FINDINGS – A mixed-methods study published in the *Interactive Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and Physical Activity* found personal motivators for cyclists included health, fitness, stress reduction, and the fun and enjoyment of it.²³

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Day 19: May 25

If breakfasted well in Canada, wish rations hold to the Erie Canal Trail.

We pedal Niagara Falls' footpath. Mists lifts. Many stroll, jog, or selfie. Diving birds ride or float. Spumante smooths. The trail weaves through gardens. A clock made of flowers tells the time. Towards the border, a sign for bicycles says, *Talk to the Toll Guard*. She directs us through the gates to join the bridge's traffic, calling, *Be careful*.

Once there, we queue in a lane for autos/RVs/campers. The border guard asks, *Did you buy anything?* Tapping Lexa's light load, I blink, *Would they confiscate grapes?*

Once through the border, we pedal towards the Erie Canal's welcome of lovely towns, water fountains, and amenities.

Near a barbershop, two girls at a juice and fruit stand hail us, *Make us an offer*. We shrug. The other one says, *Fifty cents?*

•

Crowds thicken near Spencerport. I call you. *Can you help me get a motel in Rochester?* A grey-haired man on a motorbike passes where we pedal. Un-helmeted, his unwashed hair lifts limply.

Where in Rochester?

Uhm. Near the trail? In the shade of a bridge the grey-haired waits. I pass and a few moments later, he passes again.

There's a big box a mile from one with three stars. Do you want me to book it? The grey-haired doubles back.

Uhm. You talk options. When the grey-haired passes again, I say, *So when we meet you at the hotel tonight, what do you want to do?*

What?!?

Later, I don't mention the man, saying instead, *90 miles is still 90 miles*. It is – right? Or is this how a cyclist body answers?

• •

Ground Defenses

When the krav maga instructor teaches ground defensives, it will begin with how to get up. Half roll. Foot on hip. Hand on the ground. Hand on shoulder. Kick out. Bar arm. Step back. Rise. Back up. You repeat. And repeat. Sometimes your partner gives you a struggle. Sometimes you give your partner a struggle. The pleasure is in the escape.

Later the instructor will say, *Never go to a second location*. This is another lesson repeated. One woman on her phone. One man wrapped his arm around her and forced her into a waiting car. A hurried drive. The driver. The two in the backseat. Struggle. She fought, and by the time the car reached the highway, they pushed her out.

Once the lesson will be about ducking out of an arm thrown around a shoulder. Another lesson: bearhug. Another: carotenoid choke. Each time the reminder hovers, *Never go to a second location*.

...

ROUTE – Canada to New York

via Niagara Falls, Lockport, Erie Canal Trail towns like Medina, Brockport, Spencerport, Rochester
on Erie Canal Trail and Parkway
91 / 1,516 miles
515 elevation

HIGH – Niagara Falls at sunrise

LOW – Ration worries, weirdo follower

FUNNY – Pedaling multi-surface paths, You asked, *How much of the Erie Canal is paved?*

FUEL – Motel breakfast of scrambled eggs, sausage, fruit salad, coffee

FIXES – Protected safety of the trail

FIRST AID – Aspirin, baby wipes, sunblock

SHELTER – Erie Canal amenities for cyclists, motel

FACTS & FINDINGS – Another barrier for women cyclists was the perception of safety.²⁴ A 2019 study by Strava, found making streets safer increased women cyclists' use of them by 40-50%.²⁵

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Day 20: May 26

If elsewhere is watchful with distance, wish insistent friendliness here.

The dining room bustles with Memorial Weekend travelers who stride determined – tables, coffee, buffet. We fill a thermos with coffee and transfer it to water bottles, telling a couple, *My bottles are too tall for the machine.*

We fill the thermos - three eggs, three sausages – and tell another gal, *Breakfast to-go?*

At the front desk, we ask the clerk for fruit. He says, *I'll get you fruit.*

Back in the dining room, he reappears with apples. Rolling most into a basket, he says, *You've got to grab them fast*, and holds back two. He disappears to reappear with oranges, handing us two from the bag. *They're like a sign for peace.*

He joins us outside, smokes an e-cigarette, and talks local trails. We pedal into the day with a wave.

•

Fulton bumps – midway, racetrack, car show. Ice cream shops jive. Big box shoppers joke. I lock Lexa. A kid in scruffy jeans asks, *You got to take all that stuff off your bike?* He puffs a cigarette. *You're biking across America, right?*

Am I? Hope so. Only from Minneapolis so far.

I'm going to see the car races tonight. We talk cars. A grizzled man on a motorbike joins us. We talk a bike he built from a kit, my trip, and the local weekend festivities.

At the motel, the clerk natters about jobs, night-shifters, and work. *Here, you can't even buy beer in the morning.* He charms everyone – a guy in his 20s without front teeth, a gal with scraggly hair tucked under a frayed hoodie, and several dirt-streaked construction workers.

With keys, we roll through the halls. Rolled clothes sit in bundles outside a few doors. A dog barks. What is the motel culture here?

• •

Attacks from Behind

When the krav maga instructor will say to avoid ATMs at c-stores, you scan your classmates. Do they go to ATMs at c-stores? What is your PIN number?

Later you will learn the defense for a gun from behind. Scenario: You stand at an ATM to withdraw money. A bad guy approaches, presses a gun into your back, and says, *Give me your money*. You practice and the gun changes locations – side, shoulder, face, chest. *Give me your money*, becomes, *Give me your pumpkins*. *Give me your trick-or-treat candy*. *Give me your bicycle*. You say, *Tell me a joke, or we're going to a second location*.

Once you start telling jokes, this becomes a defensive.

• • •

ROUTE – *New York*

via Rochester, Palmyra, Pultneyville, Sodus Point, Fair Haven, Fulton
on Erie Canal Trail and Parkway
101 / 1,516 miles
819 elevation

HIGH – Lake Ontario, talking to all the New Yorkers, kind, generous clerks

LOW – Tummy troubles, sinus headaches

FUNNY – Characters at motels

FUEL – Omelets, sausage, apples, oranges

FIXES – Motel key

FIRST AID – Your texted stickie note, *Congrats on the second century!*

SHELTER – Erie Canal Trail amenities

FACTS & FINDINGS – *Women on a Roll: Benchmarking Women's Bicycling in the United States* offered five keys to encourage women's cycling. These included a focus on comfort, convenience, confidence, consumer products, and community. The five "C's" sought to make biking safe and inviting and to develop basic riding and maintenance skills.²⁶

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Day 21: May 27

If tea tree pest spray doses all, wish it potent.

We pedal near masculine traffic – boats, trucks, dirt bikes, buggies. Three dozen ATVs pass at once. We are the only cyclist, the only woman plus bicycle until the end.

The road's newer layer of asphalt spreads unevenly, making a lumpy cracked mess of the shoulder. Gripped for the terrain, we weave. At an intersection, a car putters. Is she waiting for us to cross? We finger-wave, but she cuts us off. Six inches buzz between us.

She jerks to a stop. Through a cracked window, she says, *Are you okay?*

I exhale and blink, fingers prickling with adrenaline as I double-check the fluorescent vest's clasp. *Yes*, I ease my grip on Lexa.

I didn't even see you. I am so sorry. She revs her engine, shifts gears, and jolts away.

We roll, stop. A sheriff passes. We breathe.

•

Soon enough I find the B&B. The clerk insists I take a bath in the claw-footed tub. Later, I follow his directive. Though the hot water runs steady, the misfit plug refuses to seal. Even the weight of my toe doesn't help. I call you, *Lexa's in the pole house*. I tell you about the friendly B&B dog, the recommendation for a closed museum, and the other night's residents, *A father-son hunter pair. Why are there so many hunters? Why do clerks like to tell me there are hunters? Is it supposed to make me feel safer or more scared?*

What? Are they there?

He said eight. It's nearly eight, I say. *What do you think – duck? Mosquito? Are there bike hunters?*

I talk about the day's journey. Unlike the wildness of other parks and forests, the land and housing felt owned. Unlike other rural stretches, the stores bleated with neon signs. Did they even sell food? I leave out the rash of men, the abundant alcohol, and the guarded lift of my shoulders. I talk roads, how some were smooth and others not.

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Learning to Fall on Your Back

When the krav maga instructor teaches you to fall, you will start from a crouch. Bodies make concentric circles. Bodies lean back, arms wide, chins tucked. At impact, limbs recoil to a defensive position. *Again.*

Later the lesson will move to a squat. *Give yourself enough room.* Bodies fall back in a circle like petals opening on a flower. Each petal recoils at impact. *Again.*

Once everyone falls easily from a squat, the instructor reminds again about the chin tucking, the possibility of one's skull cracking on the cement. *Three more times.* Bodies smack the floor. The smack becomes the signal and cue. *Again.* You hit and assume the defensive. *Soon we'll learn about mounting.*

• • •

ROUTE – New York

via Fulton, Pulaski, Orwell, West Leyden,
Boonville
on Osceola Road
79/ 1,595 miles
2,054 elevation

HIGH – Lonesome miles in the Adirondack
Mountains

LOW – Mosquitoes

FUNNY – ATV traffic

FUEL – Microwaved sweet potatoes, eggs,
oranges

FIXES – Free upgrade to a room with a
private bathroom

FIRST AID – Tea tree oil bug spray

SHELTER – Nice B&B dog, Lexa safe in the
pole house

FACTS & FINDINGS – According to People
for Bikes, 53% of people feared being hit by a
vehicle while biking.²⁷ Time and day affect
bicyclist fatalities, with an increased rate of
fatalities during the weekday, between the
hours of 6-9 PM, and after dark.²⁸

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Day 22: May 28

If some roads whisper with variegated trees, wish mosquitoes didn't hum everywhere.

We ride. On the Toby Bike Trail, we try to put trash in the bins, but our numb hands refuse to work the bear-proof lock. Maybe they are biker-proof locks.

In Inlet, local librarians let us recover. When one asks, *Are you on your own?*

I tap my phone and Lexa. *I have help.*

She says, *You're brave.*

We ride chutes and ladders to the bottom of Blue Mountain. Midway through the ascent, the Adirondack Experience museum swarms with vehicles. At the top, we shake, wet with sweat. When the insects hum as they swarm, we giggle, *Go, or we'll bite.* We roll down and down and down the chute.

•

I call you, stewing. *Do I understand anything about motel culture at all yet?*

This morning, the clerk leaned from the office with the bill. I handed over my card to run. He popped back out. *It's asking for your pin.*

I don't think I'm supposed to give you that. I can come in. And I did. And I entered it, skin prickling as he watched. With quick fingers, he canceled the transaction and ran it as credit.

I can call the bank, you say

This evening, I asked the clerk about amenities – microwave and refrigerator (no), bathroom (shared across the hall), AC (ceiling fan), and Lexa (in the closet in the hallway). Following her gesture, I asked if she'd be safe. She says, *In all the years I've been here, I've never....*

Once settled in, people cavort, smoke, and laugh on the porch outside my window. I stew.

You ask, *What mountain did you climb today – Blue Mountain?*

• •

Learning to Fall Forward

When the class has successfully studied back falls, the krav maga instructor will teach front falls. *Palms open. Land on your forearms. Ten times. Smack.*

Later impact will become a focus, an instinctual gripping at the core, a bracing, or a forearm plank that smarts at the elbows.

Once you learn to fall, the instructor will give a teaser on the next lesson: ground defense. You learn new contexts for common words – *grapple, shrimp, guard, front mount.*

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ROUTE – New York

via Boonville, McKeever, Thendara, Old Forge, Inlet, Blue Mountain Lake, Long Lake

on Moose River Road, South Shore Road, Toby Bike Trail

77 / 1,671 miles

2,556 elevation

HIGH – Being alone in the Adirondack Mountains, all the lakes and air, the variegated shift of greens among the trees

LOW – Mosquitoes, handlebar palsy

FUNNY – Motel porch culture

FUEL – Tuna, grapes

FIXES – Blue Mountain climbed

FIRST AID – Toothpaste

SHELTER – Meditation

FACTS & FINDINGS – In 2018, Jenny Graham set the world record for women and bicycled self-supported around the globe in 124 days.²⁹

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Day 23: May 29

If hills make muscles protest with soreness,
wish to ride through the discomfort.

In a panic over increasing pain, I leave a
message on your voicemail. I walk or limp
every hill. Insects swarm. Rusted vehicles
hover or grunt past. Posted signs announce,
Keep Out. At a c-store without a bicycle rack, I
push Lexa inside. The clerk folds her arms,
narrowing eyes. *You can't bring that in here*.

May I use your restroom or call a taxi? Sorry.

I don't know of any taxis out here.

*Sorry. My quad smarts with heat. I thought if I
could get here and felt okay, I would finish the ride.
And if not, I'd try to call a taxi.*

A customer offers, *I have muscle relaxers*.

A serviceman offers. *I can take her to 4-corners.
It's flat to Ti and what, 20 miles*. I accept the ride.

When we ride again, Lexa weaves and goes flat.
Cops pass. My quad aches.

•

After the painful miles, I roll to a big box.
Among the produce, a guy in an Indiana Jones
hat says in a sing-song voice to his daughter,
She's going on an adventure. The little girl sticks out
her tongue from her spot in the cart's bottom.

I blink. Would this store have a natural muscle
pain gel? The guy gets me talking about the
ride. I name tomorrow's towns and spread my
maps across the grapes and berries in the cart.
He leans over the maps. *Avoid Middlebury. It's a
madhouse*. The girl yanks her ponytails.

I rub my quad. *Know anything about the climbs?*
The girl drums her sneakers against the bottom
and kicks his shins twice.

He traces the route with a finger. *Look at the
elevation lines here*. He taps them. *It's a climb*. He
steps from his daughter's next kick. *I'd stay in
the mountains since I'd gotten myself all the way there*.

I blink at him. Where are the people who think
bicycle?

• •

Mount Defense

When the instructor talks assault and attending parties in pairs, the word will be, *Roofies. They're here.* This lesson repeats.

Later you will practice ground defense, tactics to remove someone who has mounted you. Everyone takes turns. One is trapped and mounted. One is heavy, forearms crossed and pressing down. Your partner becomes increasingly less verbal during the class. *Are you okay?*

I feel dirty. I need a shower.

Once the women's self-defense instructor says, *Find a pair*, you will glance around the room – moms, high school teens, middle school girls, middle-aged women. You will be paired with a gal the instructor refers to as, *Master*. As the class winds down, she demonstrates pressure points. *These always take someone down.*

• • •

ROUTE – New York

via Long Lake, Newcomb, North Hudson,
Severance, Ticonderoga
on the goodwill of service workers
57 / 1,728 miles
6 miles (van)
2,644 elevation

HIGH – Adirondack mountains and lakes,
arriving in Ticonderoga

LOW – Talking, hovering insects, flat tire,
muscle pain

FUNNY – B.O. bread man at the big box

FUEL – Sweet potatoes

FIXES – When I call you, you ask, *Have you
tried air?*

FIRST AID – Aspirin, muscle rub

SHELTER – Public restrooms, a ride from a
kind stranger, police

FACTS & FINDINGS – The *Engaging More
Women in Bicycling Report* also noted a barrier
for women cyclists was a lack of confidence in
one's body and misconceptions about
femininity and athleticism.³⁰

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Day 24: May 30

If you said, *I can come early to drive support*, I wish for one thing, *Save me from the pain*.

I machinate miles we might ride with pain, then pedal into it. At the river, we pull a cord to flash a ferry. When it arrives, the gal asks, *Would you mind if we waited for a car?*

I shrug. *You're in charge*. She laughs.

Her driver says, *There are cars on the other side*.

In Middlebury, a bicycle mechanic performs a quick tune-up and flat repair on Lexa. *This will get you to Bar Harbor*.

Pedaling as if to do the mountains, Lexa wobbles. Is it okay to take a rest day? I call a motel with a candy theme. Once there, the clerk prepares my breakfast basket, *Will you take a brown banana?* She asks for the third time, *Will a man be joining you tonight?*

I tell her no, again. When I find the room, I giggle over your text. *I'll be there soon*, you wrote, meaning tomorrow

•

What have I learned in a fortnight alone? Riding alone makes the proclivities and stories glare. I prefer to be alone, without an audience, or in spaces that offer the anonymity of the crowd. I knew this but I didn't.

When I'm scared, I cry. When I need, I say, *I'm sorry*. When I want, I turn up my palms and ask. These gestures of the body hail others for connection.

Fear had patterned me to silence. I didn't know it was okay to talk to strangers – road strangers, clerk strangers, trail strangers, store strangers – or such talk transforms. But terror's safety strategy of fight, flight, or freeze kept me in motion from danger, I was learning to listen for the narrative patterning of speed.

Maybe this bike ride is my life ride. I need it to know how the current of my life makes me ride in a given way, meeting the same strangers and friends, while wishing for a lonesome anonymity, a nowhere, a solitude I crave with a bicycle. Her name is Lexa, and she speaks.

• •

Towards the End of Krav Maga

When the last few classes meet, the krav maga instructional team teaches rolling, walking, and running falls. The class queues to try.

Later you will let your vision spin, allergies plus tinnitus and vertigo, making you dizzy after a simple summersault. Can all adult bodies roll? Does age matter? Are your classmates more supple, youthful, and reliable to repair?

Once the class session ends, you join a group to ask questions about what happens after the semester. It answers one safety question – *Where to train next?*

Is this breathlessness greed or need? What is your next?

• • •

ROUTE – *New York to Vermont*

via Ticonderoga, Shoreham, Cornwall,
Middlebury, East Middlebury
on ferry
31/ 1,760 miles
1,830 elevation

HIGH – You nattering while driving to save
me from my sore leg

LOW – Second shortest day

FUNNY – Motel clerk asking, *Will you take a
brown banana?*

FUEL – Banana chips, brown banana

FIXES – Lexa's new tube and tune-up

FIRST AID – Muscle pain relief

SHELTER – Bike shop

FACTS & FINDINGS – *Bicycle: The History*
discussed how women's early embrace of
bicycling in the 19th century spurred debate.
Women cyclists were ridiculed, mocked, and
sensualized.³¹

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Day 25: May 31

If you leave Nebraska at dawn, wish for speed.

We ascend. At a Robert Frost trail sign, we wonder which fork. At Bread Loaf's chairs, we wonder which idea. At a cyclist's passing, we wonder which race. She hustles in spotted shorts – *breath, pant, sigh, oh*. She vanishes, then doubles back. We coast.

At Gaysville, I leave Lexa unlocked outside a c-store and emerge to find a man beside her. *Are you watching my bike?*

I've watched a number of bikes in my day. He hides his hands.

Lexa's unclipped bag gives us pause. *Is it safe to leave my bike here?*

I think so. Though a guy once put up a notice for a stolen bike with a reward for \$500.

I blink. What could've he have wanted from Lexa – baby wipes, salted raisins, trash?

•

At a Bradford grocery, I buy a local maple syrup craft beer for you. Not a smile or hello from the cashiers – unfriendly, but not personal.

Outside the motel office, multiple clerks linger on patio furniture – in leopard print onesies, satin boy shorts, lacy robes. Some finger necklaces or plunged collars. A clerk with fanged teeth and squinty eyes checks me in. She asks, *When is the man going to arrive?* The man?

Should be here around seven, he said. But when I did the map thing, it looked like eight.

Key in hand, I role Lexa into a room crammed with furniture, sheer curtains, and a clear view of the motel fish-bowl style parking lot. I tap the mirrors and unplug electronics. The sensor by the television says, *This isn't a camera. It's the cable.*

You arrive. I ask, *You'll drive support tomorrow?*
You nod. I give you one chaste peck.

• •

Passed

When the last week arrives, you take the final. The instructors name a defense skill and in pairs or trios you – knife defense, gun defense, choke defense. Sometimes the instructor floats to your group to offer corrections. Sometimes one of your classmates asks for help. Always you study the demonstrated skill. Do you blink? The wider your eyes, the easier to take it in.

Later it ends. You see your instructor's car in the parking lot. The instructor's studio is there, hot with lights, mid-city. Online, self-defense schedules for studios, gyms, and schools are readily available. Where to learn? What to learn? What's your next?

Once you received a passing grade, at least you've accomplished this.

• • •

ROUTE - *Vermont*

via East Middlebury, Ripton, Bread Loaf,
Hancock, Rochester, Stockbridge, Gayssville,
Sharon, South Stratford, Bradford
on River Road, Middlebury Gap
85 / 1,885 miles
4,787 elevation

HIGH – Green Mountains, three mountains

LOW – Sore leg

FUNNY – All the long-distance cyclists with
mega-panniers

FUEL – Fresh fruit, veggies, deli meat

FIXES – Your arrival

FIRST AID – The idea of your arrival ahead

SHELTER – Amenities, roadside pullovers

FACTS & FINDINGS – The Tour de France started in 1903 but didn't start a women's version until 1984. Summer Olympics first included cycling in 1896 but didn't include women until 1988.

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Day 26: June 1

If Midwest riders do tailwind centuries, wish for a mountaintop metric century here.

With my aching leg, you start me at hilltops, mountains, and passes. I roll down them, refusing eye contact with the cyclists who climb them. It sprinkles or clouds, but the views – mountain ranges, blue skies, green valleys, variegated trees – astound if my quad aches still with heat. Birds sing. Lexa carries little. I pedal a dream-state of audiobooks, scenery, and road. Or I pedal, mindful of posture, pedal stroke, and hand pressure. When I forget, my leg twinges. When you arrive with support, I say, *I'm still aiming for 100. I'm just starting to lose it a bit. There's a big fly in my map case.* I search for his inch-long body. *Well, how ever he got in, he got out – I hope.*

You arrive again. *Cars fly up here. Let's go down half a mile to Hardscrabble Road.*

At your next arrival, I say, *I'm at 99.53. I need a bit more. Maybe to where the road crosses 117.*

•

You order from a lobster house – lobster roll, French fries, salad – and for me, so much food. I gaze at the groceries you unload from the rental, and say, *This too much? Way too much...* I hold Lexa's handlebars. How can she possibly carry all of that? You ask, *Should we leave some in the car?* We motel it. You do laundry. I journal. You soak in the bath. I organize the groceries

My leg aches, but my shoulders relax. Is this what it means to be safe and real? Cyclists aren't real adult people at all. We're children, all moment and presence. You let me have the hills, the audiobook, and Stephen King's home state. What can I let you have? I tap the bathroom door. *Do you want to try that maple syrup craft beer I bought for you?*

Sure.

I bring you one, nattering about the day, *Today should've been creepy. Instead, it was all pretty – pretty White Mountains, Black Forest, and lakes. Pretty. I know where I'll be tomorrow. What about you?* You tap your phone, talking fish houses, lighthouses, and ocean walks you want.

• •

Pepper Spray

When you read about bicycle touring before your first cross-country ride, gear lists will include spray. A map advises being prepared for marauding dogs in Kentucky, all those yards without fence or chain. One canister sports a red handle to hook into a bag, belt, or jersey. Another slides like lip balm into a pocket. The unheeded instructions advise, *Practice depressing.*

Later you will read an account that suggests dismounting, removing the helmet, and offering talk to dogs who chase or bark. *Hey there, pooches.*

Once you have been startled, lunged at, and sent scurrying across the road, you will dismount to try dog chitchat. They simmer down but keep hackles raised. Twice you're swarmed. First, you held the spray, talking, *Hi, puppies*, until the owner emerged, asking, *No problem?*

Another time, a lab-mix and her mate escorted you through a gang. You tell a friend later, *The dogs protected me from the other dogs.*

• • •

ROUTE – Vermont to New Hampshire to Maine

via Bradford, Brenton, Piedmont, Lincoln,
Conway, Sweden, Bridgton, Windham
on Kancamagus Pass
101 / 1,945 miles
856 elevation

HIGH – White Mountains, Black Forest,

LOW – Injured leg, sheepishness

FUNNY – Stephen King's home state

FUEL – The choice of so much food

FIXES – Machine washed laundry

FIRST AID – Mountaintop metric century

SHELTER – Your support for century #3

FACTS & FINDINGS – The Bike League's 2018 Benchmark Study reported per state percentages of people who are female who bike to work.³²

34% – VT	26.4% – NY
32.5% – MT, MN	29.2% – ID
32% – PE, ND	27.4% – IL, IA
31.1% – WI	27% – IN
29.9% – OH	26.7% – WA
29.6% – ME	23.9% – NH

• • • •

Day 27: June 2

If I got a fortnight with Lexa alone, wish now for a week with a support driver.

You start me in Bridgton, Naples, and Webb Mills. I climb two hills, walk two, and climb two more. What heals a leg with a million hills that is Maine?

When you idle up, I say, *Maine is nuts. What do they do when there's ice? Do people just stay home?* You putter off. I am alone with Lexa who says nothing.

On Old Danville Road, first the dirt-packed surface jars. We jolt and skid. Where it resurfaces, fresh asphalt without line paint signals no clear shoulder or lane. On Riverside's Road views of the Androscoggin River sneak through the forested road. A tailwind pushes. I whisper to Lexa, *Local wonder.*

The third time the same blue vehicle passes, I ask Lexa, *Bicycle hunter?* Lexa says nothing. Later, I tell you how stalking manifests in the body – icy skin, gnarling stomach, jacked-up shoulders – adding, *Just saying.*

•

Is it on your map, too? When you idle up, three times I tell you, *Meet me where the bike trail starts.* Meanwhile, Brunswick is run amok with something – graduations, marathon set-up, regatta on the Androscoggin River Bike Path. Out of water or food, I pedal until I find you.

Soft pretzel? you say, naming a Maine lobster food truck.

I point to the map, *You take me here, then I'd bike to you. Get a good lunch.*

Okay, you say and that's what happens.

I bike back roads. Sometimes I am entirely alone. When I idle up to where you lounge in the sunshine and festive crowds, I say, *That was awesome!*

Though an accident stalls traffic, we find a motel, an outlet, and local food. Massaging my sore muscles, I say, *When I'm with you, I push myself hard and past what I thought I could do.* Why? Does support help us see our bravery?

• •

CPR/AED/First Aid

When you complete the training for a women's shelter, you will sit among social workers, volunteers, and staff. A swamp cooler mitigated the desert air. Babies and dummies waited on folding tables for the practice drills.

Later, at each biannual recertification training – AEDs, mouthguards, gauze, rubber gloves – you will perform with the other staff. During one scenario on seizures, it offers context to the two you've witnessed. Still, under your care, there've been no heart attacks, no spilled blood, no ambulances.

Once you admit it, the first symptoms of heatstroke or sunstroke are familiar. Extreme heat. Muscle cramps. Flushed skin. Rapid pulse. Risen core temperature. The last time on your PR of 118, a friend says, *Let's call it a day*. But on another century, you were plied with ice, shade, and rest. Mostly, the certificate means you might be aware enough to save your breath.

• • •

ROUTE - Maine

via Windham, Naples, Danville, Brunswick,
Bath, Freeport
on local bike trails
76 / 2,021 miles
3,590 elevation

HIGH – Bright colors of water, land, and sky

LOW – Near bonking, noisy motel neighbors

FUNNY – Outlet malls, whistling, coughing
locals

FUEL – Still so much food

FIXES – New cycling skirt

FIRST AID – Your sight-seeing and local
cuisine stories

SHELTER – Bath's park, your support

FACTS & FINDINGS – The United States Department of Transportation reported 6,862 cyclist fatalities between 2010-2018. Since 2010, cyclist death counts have risen 27%. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported 871 cyclist deaths in 2018, the highest death count in 20 years.³³

• • • •

Day 28: June 3

If the body winches with pain, wish for balm.

I no longer know what day of the week it is or what month or what season. This is the point, or at least one of the points. I am hungry and thirsty to a point that doesn't make sense but just is. I hurt everywhere. Bruises appear everywhere and I have no memory of receiving them. When my leg cramps, I move at a limp. I am sunburned and my face is tight with the pull of it, though I'm sure I put on sunblock. I no longer know me.

The ride is all hills. When my quad aches, I walk. On one, I shout, *I hate your hills.*

Once at the top and back onto Lexa, a voice behind me says, *Atta girl.*

You arrive miles later. I say, *I'll try for Plan A, but I'm making no promises.* Is plan A Belfast or Bar Harbor? At the next meet-up, I say, *Okay, let's try Plan D.*

•

When we find the motel, you go find lobster at another local spot. When you return you take pictures and tell me about your day of touring.

We relax and talk. I tell you, *New York people are mature. Maine people are nice.* I tell you how they wave, make eye contact, or smile. *Maine trees are nice. Maine water is nice.* I tell you about the cops, how I like cops. *They always show up and sweep the area. I feel safe. They seem to know when I'm lost. It's like they arrive to say, "Turn here. Keep going. You're on the right path."*

For a while, we whisper about the delights of today's ride and tourist destinations – walkways, wind, waves, wharves, bridges, boats, birds. I listen as you natter, foot bouncing with stories.

Why do you listen and let me ride all by myself? If cycling is too dangerous for some, why is okay for us? What is it in you that lets you understand I need to do this?

• •

Locked Up

When you are a girl, your 10-speed commuter bike remains propped by the back door of a nursing home kitchen where you work part-time. CNAs, custodians, and other dishwashers exit and enter the door all day. Maybe the endless filling of the dumpsters, the constant deliveries, or the nearby smokers' porch for employees, she remains untouched. Her saddle rots with rain. Electric tape unravels from her handlebars. And she's always right there, ready.

Later will come bicycle locks – U-locks, combinations, cable, padlock, chains – one snickering like a zip tie. Later a bicycle thief snips the cable lock from your hybrid commuter, and you cycle through the emotions – denial, shock, relief – until you arrive at humor. Imagining the hybrid rattling his baskets, shaking the rack stays, and lumbering through the darkness.

Once a bicycle first wears a lock, a bicycle always wears a lock. The symbol is strange.

• • •

ROUTE – *Maine*

via Lincolnville Center, Waldoboro,
Damariscotta, Belfast, Camden
61 / 2,083 miles
3,996 elevation

HIGH – Lincolnville Center general store,
lakes, Belfast harbor, tailwind

LOW – Muscle pain, noisy motel neighbors

FUNNY – Anonymous coach saying, *Atta girl*.

FUEL – Coffee

FIXES – Plans

FIRST AID – Aspirin, muscle pain relief gel

SHELTER – The strength of my legs

FACTS & FINDINGS – The Bicycling and
Walking in the United States: 2018

Benchmark Report found the overall number of people commuting to work by bicycle has increased in recent years.³⁴ However, less than 1% of employees in the United States used bicycles for commuting to their job.³⁵

• • • •

Day 29: June 4-5

If it will be the lowest high on record, wish a PR: half of this cross-country route done.

I pedal stiff with layers. I slide numb fingers into the shirt's finger flaps to cut the chill. It binds. I fumble to grip the bars while rolling down the Maine hills. I use my teeth to pull back the flap to change gears for an ascent, then dig them back inside. I keep my thumbs out until my thumbs numb to red uselessness. Still, mists swirl over glittering waves. A bridge's lane for bicycles opens wide as a car.

You drive support. Always you turn up the heat, buy me coffee, and ask, *You ready for the next?*

On the last leg, Bar Harbor presses with traffic. A charter bus stalls. Window shoppers hunker in coats and gloves. A motorcyclist grumbles in a stocking cap. In failing raingear, I freeze. My phone's buttons shimmer uselessly.

The harbor appears. You wave me to your side. *Double-selfie?*

•

From the harbor sky filled with gulls and diving birds, we drive west – Seneca Falls, Cleveland, Indianapolis.

Tomorrow we will visit the women's history museum in Seneca Falls. We will watch the video, walk the two exhibits, and follow the NPS map to the offsite spots. You will ask, *Do you want me to take your picture on Elizabeth Cady Stanton's porch?*

The next day we will adore what comes of travel – Rock & Roll History Museum, Ohio cycling trails.

The day after that, you will attend a conference, a bike shop will tune up Lexa, and my leg will heal as I pedal easy halves on city trails.

As we drive from Maine, I ask, *How does anyone take a zero-day?*

You say, *It's on one day and tomorrow.*

• •

Pearls

When you commute to classes in graduate school, you will buy a bell from a big box by a brand you later learn is called “budget” in the industry. The bell’s innards rust into a crunchy orange that growls. Still, all the sounds delight, scooting over dog walkers, joggers with finger waves, and parents with strollers.

Later you will buy an American flag bell for the Trans America bicycle trail for the first cross-country adventure. Another bell will ping your presence on RAGBRAI among the horns, squawkers, sirens, and noisemakers. *On your left.*

Once into bicycle culture, you will learn a myriad way to signal presence. Like the welcoming, *Hey Sweetie*, of the chickadee, the sound bounces among the shadows and light, announcing, *I’m here.*

• • •

ROUTE – Maine

via Belfast, Verona, Ellsworth, Town Hill,
Mount Desert, Bar Harbor
on Bar Harbor pier
57 / 2,140 miles
3,088 elevation

[Driving Interlude – Zero Day: June 5]

HIGH – A half-century to Bar Harbor

LOW – A 40-degree start, rain, cold

FUNNY – The lowest high on record for that
day in Bar Harbor

FUEL – Continuous supply of hot coffee

FIXES – Layers, audiobooks

FIRST AID – A zero-day

SHELTER – Rental car, your support

FACTS & FINDINGS – Bicycling was stereotyped as unhealthy for women in the 19th century. Some argued “bicycling was physically and morally harmful to women,” could “alter women's personalities” or make any woman “fast, unwomanly, and desirous.”³⁶

• • • •

[interlude] Day 30: June 6

If yesterday was a zero-day, wish today a half-century.

In the motel hallways, youth cavort, chuckle, and play. We lie awake, until I flush the toilet, run the tap, and double-check the lock. They simmer down. You want four hours to tour, and I want a half-century. You want the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and I want the Towpath Trail. What does Lexa want? Why has she grown cold in my hands?

Chilled by the overcast, I wish for extra layers but make do with the body's heat from pushing. If she remains silent, I whisper anyway. *Talk to me*, I say, *this ride is important*.

The Towpath Trail surfaces shift with greetings from fellow users. A bridge reroutes the journey through a forest. Akron's detour zigzags through city and residential streets. In southern Akron, Canadian geese droppings dot the trail and plastic bottles float on stagnant water. In the trailheads beyond, amenities welcome with kiosks of maps. *Look*, I say to Lexa, *they welcome bicycles here*.

•

At Canal Fulton, I stretch in the park and wait for our rendezvous after your morning at the museum. At your arrival, I say, *Canal burger?* nodding towards a creamery that sells them. You order one with onion rings.

Around a bite, you say, *Good find*. Your foot bounces as you dip the onion rings in the ranch dressing.

What's on that thing, anyway?

Jalapeños and special sauce.

After lunch, we drive hundreds of miles – cross-stitching, audiobooks, music – until we arrive in Indianapolis for your conference. Once in the plush suite, we relax in a cuddle on the couch. I whisper, *Could life always be like this – lots of miles, good food, your smile, and a cush motel?*

Should we machinate about tomorrow? We do, planning Lexa's trip to a bike shop, grocery shopping to let us cook in the suite, and the conference schedule of sessions.

• •

Helmet

When an SUV turns in front of you and you T-bone the side door, you will be thrown from the bicycle to the entrance ramp of a freeway. The red-headed driver sobs into your shoulder. You exchange the necessary information. Then, jarred, bruised, and shocked, you pedal to work. After work, you trace the cracks in the helmet. In bed, your pelvis and hips ache.

Later you will remember all those winter commutes when tires lost traction on black ice and you slid, tangling with your bicycle. Or the other times bicycles fall – an unseen crack in the pavement, a mud slick, or a traffic cone. A helmet cushions and keeps a ride going.

Once you flip over the handlebars, you blink. *Get up*, you say inside yourself, then do. Who is this voice? Impact puncture. Bent handlebars. Ride over. Life saved. In your journal you write this gratitude, *to be alive*.

• • •

ROUTE - Ohio

via Cleveland, Akron, Canal Fulton
on Cuyahoga Valley National Park, Ohio and
Erie Canal Towpath Trail
51/ 2,192 miles
814 elevation

HIGH – Riding with Lexa

LOW – Allergies

FUNNY – Listening to comedy audiobooks

FUEL – Apricots, watermelon

FIXES – Cross-stitching

FIRST AID – Meditating

SHELTER – Suite: kitchen with full stove, refrigerator, real dishes; living room with two couches and a pullout; master bedroom with private full bath and two sinks

FACTS & FINDINGS – Though the United States National Transportation Safety Board recommended in 2019 an all-ages bicycle helmet law, no universal bicycle helmet law is in place in the United States.³⁷

• • • •

[interlude] Day 31: June 7

If Lexa has gotten me this far, I wish her the best of Indy TLC.

After a long sleep, laundry, and breakfast, Lexa and I pedal to a bike shop. Cultural Trail stairsteps through downtown – cobbles, icons, signage. Trail icons direct walkers to the right and cyclists to the left, but few seem to follow them. I do as the locals – ignore lights, disregard signage, speed with traffic. Downtown, students in backpacks and businesspeople with courier-style bags commute by bicycle. On the Monon Trail, cyclists in kit on road bikes and people in summer fitness gear on cruisers pedal, everyone sharing the trails with dog, strollers, children, and walkers. This rail trail moves smooth and flat under shady trees.

I meet you outside the bike shop where we'd scheduled a tune-up in 24-hours. I tap Lexa's seat, whispering, *Will you be okay if I ride Revolt while you're in the shop?*

You say, *She'll be okay.*

•

We roll Lexa into the bike shop's garage. You talk to the mechanic. He wows with stories of a supported bike ride from Wisconsin Dells to Indianapolis, 425 miles in two days. His wife and daughter drove support and handed him what he needed to keep his 16-mph average. Then he got a hernia, then he got four hernias. Then his leg with numb for three days. He upgraded to a triathlon-type saddle with a hollow center. It took him 30 days to break in the foam. You ask what Lexa needs. I ask if a triathlon-type saddle or anything in the shop might help the numbness and lack of dexterity in my hands.

The mechanic shows us gel pads for the handlebars and nods. *She'd be ready tomorrow.*

We find take-out. At the motel, I journal, meditate, and examine the trails around Indianapolis, planning routes for the next three days of your conference. Where might I go tomorrow with Revolt?

• •

Like a Neon Light

When the greeters on the Natchez Trace Trail give you a fluorescent vest, they will say, *We only need your picture – no name or anything*. You say, *Cheese*. Thanking the couple, you ride the miles towards Nashville and beyond it, a bicycle icon over your heart.

Later you will try shirts in hues to be seen, triangles to wiggle above your back tire, ankle bands to keep pants from snagging the cassette. Sometimes the brilliance of a ride's participation shirt will blind you.

Once you select your illumination, you determine: 1) you prefer not to be the center of attention, and 2) being seen enables targeting, harassment, bullying, and ridicule. Yet, when you hold a bicycle in your hands at dawn, the road gives you the light.

• • •

ROUTE – Indiana

via Indianapolis
on Indianapolis Cultural Trail, Monon Trail
11 / 2,202 miles
89 elevation

HIGH – Bicycle commuter traffic

LOW – Shortest bike day

FUNNY – Bike mechanic's stories of long-distance rides with family driving support

FUEL – Stovetop cooking veggies, pour-over coffee

FIXES – Clean laundry

FIRST AID – Lexa's tune-up and repairs:
chain, silicone liners for bars, handlebar
tape, cassette

SHELTER – Suite!

FACTS & FINDINGS – Bicyclists are categorized into four typologies: 1) strong and fearless, 2) enthused and confident, 3) interested but concerned, and 4) no way, no how. Strong and fearless are people who will ride with limited, or no infrastructure specifically created for bicycles.³⁸

• • • •

[interlude] Day 32: June 8

If you conference all day, I wish to ride a half in Indy.

I ask your bicycle, *You up for this, Revolt?* From downtown, I loop to a park where chickadees call, *Hey, sweetie*. At the 96th Street's facilities, a walker turns on a pet spigot for a cat with a belled collar. On Monon Trail, a tree crew clears, cuts, and shreds branches. Summer shade dabbles every commuter on the trail. At a closure sign, I keep to the trail unsure of direction, but a guard stops me at an art museum's gate. *We don't like cyclists back here*.

Is this still the Canal trail? I ask, *A sign said 'Closed.'* *I crossed the bridge hoping to get to a road. Is there one?* *I'm not from here*.

I can let you through, he says, leaning a young face through the door. *Back up. The gate swings that way*. I thank him as I bike through.

I'm just a peon, he says. *Have a good rest of your day*.

•

We meet at the motel to return to the bike shop. The mechanic has touched up Lexa's paint and coated her with wax to a bright shine. *She has wear where she sits on your bike rack*. He gives us two foam sleeves to wrap her frame where the rack holds her steady. He flips Lexa over. *Let me show you what's going on with your chain*. He shows where another bike mechanic threaded the chain over the bracket rather than the cog. *This likely was causing the shifting difficulties*.

Mmm, you say, crossing your arms.

The mechanic taps where the chain's friction had worn grooves into the bracket. *The cassette had started to shark fin*.

I ignore the talk, turning to Lexa. She glimmers in the sun. I trace the new tape on the handlebars and squeeze for the gel padding underneath. *Would this solve the numbness and dexterity issues? Or will I still have to use my entire arm and shoulder to shift from Washington back to Minnesota?*

• •

Flats

When you change your first tube, it follows an epic study – how-to videos, books, articles – and with a friend who serves as coach. *Now, with the other tire iron....* Grease smears everything. You sweat. The floor pump trembles in your hands.

Later you will bike supported cross-country, along rivers, north to south, and east to west. Flats are an occasional annoyance at organized club rides, the mega-RAGBRAI rides, and on solitary loops of your city. At each flat, you walk or call for help, shaking with anger, *I don't know how to fix it.*

One more time: You biked cross-country – and didn't know how to change a flat.

Once you flip over the handlebars 30 miles from home, a friend arrives as SAG. Back at home, bruised, road-rash oozing, handlebars bent, you fix the flat, anger oiled with adrenaline. Then, as if a lesson is worth repeating, you fix five flats on Lexa over the next month. Then you say, *It's nothing to fix a flat. Nothing at all.*

...

ROUTE – Indiana

via Indianapolis
on Cultural Trail, Monon Trail, Falls Creek Trail, Harrison Trail, Central Canal Trail, White River Trail, Fort Harrison State Park
50 / 2,252 miles
364 elevation

HIGH – Bike mechanic taking care of Lexa

LOW – Getting rerouted from the Canal Trail

FUNNY – Traffic, road construction, trail upkeep

FUEL – Suite cooking, hot cocoa

FIXES – Lexa's tune-up, spot painting, correctly threaded chain

FIRST AID – Indianapolis trails

SHELTER – Suite!

FACTS & FINDINGS – The League of American Bicyclists reported in 2019 women are 28% of all bicycle commuters in the United States.³⁹ This number has increased by 37% in recent years, with larger cities seeing the biggest increase.⁴⁰

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[interlude] Day 33: June 9-11

If I planned options, I wish to bike each.

We're both to our day early. I pedal through a set-up of a pride festival in Vets Memorial Park to find White River Trail. Birdsongs filter through the leaves. The trail rises and falls under bridges, twists, and turns. I follow roads south and refuel at Southwest City Park. Other cyclists pedal here, moving fast and silent. Southern Indiana shimmers with lit fields and welcomes with shady roads that follow bluffs. Early summer corn stands at multiple heights – little flags of hope, upper calf, knee, mid-thigh. I am off route. I am making the journey up. I follow phone recommendations, or when several cyclists turn on a given road, I turn too. In Martinsville, a Giant Festival roadblocks the square with orange fencing, a stage, and vendors. Athletes strut. Men bullhorn announcements. What makes one a giant? What makes one a cyclist? When did I become less afraid to pedal such roads?

•

I refuel and recover, worrying how long I left Lexa alone. *Would Giants roofie water bottles?* Then seven gorgeous curves, seven shady bluffs of Blue Bluff Road, seven sun-brushed fields, and seven switchbacks in Yellow State Forest welcome. Through Dolan and New Unionville, cyclists appear, including a group of 20, bringing my rough count for a Saturday in Indiana to 30+. *Are they my tribe? Or are we one forest, a grove of motion under Indianan skies?*

You arrive for our long haul back to Minnesota. We drive with ease, an audiobook as our third companion. We take turns at the wheel. We sleep. I do everything to focus on the moment. Soon the next mini leg begins with you as support, then I ride solo and self-supported. What makes me most afraid?

• •

Lights

When you experiment with bicycle lights, you will try the offerings. Some wrap around spokes, a stem, or handlebars. Some pulse or flash. Some clamp, lock, or fasten. Some take AA, AAA, coin-shaped discs, others USB. Lights let you see the trails that whisper with darkness. Your favorite places are the pockets of heat and cool, where scents lift from the streets to trail bridges and quiet nothing of neighborhoods.

Later you will read about legal expectations for bicyclists, which states require front and rear reflectors, or front and rear lights. *Be seen, be safe*, one campaign reads. At the Nebraska State Fair, a bike group offers free lights to those who park their bicycles at a bike barn.

Once in a while at a commute's start, you will be lightless – lights forgot or dead and with sunset sooner than thought. Any moment can be jerry-rigged or hacked. Even a mobile phone can illuminate the route home.

• • •

ROUTE – Indiana

via Indianapolis, Brooklyn, Centerton,
Martinsville, Hindustan, Dolan, Chamlin
Meadows, New Unionville, Bloomington
on Central Canal Towpath, Indianapolis
Cultural Trail, White River Trail, Blue Bluff
Road, Old Highway 37, Yellow State Park
61 / 2,313 miles
1,673 elevation

[Driving Interlude – Zero Days: June 10-11]

HIGH – Riding to that good place

LOW – Allergies

FUNNY – Giant Festival, squeaky cat, your
calm

FUEL – Pour over coffee

FIXES – First bike route planned on my own

FIRST AID – Free 10-day meditation course

SHELTER – Friends, rental car, you

FACTS & FINDINGS – A 2018 report found some states have dedicated funding for bicycling and walking (IL, IO, MN, OH, PE, VT, WA, WI), while others do not (ID, IN, ME, MT, NH, NY, ND).⁴¹

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Day 34: June 12

If the morning means driving, I wish the afternoon means riding.

We drive. I feed you breakfast, find the rest stops, and keep the audiobooks playing. At one with securely locked trash cans, friendly squirrels greet us. You ask, *Do you want to roll down the hills?*

You start me at Sherman Pass in the afternoon for 6.4 miles without a single pedal stroke, then off and on pedaling until mile 10. The first 20 miles of the day finish in an hour – good enough roads, clear shoulders, and truckers who honk twice to signal presence. I focus on my core. At the first hill, I cheer, *Finally, something to do*. We meet in Kettle Falls. You drive me back to Sherman Pass. I roll down it towards Republic, pedaling the five miles of Golden Tiger Pathway – foothills, trees, and rocks above highway and homes. I listen for birds, for the ones that twilled in the Cascades, having memorized their song, but not their name.

•

In the motel, I recover. You open the door and windows to air out the half-sewer, half-air freshener stink. As I fuss with the domesticities and stretch, testing what remains of the injury, a man in the parking lot in blue jeans, boots, and a button-down plaid shirt, surveys his motorcycle around puffs of a cigarette. You talk for an hour about the road.

I sort my kit and supplies. What might I send home with you? What do I need?

What lessons will carry into the rest of the journey?

1. Carry all fuel – food, water.
2. Never stop biking.
3. Multi-task while riding.
4. Strategize for necessary breaks.
5. Groceries first, then motel.
6. Shower, laundry, refuel, meditate.
7. Journal.
8. Call home, stretch, route plan.

When you join me in the room, I share my list. You ask, *Is that it?*

For the first half. Do you think there will be more?

• •

Muffled

When you first see the ad in the cycling gear catalog for wind noise reduction, you will giggle. *These are a gimmick, right?* Fussy strips, extra clips, fabric triangles to wrap around a chin strap. You read gear reviews that reference Elvis sideburns. One reviewer whines, *They're calling me Wolverine.*

Later you will note how highway traffic eradicates thought, wind blasts eliminate the grumble of trucks that sneak up from behind, rough roads smash conversations. The nattering of podcasts, audiobooks, or music squelches into background noise. What would it mean to hear at all?

Once they arrive, you will ride into pre-dawn silence. Behind you, every pedal stroke shushes, vehicles purr with heat, Nebraska wind pushes through the fields, and bicycle podcasts offer – training plans, infrastructure advocacy, new tech, interviews with leaders.

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ROUTE – Washington

via Colville, Kettle Falls, Republic
on Golden Tiger Pathway
52 / 2,365 miles
692 elevation

HIGH – Mountaintop half-century, Colville
Forest, Washington landscape
LOW – Twisty mountain tummy troubles
FUNNY – You chatting with a motel neighbor

FUEL – Still so much food
FIXES – Motel air freshener set outside
FIRST AID – Your support for my healing leg
SHELTER – Rental car

FACTS & FINDINGS – The Rails to Trails
Conservatory lists the total multipurpose rail
trails per state:⁴²

2,131 – MN	562 – NH
2,111 – PE	470 – IN
1,179 – NY	464 – ID
1,905 – WI	400 – ME
1,085 – WA	247 – MT
1,037 – IL	130 – VT
1,028 – OH	36 – ND
900 – IA	

....

Day 35: June 13

If a mountain pass beginning is possible, I wish it now as my leg twinges.

From Wauconda pass, I roll to Republic, bundled in layers, then roll from the pass to Okanogan. The air silences mental chatter. The ride becomes a music of roads, mountains, and sage.

I think little. I think about sliding peeled oranges from a baggie and my wet sticky fingertips. I think about un-layering, first the sparkly gloves, then waiting, then unzipping the raincoat, then each pullover. Then stopping to remove layers, I think about using my numb fingers to remove the legwarmers and socks without falling over. Then, because I crammed the layers into my bag, I can no longer get into my bag. How can I eat and ride like this? Then I search for a pull-in to adjust the fuel. Then I find one and eat freeze-dried mangos and dates. Then I think I need to find a place to potty. Is there such a place? Where will I potty? Then I find a place with little cover. Then I beg forgiveness.

•

At a grocery store, you lift Lexa to the bike rack. With 19 miles to go, I run in, but once we're on the road, you stare at the rearview mirror, gripping the wheel. *Where's Lexa?*

She's gone.

Back inside the grocery, the clerk and I replay surveillance footage. The tapes reveal we left with Lexa. Meanwhile, you walk the route, stopping every person, *Have you seen Lexa?*

At the police station, we file a missing bicycle report. I tell you, *He was so nice.*

At a bike shop, they say they can sell us a touring bike, but not a Lexa. A shop elsewhere has a 2017 Lexa for \$1,100. Lexa costs \$500 and is equipped – brackets, mounts, chain, cassette, silicone gel handlebar strips. My belly rumbles. I ride Revolt for the last 19 miles. At the motel, you do the laundry and I recover. Whenever you look at me, I tell you, *Just fix it.* Unless Lexa reappears, maybe I can ride Revolt the 170 miles to the coast, even if my body thinks he's a stranger.

• •

On Body Language

When you read the first book, you will practice observation. Hands broadcast, feet signal direction, torsos invite or bar. One book advises to count for three: 1) toes lifting, 2) thumbs popping, 3) head high. *Positive*, you read, *upbeat*.

Later the lesson will be self-soothing – legs press, hands rub, fingers trace. Self-directed touch calm. You count for three, waiting.

Once you’ve read several books, you make a study of gestures and check your reading on what you perceive as discomfort, asking a friend, *Are you okay?* The body quakes with agitation, but the answer is, *I’m fine*. When air-drums, head-nods, and shoulder sways appear, you ask, *What are you thinking about?* The body sings, but the answer is, *Nothing*.

• • •

ROUTE - *Washington*

via Republic, Twisp, Winthrop
on Colville National forest roads
101 / 2,466 miles
1,295 elevation

HIGH – Mountaintop century, rivers, a quiet mind

LOW – You lost Lexa

FUNNY – Last 19 miles on Revolt to finish the century

FUEL – Hot coco

FIXES – Cop in Twisp to help find Lexa

FIRST AID – Motel organic shampoos and soaps

SHELTER – Police station, grocery office with security tape, rental car looking for Lexa

FACTS & FINDINGS – In 2007, Washington was the first state to ban text messaging for all drivers.⁴³

• • • •

Day 36: June 14

If we machinate about Lexa, I wish for Lexa and when you look at me, I say, *Just fix it.*

Bundled, I start at Washington Pass in a hover over Revolt's unfamiliar body – disc brakes, upright top bars, a hybrid of touring and hybrid bicycle. For the first four miles at 7% grade, his brakes whine, until he yields to the shift of my hips. By mile 82, I ask, *Revolt, how many miles do you want with me?*

After Washington Pass and Rainy pass, we rendezvous at Diablo Lake to let the green-blue water refuel us. Then I pedal two little hills and through two fantastic tunnels. The first tunnel splashes with mud and showers us from what weeps from the rocks. The second tunnel requires a bicycle signal to be pushed to alert others of our presence. Inside the tunnel, the road vanishes, illuminated by teeny reflectors on the ground and the distant opening ahead. The delight of it gives me the giggles, that dissolve into full-bellied laughter. *Revolt, I say, You are too much fun. You'll get me into trouble.*

•

At a park in Newhalem, I lean Revolt against the bike hitch and sit beside you. Can we make today a mountain century, too?

You say, *Lexa is found*, and play the message. A contractor had found her on the roadside and dropped her off at the bike shop. You start the car. *Let's get Lexa.*

I ask, *Should we put Revolt on the bike rack, first?*

At the bike shop, the mechanic lists the damages – bent crank, lost mirrors, tire rips, damaged shifter. Not having enough parts for her, they recommend another shop in another town closer to the ocean. *You've helped with Lexa. Can you help with my hands?* I explain the numbness and dexterity issues.

The mechanic says, *Look over each shoulder every so often, and up and down, and lower down your shoulders.*

Then, we spend money – new gloves, new tee shirts, new mirrors. When they hand us the receipt, I say, *Thank you. We appreciate this.*

• •

Nonverbals

When you study body language, a good portion involves nonverbals. Some relate to the body, others not. A bag left on a table signals territory. Certain furniture invites lingering. Others inspire hurry. A color signals danger or welcome.

Later you will become aware of social signaling. Yard signs will congratulate recent high school graduates. Children will chalk positive sentiments on the pavement of local trails. Local businesses will use signage to espouse PSAs. If language-based, the messages trumpet complex social signals.

Once such reading becomes a habit, you will practice how to communicate: 1) you are safe, and 2) you are not a target, victim, or chump. Who is the audience – bicycle, self, or stranger?

• • •

ROUTE – *Washington*

via Twisp, Winthrop, Passes, Newhalem
on mountain roads
82/ 2,548 miles
1,613 elevation

HIGH – Mountaintop metric century,
cascades, rivers

LOW – Bad tummy trouble, lost Lexa

FUNNY – Lexa is found! Nice bike people
who saved Lexa

FUEL – The mountainscape

FIXES – Befriending Revolt

FIRST AID – Meditating, music

SHELTER – Rental car

FACTS & FINDINGS – According to research published in *Transportation Research Record* in 2019 from researchers at Texas A&M University and Rutgers University, news reports in the media on bicycle accidents followed the victim-blaming narrative, rather than addressing the safety of roadways, infrastructure, or communities.⁴⁴

• • • •

Day 37: June 15

If the day bookends on roads, I wish the middle all trails.

From the town in the mountains where someone found Lexa, it takes an hour to reach the Cascade Trailhead. Under the forest's canopy, shaggy trees shadow the Cascade's flora. I slide my sunglasses to the tip of my nose. Revolt handles the trail's unexpected terrain – narrow ruts, moss, gravel, footpath, paved, woodland. If wide enough to drive a vehicle, few others join our travel – a couple with a dog, a man with a dog, a lady with a dog, two ladies on their own. Mostly, Revolt, me, and the trail become synonymous with the green mountains, braided clouds, sandy riverbanks, and feathered creatures. *Let's live here, Revolt*, I whisper. Revolt bounces.

We pedal the road to the next trail where I hold my breath against fish rot and slow to read an educational sign. A National Park Service conservation project repopulates coastal waters with seabirds and this project is the stink. No one else pedals or walks here. Is the lesson awareness or waiting for high tide?

•

We meet near the San Juan Island ferry terminal and ogle the line of travelers with island destinations. *Let's try and go there someday.*

Okay. We recap the route – pedestrian bridge, massive boats, tidal waters, how blue the water is, how lovely the coast. You say, *You biked all the way here.* You mean to the ocean.

In Washington Park, we drive the loop, pausing in pull-ins to gaze into the wonder of the ocean, west coast, and open sky. *Let's stay here all day.*

We have to go get Lexa, you say, mentioning the bike shop in Burlington that has Lexa in the hands of a mechanic.

Once there, you talk with the mechanic. Lexa's shifters and tires were fixed, but the bend in the crank can't be straightened. You look at me and I say, *Just fix it.* Then I ask, *Will Revolt's fit?* You roll Revolt into the shop, then remerge with both bicycles. Lexa's cranks now mismatch, and Revolt is un-ridable. My tummy rumbles. Will Lexa make it to Minnesota?

• •

Emotional Intelligence

When research takes you towards the social, you will begin with emotional. Books will talk advantages of emotional awareness. *Begin with the self*, one suggests.

Later a certification will require mindful practices. Another contends with difficult emotions. One requests making a feeling inventory based on a wheel of emotions. The body becomes part of the listening practice – where you hold at the throat, where you grip around the eyes. Does the body invite an emotion or does an emotion invite the body? Is the body or the emotion in charge?

Once you discover the EQ test, you send it to friends. If they take it, they do not share their score. You take it. The imperfect score is both a challenge and an invitation.

• • •

ROUTE – *Washington*

via Newhalem, Marblemount, Concrete,
Sedro-Woolley, Whitney, Burlington,
Anacortes
on Cascade Trail, Tommy Thompson Trail,
United States Bicycle Route 10
81 / 2,629 miles
889 elevation

HIGH – Cascade Trail

LOW – Waiting for Lexa

FUNNY – Lots of cyclists pedaling

FUEL – Ocean

FIXES – Being alone, laughing while riding
Revolt

FIRST AID – Burlington bike shop for Lexa

SHELTER – Washington Park pull-ins to see
the water

FACTS & FINDINGS – The Bike League
reported commuting by bicycle is on the rise,
and trips by bicycle have doubled in the
United States in 2019.⁴⁵

• • • •

Day 38: June 16

If the last day of support, I wish it joyful – satellite comedy, landscape, machinating.

I make lists – what to swap out, send home, buy – and calculate mileage. *Can I bike 127, 102, or 91 today?* Who am I? Will Lexa join me?

I ride along a river. I rendezvous in Manresa Grotto with you. A jeep jounces with hunters who leap out to potty, then jounce away.

I ride to Newport where you nap in the rental. I tap the window. *I need thirty dollars.* You blink, bleary-eyed. *Now.*

You can have whatever you need.

On Serenity Lee Bike Trail, roots jolt the surface until new pavement smooths the ride. A tween with a lab has him sit primly, then he lunges toward Lexa as if she's a rabbit. My giggles become infectious – the tween, her mom, the lab. Wind giggles the lake with whitecaps.

•

I say, *Idaho – unbelievably beautiful.*

You say, *You're beautiful*, and nod to a bag of groceries and supplies. *Can you bike to the motel?*

I bike Sandpoint Byway Trail – along the river, under the highway, up a grassy ridge, on a road, over railroad tracks – to a motel with a western theme. *This is awesome*, I say giggling, then tell you about all I've seen over the day. The self-supported bicyclers who sway in the wind with their panniers. The truckers who buzz and choke the air with bursts of smoke. The grey-haired recumbent riders who nod and finger wave. The traffic of SUVs, cars, and minivans. The cyclists in kit who carry little and float above their bicycles. The tattooed gal in a wheelchair who pushes into the wind. The sheriff who passes and makes everyone behave. The support driver that's you and one more night together. Can I bike the next fortnight alone – me and Lexa, that's it? Will she talk to me?

• •

Social Intelligence

When you first register for the class, you make a hard pre-class study. When the class gets started, it focuses on monitoring, which uses social media data to become aware.

Later, you will be tasked to select businesses, brands, or non-profits for the assignments. This is how to listen to a bio. This is how a word cloud sounds. This is a measurement strategy on conversation, sentiment, and reach. Monitoring leads to insights. This bicycle group focuses on social justice. That bicycle group sells bike tours. This one here talks about survey findings. That one over there has become silent. Based on this, you recommend _____ and _____.

Once the class is near its end, you will begin the final project. Select a national brand. Establish a listening goal. Monitor. Based on what you hear, make recommendations. Of course, you select a bicycle one, and you will understand how to crunch the data of social fears.

• • •

ROUTE – *Washington to Idaho*

via Colville, Newport, Sandpoint, Ponderay
on Serenity Lee Trail, Long Bridge Trail,
Sandpoint Byway Trail
94 / 2,724 miles
1,463 elevation

HIGH – Tailwind ride

LOW – Long drive to start, late start

FUNNY – Cute western-themed motel

FUEL – You

FIXES – You

FIRST AID – You

SHELTER – You

FACTS & FINDINGS – In the United States, though bicyclists account for 1% of all trips, they accounted for 2% of all traffic fatalities.⁴⁶ In 2019, the Bicycle Friendly State Report Card listed fatalities per 10,000 bike commuters in the following states:⁴⁷

15.3 – NH	7.2 – IL	4.3 – VT
13.2 – ND	6.7 – NY	4.4 – WI
12.4 – OH	6.5 – IA	4.2 – ID
10.8 – IN	5.6 – PE	3.4 – MN
10.3 – ME	4.5 – WA	2.9 – MT

• • • •

Day 39: June 17

If Lexa's return quelled my tummy trouble, I wish my tummy remains calm.

How much are the gut and emotions linked?

We kiss goodbye and I ride weighted with all I carry into beauty. All day one sip of water or one snack consumed makes us lighter. Maybe the lesson is to remain nourished? Services become limited, then disappear. Only camping appears on the map for 35 miles. My phone cannot keep a signal. I whisper to Lexa, *Is that the way it goes?* When a signal appears, I call you, *Can you find a motel somewhere 35 miles ahead?* Then the signal drops and I ride where only Lexa, birds, and trees go. When a signal flickers 25 miles later, I call you hoping to sleep anywhere. Should we learn to wild camp? Should we learn to camp alone? What would that mean? Are there bears?

You say, *I reserved a B&B right where the highway meets the road.*

•

Half under construction, I use the code, check the room, and call the owners to okay the night. I push back the curtains and gape. The lodge-style building overlooks the Kootenay River. Then I eat all of tomorrow's B&B breakfast and recover – shower, laundry, meditate, journal.

When other residents arrive, a gal says, *Oh, you're a bicyclist*, and giggles. *The owner said a "biker" was staying here and I was worried.*

It's just Lexa and me.

We're here for a renaissance-themed wedding.

Then I stretch and tend blisters. You want me to calculate the days and miles to Minnesota. I want to focus on the moment, not the destination, the work that's here, not where it might be.

Does my personality shift when I am alone with my bicycle? What does Lexa think?

• •

Karate Begins

When the karate class starts, a message from the instructor identifies a given door that opens at a given time. Keycard access required.

Later you will learn etiquette. An instructor will say, *It's proper to bow when exiting and entering the class.* A white belt will say, *Sometimes they try and trick us, then make us do push-ups when we forget.*

Once, after class, as you await a ride home, you trace the proper door's brassy handles. Would you have chosen another physical activity should other doors have opened? How much of who we are is from our own volition? How much is from the world into which we fall? You are in karate because karate has a door to open.

• • •

ROUTE – *Idaho to Montana*

via Ponderay, Clark Fork
on Kaniksu National Forest and Kootenai
National Forest roads
79 / 2,802 miles
2,418 elevation

HIGH – Rivers to as bike companions

LOW – Headwind

FUNNY – Unbelievable view from B&B

FUEL – B&B food, cranberries, coffee, boiled
eggs, oranges, bananas

FIXES – White noise machine for sleep

FIRST AID – A kiss and hug goodbye

SHELTER – Your help with motels

FACTS & FINDINGS – A People for Bikes
2021 study found physical, social, and cultural
barriers, including persistent stereotypes,
prevent people from cycling.⁴⁸

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Day 40: June 18

If remoteness is 70 miles long, wish for it.

At the Libby Dam, we pause at a kiosk. A visitor center truck arrives with two gals.

Questions about the dam?

The 55 miles of no services to Eureka is a bit intimidating. I ask, *Will it be that remote?*

That gets them talking camping and hiking alone and sightings of bears and moose in the hills along the reservoir. *Do you have bear spray?* Lexa shakes the dog spray on her bag. I tap the whistle on my jacket zipper but trace the bare spot on my wrist where a bear scare sat as a kid.

When I ask if the park service runs sweeps, one gal says it doesn't, but offers, *You could hitchhike?*

Have you hitchhiked? She shakes her head no.

They talk ecology, *Do you know about fish ladders?* They describe a type of fish that gathers at the dam each year, then goes to another river to spawn. We thank them, then ride. What would reroute us to another adventure?

•

In Eureka, you stay on the line as I pay the c-store clerk who recommends I grocery shop there. Once in the room, you say, *I'm still here?* I nibble and snack – clementines, rice cakes, plantain chips, sunflower butter – saving what remains for tomorrow. Why do I push each limit, then beyond it to the next?

You natter about driving Cheyenne to Nebraska, the pronghorns you glimpsed, the wind turbines along the highway, the sunrise on the land. You natter about sleeping at a rest area, *Just real quick.*

I natter about the visitor center gals. *They've counted 17 mated pairs of bald eagles.* I natter about needing to recalibrate the cyclometer, *It says I burned 7,600 calories.* I natter about numbering the miles by the crossroads and the movement of the land, learning about gulches and creeks. *Nothing tests your knowledge about maps better than biking through them.* I natter about finding the plastic lump that was the whistle, *I think we melted it doing laundry somewhere in Washington.*

• •

Aims

When a karate instructor will ask, *Has everyone read the syllabus?* Eyes widen and blink. The syllabus will note multiple instructors and multiple degrees – PhDs, MSs, Dans, ranks, belts. To which should you aspire? The class whispers. The yellow belt test is the semester’s culmination.

Later the instructor will ask each student to name previous self-defense training. Everyone has some – krav maga, karate, taekwondo, Chinese martial arts – some have more.

Once the instructor will ask why you are in the class and everyone answers. After class, a white belt asks again. You say, *Because I’d never done it before. You?* The answer: *I’ve always wanted to.*

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ROUTE - Montana

via Libby, Rexford, Eureka
on Old Haul Road
84 / 2,886 miles
2,733 elevation

HIGH – Lake Koocanusa, hills, gulches, dam, reservoir, mountains

LOW – Fuel supply worries, all-day rain

FUNNY – You for staying on the line until services were lost

FUEL – Rexford over-shopping for groceries

FIXES – Completing the 70 miles of remoteness alone

FIRST AID – Warm welcome by the Libby Dam Visitor Center gals

SHELTER – Gazebo at the Libby Dam

FACTS & FINDINGS – A barrier for women cyclists was the logistics.⁴⁹

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Day 41: June 19

If some harass bikers, wish for those who charm them.

Sixteen miles into the ride, and no place to potty appears. Not a rest area, a side road of trees, or a guardrail. When a good enough spot appears, we stop. A delivery truck pulls to an idle at the end of the road. We stretch, add sunblock, sizing the audience. At our wave, the truck approaches. A greying man with a few teeth says, *How are you?* gut pressing against uniform.

Good. Just stopping to take a stretch. How are you?

Fine. I saw you in Eureka a while back. It's amazing what you do. I couldn't do it.

Maybe he asks where we're from. Maybe we say something about the expanse of the land here. Maybe he alerts his radio friends. Maybe all the trucks that suddenly appear are traffic as usual. Whatever. We keep pedaling the shoulder, dodging blasts of smoke, and listening to the ride.

•

After the shopping, the arrival at the cute motel, and dinner, I call you with stories of charm. *A guy pulling a trailer with gear said, 'You're traveling light.'* I talk about the lake there and Lexa, how everything I eat makes her lighter. *Do I look light?* Am I light?

I tell you about the biker with empty panniers who said, *Sorry about the hill there. I hope I wasn't crowding you.* I tell you about his jokes on long-distance cycling, his charmed stories of his wife plus dog who drives support, and his bicycle-focused blog. I tell you he asked my name and I said, *I'll give it to you as long as you don't harass and stalk. Okay?* You make a noise and I say, *He said okay. Is it weird I want to feel safe?* What do I need to feel safe?

I tell you about the motel clerk who sells sandwich bags of Epsom salt and baking soda for \$4 and the yarrow tea advice. *She said yarrow gets rid of her son's ails. Every time.*

• •

Uniform

When the next karate class starts, you will have to read the syllabus, leaving every forbidden object at home. But, during the warm-up, you are told, *Watch*. You shuffle to the side of the room, setting your smartwatch by your bag. Five minutes later, you are told, *Socks*. You ask, *Not even yoga socks?* pointing to their nubby traction dots. These too join the watch. Soon the scold is, *Hat*. Winterized hat hair sits every which way. What isn't forbidden?

Later you perform jumping jacks, sans sports bra. You complete rolling sit-ups sans mat. You grit teeth and bark to ten in Japanese.

Once, you ask, *What can we wear?* A purple belt names something in Japanese for the head, a special gift. A black belt says, *I have uniforms. Thirty dollars*. Classmates raise their hands.

• • •

ROUTE - Montana

via Eureka, Whitefish, Columbia Falls
on Old Highway (Tobacco Road), Farm to
Market Road, Whitefish bike lane and trails
70 / 2,957 miles
2,644 elevation

HIGH – Farm to Market Road's view: farms, ranches, valleys, mountains

LOW – Highway 93, no shoulders before Whitefish with several miles of intense traffic, including a blast of black smoke from a truck

FUNNY – Baggie of Epsom salt, yarrow, and baking soda for \$4

FUEL – Plantain chips, rice cakes, nut butter

FIXES – Legs take three days

FIRST AID – Stories from a friendly cyclist supported by wife, dog, and RV

SHELTER – Cute motel

FACTS & FINDINGS – The United States Department of Transportation reported distracted driving killed 2,841 people in 2018.⁵⁰

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Day 42: June 20

If Glacial National Park astounds, wish for less extraordinary traffic.

Somewhere near Essex, an enormous beetle lands on us. *Oh-ab*, I shout, brushing at the monster who clutches my shirt's fabric. Lexa jerks from the six inches of shoulder. Traffic streams. I jerk Lexa back. When traffic clears, I peek down, but the bug remains. Feathered and black eyebrow prongs shiver. I swat it away, catching the giggles. We pedal through wisps of cottonwood adrift like snow. Or maybe like fairies at a mountaintop. Or maybe like fireflies in the glooming. When we stop later, another beetle sits on Lexa's bag, clutching the clip. With a pinecone, I brush him off too, giggling. *Who are these creatures, Lexa?*

At Marias Pass, my watch marks the elevation at 5,288 feet, but a sign says 5,218. We refuel at the summit. A group from the red tourist cars take photos, bouncing, laughing, and posing.

We roll downhill to the false summit and keep rolling.

•

When I call you, I tell you about a mountain biker doing the Red Meadow Pass Loop who said things like *off-reading, single-track*, and *not much of civilization*. Mid-conversation, a hiker joined us. *He came right behind me without a sound*, I say to you, shivering at the memory.

I tell you about the road. *There was traffic, traffic, traffic*. You harrumph. *The views were good. Pretty, then more pretty*.

I tell you about getting the giggles. I tell you about Lexa's tail wag. I tell you about a bag that leaked onto everything – phone, layers, pepper spray. *Why are there no trashcans? How can there be no services?*

Then I don't tell you 42 things. I don't even type them in my journal. What I type is this: *There are mosquitos in here. I didn't see any holes in the window, though the room door isn't a perfect seal. One bit my eyebrow. Wi-Fi connection is questionable. Weather barely loads. Google Maps barely loads. Email might be loading. And that's all*.

Why?

• •

Shape of the Universe

When you finish the first session of Ten No Kata, *Punching is discipline work*, one black belt will say. Another says, *You thought you knew your right from your left*, adding something like, *Shotokan teaches you the balance*.

Later another black belt will say, *Fudo Dachi. Immovable stance*. Later still, a karate instructor will say, *Squeeze your fist at the last moment*. And later, another instructor will say, *Flip the fist over at the end*. During the drills, the direction mishmash between English and Japanese. *Yoi. Step. Punch. Reverse. Elbow. Strike. Mawatte. 45 degrees*.

When an instructor says, *You will find all these drills in our class folder. Memorize them*. The class blinks, some nod, *Yes, Sensei*. Others nod, *Yes, Sensei*. You join. This too is a drill.

• • •

ROUTE – Montana

via Columbia Falls, West Glacial, East Glacial
on Glacier National Park roads
76 / 3,033 miles
4,035 elevation

HIGH – Flathead River, snow-capped
mountains

LOW – Tummy troubles

FUNNY – Beetle bug

FUEL – Sweet potato chips, oranges,
avocados

FIXES – Marias Pass Summit

FIRST AID – Tea tree oil bug spray

SHELTER – Lying on the floor of the motel
room hidden by the bed, Lexa as guard
bicycle wedged against the door

FACTS & FINDINGS – According to a 2018 Benchmark Study on bicycling and walking, some states (MT, ID, IA, NH, ND, & WI) have never adopted a complete streets policy, while other states (IA & MT) have never adopted a statewide bicycle and pedestrian plan.⁵¹

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Day 43: June 21

If for miles we glance back at the Rockies, we wish they remain as guardians of what was and will remain in silence.

All morning, we lose elevation as the land flattens into vast, sweeping fields. In Cut Bank, we wave to a passing sheriff. Near the rest area and park, two construction workers follow our progress. One says to the other, *Yeah, you don't see that as much.*

What was the first half of the conversation? We imagine possibilities. *There's a woman cyclist.* Or: *There's a long-distance biker.* Or: *There's someone on an adventure.* Or: *There's a long-time married couple.*

As we pedal from town, the sheriff passes again, and we wave, *Thanks.* Then the land becomes familiar, homelike, Nebraskan – wide highway shoulders, endless fields, grain elevators, towns. Animals appear – cows, horses, pigs.

•

I tell you, *I journaled and got my data all up to date.*

You say, *That's good.*

I tell you about the day, *No services on the reservation. It's like outside of commerce. A bit like Amish areas in Iowa, but less curious and domestic. It's more aloof and maybe a little pissed off.*

Yeah, you say, I'd be a little pissed off.

I tell you about the expensive chain motel and the fair-priced chain grocery. *I got the basics. Nothing fancy.*

You say, *Make a list of what you need me to get you when we meet up in Minnesota. What day do you think you'll get there?*

I tell you about my audiobook and you tell me about mowing the yard and the heat. I tell you, *It's going to be 103 miles tomorrow – if I can.*

You say, *Only do as much as you want to.* Why is there an edge to your voice as if you're saying, *come home?*

• •

What a Belt Means

When you understand that different belts attend practice on different days – yellow, purple, brown – you will understand respect. They stand with heels together, toes out, hands at side, eyes up, listening. A brown belt will say, *Stand with respect when a Sensei speaks*. You try, but your eyes rove wild. You lean forward. You whisper to classmates. You crack jokes.

Later at the end of another class, you will stand in a circle to listen to advice and ask questions. A white belt will ask, *What are the names of all the black belts?* Each of the senseis beam.

Sensei _____. Then, *Sensei* _____. Then, *Sensei* _____. One says, *Sensei is easiest*.

Once the questions are answered, a brown belt invites everyone to Saturday's practice. *Yes, Sensei*, goes around the circle.

• • •

ROUTE - Montana

via East Glacial Village, Cut Bank, Shelby
on Hi-Line Highway
73/ 3,106 miles
1,040 elevation

HIGH – Farmland, gulls, open highway,
storms building in the skies, the Rocky
Mountains behind

LOW – Tummy trouble

FUNNY – Frisky buffalo in fields on the
reservation

FUEL – Dates, figs, apricots, raisins, grapes,
clementines

FIXES – Pre-dawn start, elevation loss means
one long hill from the Rockies to ride

FIRST AID – Short, recovery day

SHELTER – Cut Bank rest area: safe, clean,
and bright, a trooper who passed twice

FACTS & FINDINGS – A study in the
*Interactive Journal of Behavioral Nutrition and
Physical Activity* found women reported more
constraints than men that keep them from
cycling, especially those related to safety.⁵²

• • • •

Day 44: June 22

If today is a century, wish for tailwind.

Today is a lesson on types of road conditions. From Shelby, miles of untarred gravel chips skid and slide us. Then miles of tarred highway enhance the tailwind and we fly into the sunrise. Construction towards Galata makes us bump between shoulders drug clear. Asphalt scraped to dirt slows traffic. A stoplight halts a line until a pilot car arrives. We wait until the end, then weave around the potholes.

A few miles after the road construction ends, we climb a dirt road to a fence to rest. The world shimmers golden with fields, a blue sky presses with cumulonimbus clouds, and Gildford's grain elevator sparkles with light. I whisper to Lexa, *Let's live in just this spot – lonely, remote, but so much to see and see forever.*

Then the wind pushes us and the grasses shimmer. We pedal a good shoulder at a speed that hovers about 20 mph without effort.

•

When I call, you ask about amenities. *Chester had a Montana Department rest area in Lion's Park.*

You ask about crops. *Wheat and grasses.*

You ask about food. *Mostly grapes today. I did eat the dreaded tuna and drank a little.*

You ask about allergies. *Headache all day. Maybe storm pressure. Maybe dehydration.*

You ask me about audiobooks. *The writing in one was bad, the other good. Gravitas – completed needed.* What might be needed in my and Lexa's story?

You ask me about traffic. *Semis are good. They bonk and scoot over.* Is a gal and her bicycle good?

You ask me about the motel. *The clerk said the mosquitoes are bad and will swarm you.* Will tea tree oil be enough?

• •

Conditioning

When a brown belt praises a white belt who attended an extra practice on Saturday, it will be, *You got a jump start on the blocks*. You beam at his pride.

Later during Ten No Kata, a black belt will scold – feet not together, breaking from the line, yawning. The instructor chides another white belt, *Drink some caffeine*. Your mouth quivers.

Once the drill has gone on for most of the class, you pine – water, snacks, fresh air, running at a full-tilt anywhere at all. Then a black belt nods to someone with, *Water*. All the yellow and white belts scamper, bare feet padding to the door, bow, and exit.

• • •

ROUTE – Montana

via Shelby, Galata, Chester, Gildford,
Kremlin, Havre
on Hi-Line Highway
103 / 3,209 miles
1,375 elevation

HIGH – Bear Paw Mountains, a tailwind for a fast century

LOW – Sunburn, rumble strips that split the shoulder, aggressive drivers, bumpy shoulder

FUNNY – No place to potty

FUEL – Fruit, veggies, tea, meat

FIXES – Tailwind push

FIRST AID – Aloe

SHELTER – Hillside above Gildford

FACTS & FINDINGS – Cycling improved women’s health, according to research. It reduced risks of heart disease by 50%, cardiovascular disease by 13%, heart failure, and breast cancer.⁵³ It also lowered body fat and increased longevity.⁵⁴

• • • •

Day 45: June 23

If today is 90+ miles, wish to complete them by noon.

Ninety miles in six hours. Check.

At the motel, the clerk says, *You made it – 90 miles.* We discuss tomorrow's rest areas. *There aren't any.* Then town parks. *I don't think so.*

I got to find places to potty. I feel like I'm a puppy – food, water, potty. She talks about mosquitoes. *Mosquitoes worry me. I can squat in the bush, but they might swarm.*

I never thought about trying to find a place to potty.

Later, another clerk assures me there are rest areas in Harlem and Dodson.

Then, all day we ride. We stop for the brush. No mosquitoes. We stop at Harlem's park. No mosquitoes. We stop outside Dodson. No mosquitoes. Later, I say to Lexa, *Either there are no mosquitoes or tea tree oil conjures places for wild squatting.*

•

I tell you, *Today was so quick! Seriously. Cooking. I never saw another cyclist. Just me. The road. Free tailwind.*

I tell you about my arrival. *One guy checking out kissed his dog on the mouth.* You make a noise. *It was cute.* I explain how the clerk was helpful, *but at one point, she gave me a weird look, so I said, 'Sorry. I've just biked 90 miles. Sometimes it's hard to speak in complete sentences after that.'*

I tell you about the reservation with its open country and the folds of the Milk River. *Particularly beautiful.*

I tell you about food mishaps. A rotten eggplant. An avocado with a bad spot. Dreaded tuna. Dropping six eggs, half in the trash and half on the floor. *Major boo-ness.*

Anything else? you ask.

I try not to drink very much water.

You grunt. Why? Are you worried about me or my ride? I whisper, *I should be in Minnesota soon.*

• •

Tenants

When a black belt says, *Keep eyes upon the opponent*, your constant floor gaze – biking, walking, self-defense – will startle you. All at once, you stop looking down and away, but rather lift your gaze.

Later a black belt will say, *Karate is defensive, never offensive*. Another will say, *Equal force*. *Ying-yang*. Then at the end of the class, two black belts agree. Files have been added to the class folder to be memorized.

Once you read them, you print out the tenants of Karate.

1. *Seek perfection of character.*
2. *Be faithful.*
3. *Endeavor to excel.*
4. *Respect others.*
5. *Refrain from violent behavior.*

• • •

ROUTE – Montana

via Havre, Harlem, Malta
on Hi-Line Highway
92 / 3301 miles
492 elevation

HIGH – Harlem’s Centennial Park,
reservation, open highway, Milk River

LOW – Allergies

FUNNY – Motel’s kitten

FUEL – Microwave cooking

FIXES – Tailwind

FIRST AID – Tea tree oil bug spray

SHELTER – Wild-style rest stops all-day

FACTS & FINDINGS – *Women on a Roll:
Benchmarking Women’s Bicycling in the United State*
found two-thirds of American women agree
their community would be a better place to
live if biking were safer and more
comfortable.⁵⁵

• • • •

Day 46: June 24

If insomnia, wish to research the route well.

A page on the city of Glasgow claims no murder or rape for many years. Why?

Maybe it's all the mosquitoes in that motel a few days ago with that non-secure internet, the weird echo and reverberation of your voice when I called. Did both of our voices sound fast? Or maybe it was having to lie or kneel on the floor the whole time. Or that the curtains were full of holes. Or that the shutters didn't close. Or that the motel was right up against residential housing. Or that – and this is what won't be said. Maybe it's the current audiobook that details a culture of alcohol – driving drunk, erratic violence – and silence – sexual assault, molestation, rape. Or maybe it's that when it's time to bike, mosquitoes follow us from town, biting calves through tights.

It sprinkles. We don't dare stop. Low land bridges swarm with sparrows. Sometimes bugs smack us. Sometimes they chase. The rain is a blessing that sweeps the air clean.

•

At the motel, a man waylays with stories of his ten-speed. *It said Olympic down the side*, he says.

I say, *I have an Olympia, too.*

When they tore down his middle school, he salvaged its yellow bricks in his house by Fort Peck Lake. He says, *I rode that Olympic to middle school.*

At the grocery, I buy sundries – baby wipes, bug spray – and food – asparagus, deli meat, berries. At the till, the gal fills my bag and double sacks another. She asks, *How do you cook all the veggies?*

In the microwave. She cocks her head, raising an eyebrow. I add, *I don't have a tent or sleeping bag.*

You don't camp?

I'm not much of a camper. I'm more of a motel-er. She and the other customers behind me giggle. Is it okay to prefer a motel's safety?

• •

Listening

When Ten No Kata becomes a regular practice, everything said will correct form. A black belt says, *Everything from the hips*. Then, *Shoulders over hips*. And then, *Pivot on the ball of the foot, but quick in the hips*.

Later arm cues dominate – *elbows in, shoulders down, fist at solar plexus*. Then the cues are on practice – *line up with the right, 15-degree bow, 45-degree stance*. At the end of class, a brown belt says, *The rule is: Listen and do the form*.

Once a black belt is like, *Arms out like you're pushing a car*. You're like, *Do I look like I've pushed a lot of cars?* Then the instructor is like, *Arms out like two sides of an isosceles triangle*. You're like, *This is karate, not geometry, right?* The instructor tries again, *Brush the sides of the body with the arms*. You're like, *What?*

• • •

ROUTE – *Montana*

via Malta, Saco, Hinsdale, Glasgow
on Hi-Line Highway
72 miles / 3,373 miles
860 elevation

HIGH – Bowden National Wildlife Refuge,
Nelson State Recreation Area, Hinsdale's
Roadside Park, lonely, open road, the beauty
of storms in the distance

LOW – Mosquitos

FUNNY – Pronghorn

FUEL – Microwaved veggies dinner

FIXES – Can of toxic bug spray

FIRST AID – Short day for recovery

SHELTER – Roadside rest area, a good,
priced motel

FACTS & FINDINGS – A cross-sectional
mixed-methods comparison study found
constraints that kept cyclists from riding
included traffic, motorists' aggression, and
safety.⁵⁶

• • • •

Day 47: June 25

If a century, wish to not stop on the first half.

Near Frazer, a dirty white van passes, then pulls into the town's turnoff, bounces, and stops, bounces towards the highway where we pedal, and stops. The dark windows hide the occupants. Chanting, *Go away*, I call you for a few miles of defensive chitchat. No matter what happens, you'd be a witness. The van never passes. We strategize route options. The maps suggest backroads with scenic stops, but the highway has a good shoulder and SUVs and RVs traffic. It seems best not to stop.

In Wolf Point, one police car stands parked and unoccupied along the road. We nod to another, but it pulls into a car wash and doesn't emerge. At a roadside rest area, people linger at picnic tables with a quiet strangeness. At a park, all spaces are choked with parked vehicles. Amenities reachable by bicycle are nowhere – not a restroom, water fountain, or trash bin.

We push into the headwind, cross a river, and climb. We do not stop.

•

Near the top, I stop to refuel. Red ants frenzy the ground. A deer meanders. I leave the bug spray in a field, skulking back to Lexa. Why are there no trash bins anymore?

I ride 44 miles of headwind through enormous skies, clouds, and hills. When I stop again, I remove a tick.

When the clerk in Circle asks if I stayed in Wolf Point last night, I tell her my route. *I have a house there*, she says, then explains how robbers broke in, stole the electronics, then left candles everywhere to burn it down. No one was charged. *Then the guy who did it took a three-year-old girl to a silo and raped her. And then they arrested him.* She mentions recent cyclists who'd stopped in Wolf Point. *They left their stuff on their bikes and gone shopping for groceries. When they got back to their bikes, all their gear and bags were stolen.*

Oh, I shake my head.

Several cyclists have told me such stories.

I did not stop.

• •

Momentum

When the instructors will teach jujitsu – wrist grabs, elbow drives, forearm locks, joint snaps – the combination or technique refuses to become muscle memory. Instead, other memories take over – dance, yoga, bicycle, weightlift. You try, *Come with me or else*, trying to joke or charm the other belt. The instructor says, *Tap out*. And adds, *It's fun when you get to give a little pain*.

Later the practice returns to Ten No Kata. *It's easy to remember – 1 low block, 2 middle blocks, 3 upper blocks*. Everyone nods. *Yes, Sensei*.

A black belt adds, *Torso forward for attacks. Torso side for blocks*. Then cues – knees brush to protect the body, punch strikes forward as elbow strikes back to create equal force.

Once in a while, a sensei asks, *Questions?* You ask about form. A black belt answers, *Holding form builds endurance*. What are you enduring? Why?

...

ROUTE - Montana

via Glasgow, Nashua, Frazer, Oswego, Wolf Point, Circle
on back roads
102 / 3,476 miles
2,536 elevation

HIGH – All hills and sky between Missouri River and Circle

LOW – A 10-mph headwind

FUNNY – Sleepy

FUEL – Gallon of purified water

FIXES – Another century

FIRST AID – Doing the century

SHELTER – Nice clerk

FACTS & FINDINGS – A recent study found middle-aged cyclists were the highest demographic killed while biking.⁵⁷ Cyclists aged 50-59 have the highest death tolls, followed by those aged 40-49 and 60-69.⁵⁸ In 2017, 47 years old was the average age for killed cyclists.⁵⁹

....

Day 48: June 26

If we call, *Safe travels*, to a cyclist who ascends the same road, we wish this lonely road to ourselves.

We pedal into a warn sunrise of wind and climb where train tracks stand overgrown with grasses. We take the easy descent to Glendive and stop for supplies. The rain keeps us by a DVD vending machine, then double-checking the clasp on the florescent bicycle vest, we ride onto 1-94. When a frontage road appears at exit #224, we take it, but bugs circle, ride the slipstream, and growl. We push hard over the bumpy road, fearing the second arrow of biting flies we once met in Wyoming. We refuel by a cottonwood, waving away hover bees. Something stings the inner pocket between my toes.

At exit #242, we scan for the rest area but don't stop. Dehydrated? Losing it? Dry air? Allergies? Lack of sleep? How to balance fluids and fuel?

At the North Dakota border, I call you with, *Happy birthday eve!* and natter with questions about your day.

•

At the motel, the clerk's glassy gaze and slowed motions find your reservation. Beneath her white bob, her lips remain slack over the words of key and receipt.

Then an older white-haired gal pushes a walker down the hall. *Oh, sorry. Do you need more room?* I ask, scooting Lexa over and fiddling with the door.

The key goes into the knob, she says.

I thank her, sensing the knob is hers, the key is hers – the hallway, the motel. Then with Lexa safe, I carry my phone and keys to the kitchen to make a decaf where the older gal spreads jam on toast. I ask her about the road ahead.

I haven't been on Old Highway 10 in some time. I can call my daughter, she'll know.

No worries. Just curious. How do I know this building is hers? Is reading motel culture a skill to learn?

• •

First Peaceful Mind

When the class gets into a rhythm, you will come to expect the routines of self-directed stretches where you line up along the white tape. The warm-up lead by the highest-ranked colored belt will normalize. The class of drills or katas will be an expected segment of practice. The final circle at the end, you will come to welcome and crave.

Later the memory of a routine practice will comfort, a nostalgia for what was.

Once Ten-No-Kata is established, the black belts instruct the basic forms – katas 1-4. A yellow belt reveals which of the forms will appear in the test. A black belt will tell you, *You only need gobbledygook for the yellow belt.* You blink. *Say it again? Heian Shodan.*

• • •

ROUTE – *Montana to North Dakota*

via Circle, High Point, Lindsay, Glendive,
Wibaux, Beach
on I-94
90 / 3,566 miles
1,886 elevation

HIGH – Riding through dawn, gorgeous road
mostly to myself from Circle to Lindsay and
beyond

LOW – Rain sprinkles

FUNNY – Chatting with a sleepy you

FUEL – Tuna, dried and fresh fruit, good
water, motel coffee

FIXES – Ride faster to escape bugs

FIRST AID – Post-ride shower, meditation,
rest

SHELTER – Nice clerks

FACTS & FINDINGS – Eighty percent of
cyclists reported an improvement in health
because of bicycle commuting.⁶⁰

Day 49: June 27

If sleepless, wish to ride anyway.

Skin crawls with allergies. Hands, knees, and thighs ache. One quad whines. Feet blisters burn. Mouth's cracked corners sear.

On I-94, rumbles hit us in double-mega strips of three. The first one jolts hard. On the second, a blue semi bares down, forcing us to ride over it. Lexa jerks and shudders. The fluorescent vest's clasp jiggles free, flapping open in the draft. We curse, then flush, skin prickling. Hugging the interstate's edge and one-handed, we reset clasp and grit teeth.

With Dickinson's skyline ahead, we ride the wheel well on good, if shoulder-less pavement. But then brakes screech and grind. An engine guns. We roll over the white line to the shoulder, a slope that dissolves into the dirt. A white truck whizzes past, leaving burnt rubber fumes and a zigzag of black tread. The driver glances towards the side of the road where we hover. I lift my left hand, palm up with the universal sign of *What was that?* His ten-gallon hat makes no answer at all.

•

At the big box, an old guy pushes a nearly empty cart with effort. The cart jerks under his wide-gripped hands, then swerves towards me. I stop, drop my head, muttering my MO, *Oh, Sorry.*

Next time, I'll just bit you with my car, HEHEHEHE.

Oh, ha-ha, I laugh, then stew for six aisles. Do Dickinsonians not like cyclists? Do they put the DICK in Dickinson because they'd rather not be SON? What does this mean for the rest of riding through North Dakota?

Sigh. What's real? What are allergies?

Then the self-checkout gal smiles. The extended-stay motel room charms with a regular-sized fridge, microwave, and coffee pot. Meditation centers me. The single-serving size Epsom salt for 88 cents calms muscles. At the kitchenette, I bounce my foot and surf the map for tomorrow's route. Is there more than one? Which way is best? Is there anything but the road?

• •

Language Lessons

When you try to learn Japanese, you will download several apps with lessons. Counting to ten grunts, like push-ups. The alphabet twists with kicks. Common phrases blur into blocks that end with, *Kiai*.

Later you will research the meaning of everything. *Ten-no-kata* means kata of the universe. *Heian* means a peaceful mind. *Taikyoku* means first cause. *Sensei* means teacher.

During practice, a black belt will describe the shapes of katas, a yellow belt will name every kata mastered, and upper belts will practice katas like dances. You listen and blink. *Gobbledygook*.

Once the senseis have taught the katas, you're released to self-guided practice. *Madam butterfly*, one black belt teases after ten minutes and instructs – knees soft, move from the hips, slide feet.

• • •

ROUTE – North Dakota

via Beach, Medora, Dickinson
on Old Highway 10, I-94, Medora trail
69 / 3,634 miles
2,077 elevation

HIGH – Meditating after a day of sunshine, cropland, and water towers

LOW – Weird white truck, grumpy shopper

FUNNY – Pronghorn

FUEL – Rice cakes, nut butter, dried apricots

FIXES – No annoying bugs

FIRST AID – Aloe, aspirin, Epsom salt

SHELTER – Painted Cave Visitor Center,
Medora park, efficiency motel, a short day
for recovery

FACTS & FINDINGS – A 2018 survey from People for Bikes found 50% of U.S. adults worried about being hit by a car while bicycling.⁶¹

• • • •

Day 50: June 28

If today is a century, wish to recall anything.

We ride pre-dawn, following a road that parallels interstate. By sunrise, the pavement ends in gravel. We ride it, scanning south for a good-enough road to Old Highway 10. A rusted red Datsun jolts towards us, windows down. The driver cuts his eyes. *I've taken a wrong turn. Can you help me out?* I blink – sleeveless cutoff shirt, unshaven, trucker cap, the stink of alcohol weeping from his flesh. Without a word, we bike hard, creating distance from the rusted car. At the first gravel road, we head towards the highway.

We ride all day. We interstate or side roads, avoiding gravel. The headwind beats on us and beats on us. The headwind doesn't stink.

Near Mandan, honeybees swarm, hovering around where we pedal. We talk gibberish – motel, grocery, rollers, century.

•

I try to journal, but eat, wish you a *Happy birthday!* and sleep.

In the morning I try to journal and manage two sentences. I tell Lexa, *Let's try again tonight.*

And Bismarck leaves a mark. Why for the next year do I keep returning to this place in my research, dreams, and journaling? Was it the bees? Was it the last dick coming out of Dickinson? Was it the crossing of the river?

• •

Towards the End of Karate

When the sanseis retrieve a punching bag, you will practice kicking. *They never get the pads out. This is a treat*, a yellow belt will say. You will also practice kicking the wall, and kicking and blocking in pairs, and sparring, *Sanbon Kumite*. The three-step sparring jars. Blocking requires physical contact. Eye contact is required. A yellow belt confides, *I couldn't look anyone in the eye at first, either*.

When a purple belt nearly smashes your face, you scuttle back and laugh. Every belt stares. What did you do wrong – laugh, break line, nearly get hit?

Later a sensei will ask, *What happened?*

You laugh, crack a joke, but the sensei stares. You blink, *I'm learning*.

Once during a sparring kick drill, a yellow belt thumps your core two dozen times with the top of her foot. On your turn, your toes brush her uniform. She says, *It's okay to kick me*. You blink.

• • •

ROUTE – North Dakota

via Dickinson, Mandan, Bismarck
on I-94, Missouri Valley Millennium Legacy
Trail, Bismarck city trails
103 / 3,737 miles
1,958 elevation

HIGH – Century

LOW – Headwind

FUNNY – Florida lady at the rest area

FUEL – Fresh and dried fruit, electrolytes,
deli meat

FIXES – Audiobook

FIRST AID – Some centuries slosh the mind
to mush

SHELTER – Interstate rest area, motel
booked with your help, again

FACTS & FINDINGS – Bismarck-Mandan
MPO won the Bronze Award for Bicycling
Friendly Community in 2020.⁶²

• • • •

Day 51: June 29

If today is interstate, wish another century.

The lobby stirs with roadworkers in fluorescent gear. The clerk keeps the talk going, eyeglass string flashing. She asks about today's destination. Everyone *whoas* the answer. *We did a hundred yesterday. Jamestown is the plan, anyway. We'll see.* A worker hops up and opens the door for us. His florescent tee-shirt matches the yellow hue of our bicycle vest. *Thanks*, we say.

Midday, we recharge devices at an interstate rest area. Two self-supported cyclists get us talking. One's a Minnesotan from the Halloween capital of the world. The other's his friend from the UK. One of them dabs sunburnt spots where the gaps of his helmet made bare his pate. One had sunblock in his ears. Lexa eyes their bicycles' loaded panniers and turns her handlebars away. Then for the next hour, we ride single file.

At the next rest area, a man asks, *How far you going?* We talk routes back to Nebraska. He says, *It's good to meet another cornhusker.* I blink, *Doesn't he see Lexa?*

•

The Jamestown clerk gives your last name on the reservation a hard time. *Women don't keep their own names up here.* I study her demeanor – black cap, sun-carved crow's feet, level shoulders. Why don't I buy it?

We talk road, her Harley, and mail truck driving days to Fargo. *Semis are the gentleman of the road.* I describe how they scoot over for bicycles.

I'm an ex-trucker. She nods. *They teach us how to drive.*

Once in the room, I recover and update my journal. Then I call you with the day's details – two-lanes, lowlands, wetlands, sunrise, Apple Creek Road, World's Largest Sandhill Crane. *I didn't even think. I was moving so fast. Just a gerbil in a wheel pedaling, all tailwind and draft.*

It's still a hundred.

I pushed. And then all of the sudden, I was here.

• •

Last Face-to-Face Karate

When you're made to hold poses for many minutes while a classmate's form is corrected, you will study the bodies of the instructors. A brown belt nurses a wounded shoulder. A black belt wears sneakers to protect feet. A yellow belt practices with tape to keep the toes together and from catching. A brown belt and a black belt wear braces around ankles and heels. It makes you ache.

Later in the chill, you commute home, breathing away the pent-up frustration. Is this why injury occurs? You hold every form, obey, practice, bow, clap, and say thanks. Meanwhile the body charges with dozens of unreleased kicks, punches, and shouts. If a kick isn't released, does it turn inward?

Once the class ends, you hang your uniform on a nail in the basement. There it waits, like a white glow of promise. Will you ever put it on again or take the yellow test?

• • •

ROUTE – *North Dakota*

via Bismarck, Menoken, Steele, Jamestown
on Apple Creek Road, Highway 10, I-94
104 / 3,842 miles
1,297 elevation

HIGH – Tailwind

LOW – Interstate cycling

FUNNY – World's Largest Sandhill Crane

FUEL – Baby oranges, deli meat, dates

FIXES – Amenities, music, maps

FIRST AID – Big box supplies

SHELTER – Interstate rest areas

FACTS & FINDINGS – In 2021, the National Conference of State Legislatures reported the following safe bicycle passing laws per state:⁶³

- 4 feet (PA)
- 3 feet (MN, WI, IL, OH, ME, NH, WA)
- general “safe distance” (MT, NY, VT)
- no specific law (IA, IN, ID, ND)
- require a motorist to completely change lanes when passing a bicyclist if there is more than one lane proceeding in the same direction (WA)

• • • •

Day 52: June 30

If interstate riding is required, wish to draft with semis.

Given the time zone shift of yesterday – somewhere after Bismarck – we don't know what time it is or when or where we are or even, what hour the sun rises. So, we get up a couple of times, then sleep, then check. Sunrise is at 5:43, rather than 4:53 or what it was in Beach a few days ago. Then we're on the road at 6:37 Central, which would be some other in Mountain time. 5:37? The interstate's quiet lasts until Oriska's rest area. We press on, numbering mile markers and dodging rumble squares. The fluorescent vest's clasp refuses to hold and we slipknot a rubber band to force it. The closer Fargo becomes, the less we can think. The traffic echoes and rushes. When Fargo appears, the city murmurs. We route through blocks of a mega-mall land. One guy holding a sale sign, says, *Hi*. We call a *Hi!* to a second guy doing the same thing, but he seems to be talking to his thin cigar. Then things get weirder.

•

At a big box, a man with ouchies all over his face says, *You've been out what – road construction, picking up trash, or...*

Riding my bicycle.

Oh, he says. *What from?*

Still dazed from riding, we, *Hmmm. The next town over. What it is?* He asks which direction. *West*, we say, *Jamestown.*

Jamestown? His arms drop. We explain we're biking cross-country. *You should be posting this stuff online.* We say we're not. He says, *You should be celebrating with friends and family.* We say we are. He gives two high fives. With lifted eyebrows, he asks about the white stuff on my face. I dab my cheeks – sunblock, grit, bugs. Pointing to his own, he explains about melanoma, the burned-off spots. He pulls up his shirt, exposing the scars. *I can show you more, or is that enough?* Then he congratulates us again.

• •

Then in the restroom, a gal in a tank top and spotted tights stares. *Hi*, we say, *How are you?* Then outside beside Lexa, a group of smokers debates the merits of Sam's club for lunch and the costs of a membership. We bike through an apartment complex where people smoke beside fences midday. Then in the motel room – dirty floors, smudged walls, old, wrinkled sacks of complimentary coffee – ants crawl the carpet. The microwave's interior light turns on but that's all. I call the front desk for one that works, but when it doesn't appear, I try the one in the lobby's breakfast area. It too doesn't work. I turn to the clerk, asking, *Am I missing something crucial?* He leaps up, then shuffles appliances – the waffle iron and toaster go to one counter, the microwave to their place and plugs it into that outlet. Then, while I nuke my dinner, the clerk talks the delight of potatoes to some guy in sweatpants and bare feet. Do they want me to share? With the nuke complete, I shuffle to my room to eat them with Lexa, squinting at tomorrow's route. Would it be strange to go to bed at 6:28? Or is it 5:28? Or 7:28?

• • •

ROUTE – *North Dakota*

via Jamestown, Fargo
on I-94
94 / 3,939 miles
843 elevation

HIGH – Tailwind, interstate drafting

LOW – Lack of amenities or services

FUNNY – Fargo culture, motel culture

FUEL – Microwaved sweet potatoes, berries

FIXES – Your voice on the phone

FIRST AID – Single-serving Epsom salt for 88
cents

SHELTER – Interstate rest areas

FACTS & FINDINGS – According to the 2019 Impact Report by Adventure Cycling Association, 73% of cyclists felt unsafe around rumble strips in the United States.⁶⁴

• • • •

Day 53: July 1

If dreams goodbye, wish rides never end.

We awake to ants crawling the room's corners, but checkout before the triple-checked time of sunrise. Grumpy, sinus headachy with allergies, and exhausted from the miles, we still let the clerk charm us. *Never heard of such a thing.* He shakes his head. *To go on such a trip.*

Through the inky morning squawking with robins, we follow bike trails that curve and arc through residential, city parks, and outdoor fitness equipment stations. After crossing the river to enter Minnesota, the first of all-day cornfields appear. I whisper to Lexa, *So many cornfields and all for us!*

It sprinkles through a headwind, but the route includes lake resorts and fancy housing. I whisper the shopping list to Lexa and ask her, *Do you think we might find a Fleet Farm? Do they have cool things for bicycles there?*

•

A gold minivan sits in the parking lot when I roll into the lobby. *The manager is out for lunch, then shopping,* the motel clerk says. I stretch and every other stretch sets off the automatic door sensor, chiming another welcome. The clerk says, *Go ahead and get some coffee.* The coffee pots are empty, but the hot water stands full. Rejoining her in the lobby to wait, I bend over the steam from the cup and sip. She talks about the closing of local businesses – mall, grocery, shops. She says, *There's no place to buy jewelry in town anymore.* Traffic speeds on the nearby road, though the side street to the motel remains empty. She says, *No one wants to work. A different generation. Everyone buys stuff online and has free shipping.*

After the manager arrives, I recover in my room, massaging my temples. My head throbs with sinus pressure. My eyes ache with it. I can't breathe. Why must the air in the Midwest suck? I stretch, numbering the miles until Minneapolis. Still, what's the point? When the ride is over, what do we go back to? How to live with the fear and danger?

• •

After Karate

When everything moves to remote, you will send the sensei one message – a question on face-to-face classes, club practice, yellow belt test. No message is returned, rather a full class note is sent. Everyone who attended will receive a pass.

Later you will scroll the videos for karate classes online and practice.

Once you find the pass note in the grade book, you go for a walk. Is self-defense what is needed? Or is something else needed now?

• • •

ROUTE – *North Dakota to Minnesota*

via Fargo, Pelican Falls, Fergus Falls
on Fargo bike trails
81 / 4,017 miles
1,404 elevation

HIGH – Sunshine, sunrise, Minnesota lakes

LOW – Weirdos

FUNNY – Hawk with a bird on the back,
automatic motel door chime

FUEL – Groceries, DIY pour-over coffee

FIXES – Talking with you

FIRST AID – Scents of kidhood

SHELTER – Cornfields

FACTS & FINDINGS – Twenty percent of women reported if bicycle repair classes were available to them, they would bike more.⁶⁵

• • • •

Day 54: July 2

If the day produces two flat tires, wish to bike a century still.

Lexa's flat when we awake. We walk to a bike shop. They replace her tube and bottle cage. Then we ride 40 miles until Lexa drags to a skitter. We're flat, again. A man stops his bike beside us. *I can't change a tube*, he says, *but I have a truck*.

In the shadows, birds sing. *It's okay. There's a bike shop ahead*. Lexa wobbles in my hands. Calling everyone we can, we all walk Lexa.

A gal with her son slows to ask about Lexa. She says, *I can't fix a flat*.

Me neither, I say. *Some guy offered me a ride in his truck*. We grow quiet. She phones her dad who meets us. He gives us a ride to a bike shop.

While waiting, we shop for a new orange triangle. The man with the truck reappears. I thank him for stopping to check on us. When Lexa's fixed, we ride hard.

•

You book a motel in St. Cloud's mall land. I navigate through the mega-mall to a big box first. In the parking lot, an employee wheeling a snaking train of carts greets me, *I like your bike*.

I lock Lexa and a young drifter asks for the time. I lift my long-dead watch towards the light (25 miles worth of dead) and giggle, *I have no idea*. Are Lexa and I drifters too, given our grubby state?

At the motel, the clerk toys with me, questioning, complaining about the server, acting like she's doing me a huge favor. Her dark eyes are huge. I play along, then once in the room, I lay down. 8:15 PM. Out cold.

After midnight, you arrive. The clerk calls the room. The clerk remakes your key, twice. You call, text, and bang on the door. When I understand the phone is ringing, the clerk says to my bleary answer, *Your husband is here*. I move Lexa out of the way, unlock the door for you, and stumble back into bed. Out cold.

Well?

• •

Bicycle School

When you first attend bike school, you audit the MOOC. Other in-person classes are out-of-state or abroad – Oregon, Colorado, Amsterdam. Bike school focuses on infrastructure, perceptions, and histories. You learn which histories normalized the bicycle and which marked it deviant, sexed, or classed. The second MOOC asks what it would mean if streets opened to bicycles.

Later as you work through each MOOC, you let the street views, parking garages, and helmet-less pedalers who whirl through cities elsewhere charm you. You whisper, *I want to bike there.*

Once you finish one MOOCs, another appears, as if life is an endless semester in bike school. This hobby, passion, and obsession elevate to academic inquiry. At each module's start, you wait for what it will reveal about women's safety. Could bike school keep you safe?

• • •

ROUTE – Minnesota

via Fergus Falls, Garfield, Alexandria, Sauk Center, Melrose, Albany, Avon, Saint Joseph, St. Cloud
on Central Lakes Trail, Wobegon Trail
105/ 4,122 miles
4.7 miles (walked)
6.3 miles (car)
776 elevation

HIGH – Century

LOW – Two flats

FUNNY – How nice and helpful Minnesotans are, motel clerk giving me a hard time

FUEL – Water, grapes, berries

FIXES – You saving me

FIRST AID – Bike shops for Lexa's flats, new bicycle triangle for Lexa to replace the one lost somewhere in Ohio, heavy sleep

SHELTER – Quiet, safe, and protected trails with amenities

FACTS & FINDINGS – A 2018 report from People for Bikes found 50% of U.S. adults lack an operational bicycle.⁶⁶

• • • •

Day 55: July 3

If I machinate a million ways to connect yesterday's arrival in St. Cloud to Fort Snelling State Park without battling gridlock traffic in a rainy headwind, I wish for help.

The map unfolds with suggestions to follow *whichever route suits your needs*. I wake you with, *Let's go north and just get on the Paul Bunyan Trail*.

Once in the rental, I delight over the mini light on the roof, two USB jacks in the backseat, the stereo, heat, and AC. *So cush*.

Then, Lexa and I ride into the rainy wind on the trail from Brainerd. Why are we willing to ride anywhere, in any weather? The trail starts smooth but soon splits with seams. Tar patches make Lexa bump, bump, bump along. Traffic on 371 drones over the music of trees and birds. By Hackensack, I say, *Let me go up a bit and back to make it a half? Okay?*

I loop back to where you wait by Lucette's statue, Paul Bunyan's wife and sweetheart. *Selfie?* You nod. I nod, rolling Lexa to her voluminous skirts. *Let's not forget Lexa*.

•

On Walker's tourist strip, I say, *Everything is smaller*, breathing my way into memories of summer vacation here. We enter tackle shops and boutiques where painted loons and moccasins await. At a screen-printing store, people join a snaking queue for shirts made to order. At Big Rock Resort, the cabin where we always stayed as kids is the same, but the dock had been improved and other cabins added. At the lodge, the basement no longer features an arcade, though a couple of foosball tables and a jukebox remain. We wander, sidling away from feathering line of mayflies on buildings or piled like leaves. Beside the lake, I repeat, *So much smaller*. But how?

We drive the loop 0.6 miles to Red Wing and Horseshoe Resort. Biking the loop with my dad to order club sandwiches with a pickle had once been an epic adventure, but now some of the resort appears abandoned, while others prefab and new. *Do you want to stay in Walker?* you ask. Once there, I inhale for memories. What is needed to remember?

• •

State Troopers

When will you first understand state troopers as the gift to slow traffic, the kindness of triple-pass on an injured ride, or the escort through a rural town? Police for long-distance cyclists mean safe.

Later a trooper will roll to a stop beside you, asking, *Everything okay?* This will be the moment after two cross-country bike trips when you get to say, *I adore you people*, then burble about all the police in other states and on other journeys, who offer solace and safety to a biker, making traffic behave. *That's what we're here to do.*

Once law enforcement made you hunker on the highway or rubberneck towards sirens, some from *Cops* shows, television dramas, or documentary film, but then you became a cyclist. Now every trooper is one you lift a hand to, waving, *Hello*, which also means, *Thank you*.

• • •

ROUTE – Minnesota

via Brainerd, Hackensack, Walker
on The Paul Bunyan State Trail
50 / 4,173 miles
443 elevation

HIGH – Biking in quiet solitude

LOW – Car irritation, allergies, headwind

FUNNY – Changes at Big Rock Resort

FUEL – So many groceries

FIXES – Fleet Farm shopping: stocking cap
with pom-poms, zip-up, jacket, shoes

FIRST AID – Visiting sites of the annual
summer vacation of my childhood: Leach
Lake, Big Rock Resort, Walker, Fleet Farm,
Brainerd

SHELTER – Big Rock Resort, rental, Fleet
Farm

FACTS & FINDINGS – Forty-three percent of
U.S. adults said in a 2018 report from People
for Bikes they'd be more likely to bicycle if
separate paths for bicycles and vehicles were
available.⁶⁷

• • • •

Day 56: July 4

If morning storms, I wish to chase to where a darker front curls into a lighter one.

The first ten miles whirl with weather shifts: sprinkle, drizzle, rain, thunder, shimmers, crackles, bangs. When it cuts loose, Lexa and I pedal the onslaught for seven miles. Rain slathers limbs, soaks through layers, and runs into my eyeballs. I tuck the phone into my sports bra and the audiobook mumbles against my chest – plot, character development, scene. I text you, *Save me*, they try to speakerphone the location. *There's a gravel road that crosses the trail. Maybe it's a driveway. There's one of those steel shed buildings. Or it's a church. No, a cemetery.* Thunder cracks.

I'll find you. You find me at a community center shelter bouncing between rows of picnic tables.

Freezing. My hands don't work. I can't unclasp the sports bra or pull off wet layers for dry pants. You turn the heat to 85 and unzip your hoodie.

When it lets up, you say, *Ready to try again?*

•

In Bemidji, we take selfies and double-selfies of Babe the Blue Ox and Paul Bunyan, then let the families selfie Bemidji's wonders with their little kids.

Trees at the lake's edge shimmer, waves glimmer with light, and gulls toss through the sky. You ask, *Do you want to bike the tailwind?*

I kiss you, then bike the trails to the Bemidji State Park.

At the car, you say, *Itasca State Park?* There, we loop the trails. I take your headwaters selfie. Once you are wet to your knees with wading, you say, *July 4th Fish Fry in Walker?* There you order a fish fry meal for you, surprising me with a basket of sweet potato fries. You ask, *Motel?* There we cuddle, murmuring about the local foods and trails.

Why had my dad repeated often, *Laura, it's dangerous out there?* Did he not sense that there was also this?

• •

Organized Rides

When you slide into the slipstream of your first organized ride, it will be RAGBRAI. On your first day of RAGBRAI, your PR is 38 miles. At the end of the first day, your PR is 54 miles. At major highway crossings, state troopers wave you across. The baggage truck hauls your gear to high school fields for tent camping. RAGBRAI lines up dozens of porta-potties. Hy-Vee offers aisles of chilled air and fresh food. Bands percolate the night with percussions.

Later you will join a panoply of organized rides for the pleasure of biking where you've never been or seeing afresh where you already go. SAG tables offer refreshments – orange wedges, banana halves, watermelon slices. Fellow bikers help fix flats. Pre- and post-ride feasts allow you to gather in a ritual of connection.

Once you recognize yourself as part of this tribe, you see how tribes establish an ethics of care. *Ride Right*, one says.

• • •

ROUTE – Minnesota

via Walker, Bemidji
on Paul Bunyan State Trail, Lake Bemidji trail,
Itasca State Park Trail, Bemidji Park Trail
51 / 4,224 miles
542 elevation

HIGH – Leach Lake, tailwind

LOW – Low sleep, allergies

FUNNY – Paul Bunyan statues

FUEL – Sweet potato fries

FIXES – Cross-stitching

FIRST AID – Pedaling with you at Itasca

SHELTER – Guthrie Community Center

FACTS & FINDINGS – A 2018 bicycling participation study found 32% of Americans aged 3+ bicycled at least once a year.⁶⁸

• • • •

Day 57: July 5

If two days ago we found Paul Bunyan's sweetheart, I wish for Paul Bunyan today.

Our Akeley rendezvous is Paul Bunyan's statue. You take my picture. Then I climb into Paul Bunyan's hand for another picture. Then another with Lexa. Then your picture in Paul Bunyan's hand. *Double- selfie?*

Then I ride. The Heartland Trail teems with families – parents watching their kids, cyclists watching for kids, kids watching cyclists, kids with crazy biking behavior that needs watching, cyclists watching parents watching their kids – watching out for the kids to help them cultivate a crazy need for bikes forever. I loop among this fun, enjoying the fun of seeing whose eyes orbit for eye contact, whose heads nod mid-rotate, whose voice rings with *Hello*s, and whose mouth clinches with a parental worry. Lexa shimmies, shies, or sashays through it all.

At our rendezvous, you say, *Duluth*, and show me your phone with a plan. *Yeah?*

•

At Engler Park, we circle the base of an overlook tower to find the entrance for the stone stairs. As we climb, a girl coming down them says to me, *You have to go to the top. It's really cool up there.*

I thank her, then turn to you. *Hey, we should try and see if we can get up there.*

At the top, we follow the curved walkway to see everything – Duluth, Lake Superior, Wisconsin, Minnesota – and listen to the birds. You memorize the lay of it, planning tomorrow. Then we machinate – motel, shopping, dinner. We are always machinating. Do we machinate or is everything already machinated for us? We try the Fleet Farm for snacks, supplies, and new boots for you. You try on a pair in camouflage, saying, *They fit.*

We are not hunters, I say, *Anyway, we'll lose them in the garage.*

At the motel, you do laundry and I plan the last three days of our biking and touring adventure.

• •

Media

When you learn about bicycles, you will rotate through every bike-related media. The internet flashes with videos of pro-tips, how-to's, and top-tens. Libraries and booksellers offer audiobooks that tick like bicycle tires. The mailbox offers magazines where the centerfolds are brand new bicycles. Sometimes, bicycle maps arrive, opening with fluttering pages to the next adventure.

Later podcasts from bike shop owners, bike race winners, and trainers broadcast on bicycle prowess, fitness, and know-hows. They natter, teach, and warn through the looped training rides in Nebraska. You dodge whatever and keep breathing.

Once you go back to graduate school, you learn of the field of cycling journalism. Nearly when bicycle became a word, articles talked about avoiding headers, finding good roads, and cross-country adventures. From the beginning, bicycle writers wrote, *You can*.

• • •

ROUTE – Minnesota

via Walker, Lake Cass, Park Rapids
on Heartland Trail
50/ 4,274 miles
421 elevation

HIGH – Biking a half-century

LOW – Allergies

FUNNY – Laughing with you, your cute smile

FUEL – Raspberries, blackberries, cherries

FIXES – A bicycle route planned by you

FIRST AID – Pollen swept clear by rain

SHELTER – Rental car

FACTS & FINDINGS – A People for Bikes
Survey ranked cities by safety (out of five).⁶⁹

- 2.4 Bismarck, ND
- 2.3 La Crosse, WI
- 2.2 Alexandria, MN, Minneapolis, MN
- 2.1 St. Cloud, MN, Fargo, ND, Erie, PA
- 2 Winthrop, WA
- 1.9 Duluth, MN, Buffalo, NY
- 1.8 Sandpoint, ID
- 1.7 Akron, OH
- 1.5 Indianapolis, IN
- 1.4 Middlebury, VT

• • • •

Day 58: July 6

If construction half-closes the trail, I wish to pedal what's open to its termination.

Would it be possible to accept this path, even if half-closed and half-repaired?

From the southern trailhead, Lexa and I ride into a sunshine of a gorgeous downhill roll of twists and turns. Creeks turn with falls. Trees shimmer with light. Birds call across the forests.

The city demands defensive biking, but you welcome me at the visitor center, and we ride the trail that circles the water's edge. Everywhere the midday dazzles our miles together. Our bicycles chuckle over boardwalks, then dodge asphalt threaded by roots. *I'll catch up with you after the museum*, you say.

Lexa and I follow Superior's shorefront where it climbs and the wind blows. The deep blue water bounces with sunlight and feathered creatures. Some dive, waves sliding over their wake, and do not reappear.

•

At Two Harbors, we find your restaurant with a view of the lake, good music, and a crowd. We relax, me telling you about the curves and reveals of the trail into the city, the streets in the Duluth, and the waterbirds along the road to Two Harbors. You tell me about the lake museum, the visitor center, and the fancy bridge over Lake Superior. *Machinate?* You tap your phone.

I list a bunch of things I want – miles to ring around yet another lake, Fleet Farm shopping, craft materials for bear scares, cross-stitching kits, dream rides for the future – but stop. *Can we stay in Minneapolis? Can I just bike tomorrow where this started?* Swiping through my tablet's apps, I say, *There are bike trails. I'll be safe.*

Okay, you say and name things for your tomorrow – baseball game, nature walk, TV in the motel. And I suddenly realize I'm safe with you. I didn't know this. Or I did but forgot it. What must I do to help me remember you're my safety? That with you, I find my safety too.

• •

Membership

When you join your local bicycle club, a perk is discounts for local bike shops. This establishes permission to peruse the club's route guide, participate in annual rides, and consider multi-day tours in nearby states.

Later you will join national bicycle groups. Pedaling newsletters slip into your inbox. You scroll for hours the national and local bike reports. What to make of such a pleasure in a national identity of bicycle love?

Once the next election approaches, someone asks you how you'll vote. Maybe you say, *Bicycle*. Or maybe your bicycle says, *By bicycle*. Or maybe someone says, *Let's bike to the polls together*.

• • •

ROUTE – Minnesota

via Carlton, Duluth, Two Harbors
on Willard Munger State Trail
50 / 4,324 miles
528 elevation

HIGH – Biking

LOW – Allergies

FUNNY – Laughing with you on the road

FUEL – Baby oranges, blueberries, mangos

FIXES – Cross-stitching

FIRST AID – Still another day to ride

SHELTER – Superior Lake, Maritime
Museum, rental

FACTS & FINDINGS – According to the United States Department of Transportation, reading or sending a text takes a driver's eyes from the road for five seconds. At 55 mph, that's the length of a football field. Text messaging bans for all drivers have been adopted by 48 states.⁷⁰

• • • •

Day 59: July 7

If today concludes this ride, I wish for the roadside attraction of the World's Biggest Fish as the endpoint.

Once on the trail, a cyclist wheels alongside, *Hello*. We talk RAGBRAI training (16th year on the ride), then logistics – riding companions (a Des Moines bike shop), cycling joy (fixing bicycles), favored Iowa trails (Trestle Trail). Then as our paths diverge, the cyclist calls, *I'll see you on RAGBRAI*. I giggle farewell. RAGBRAI draws thousands, right?

Then I pedal more of the land of 10,000 lakes where I summer vacationed as a kid with my dad. He wanted to fish, teach me scouting skills like bear scares, or a pedal around the lake. If he sought to keep me safe, he also sought to instill a curiosity for adventure. His, *Laura, it's dangerous out there*, I now know was both a warning and an invitation.

Soon the biggest fish in the world appears. I selfie and text you my location. Then, Lexa and I whirl through some bonus miles, letting you catch us to where the wind has pushed.

•

With Lexa secured by the bike rack's looped locks, we machinate. *I'm game. Are you?* As I drive, I number centuries.

1. Day 14 – Defiance, OH to Avery, OH – 109.5 (self-supported)
2. Day 20 – Rochester, NY to Fulton, NY – 100.7 (self-supported)
3. Day 26 – Bradford, VT to Bridgton, ME – 100.6 (supported, mountaintop metric century)
4. Day 31 – Republic, WA to Twisp, WA – 100.8 (supported, mountaintop metric half-century)
5. Day 40 – Shelby, MT to Havre, MT – 103.2 (self-supported)
6. Day 43 – Glasgow, MT to Circle, MT – 102.2 (self-supported)
7. Day 46 – Dickinson, ND to Bismarck, ND – 103.2 (self-supported)
8. Day 47 – Bismarck, ND to Jamestown, ND – 104.3 (self-supported)
9. Day 50 – Fergus Falls, MN to St. Cloud, MN – 105.1 (self-supported)
10. PR – 300 miles in 3 days in ND

• •

Mapped Routes

When one ride ends, the next will rotate into view with study – possible routes, available maps, or locations made bikeable by those who’ve gone before.

Later such maps will arrive alongside the rest – new gear, tour books, and supplies – cassettes, puncture-proof tires, tubes.

Once you read somewhere about the need to make your own way. Now you understand a mapped route is a way. You follow it and the story you make of it is always your own. The about-faces in bikes, the hovering skids down mountains with sore legs, the orbit back to lands and lakes where it all began – these are your own. One way in the chorus of all the ways a story says, *Bicycle here. Your presence makes it safer for the next.*

• • •

ROUTE – Minnesota

via White Bear Lake, Harris, Rush City
on Sunrise Prairie Trail, Hardwood Trail
52 / 4376 miles
364/ 85,804 elevation

HIGH – Half-century

LOW – Ingrown toenail

FUNNY – World’s Biggest Fish/Walley in
Rush City

FUEL – Friendly trail cyclists

FIXES – End of the second cross-country
bicycle ride

FIRST AID – RAGBRAI is our next

SHELTER – Rental car, by the end of the
night to sleep at home

FACTS & FINDINGS – A study found cyclists
make better drivers than non-cyclists.⁷¹

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Bikepacking List

On-the-bike Clothing	Off-the-bike Clothing
Raincoat, long-sleeve thermal shirts (2),* long-sleeve UPF shirts (3), sleeveless base layers (2), sports bras (2), cycling skirt/shorts (2), thermal tights (2),* leg warmers,* sun-knees, socks (2 pair),* cycling gloves (2 pair), stretchy winter gloves,* skull cap,* handkerchiefs (3), clips, helmet	Sports tee-shirt, running shorts, sandals*
Bike Set-up	Safety Extras
Handlebar bag, pannier, bags (3), water bottle bag, water bottle cages (2), air pump mount, front and rear lights, bell, cyclometer, bike lock, water bottles (3), triangle*	Bicycle safety triangle, florescent vest, pepper spray, multi-function safety whistle with keychain
Tool Kit	Sundries
Multi-tool, mini pump, tubes (2), tire levers (2), chain lube, zip ties (12), duct tape (wrapped around seat post), mini bungee cords (6)	Baby wipes, tea tree oil spray, contact solution, contact case, contacts, glasses, toothpaste, toothbrush, deodorant, sunblock, nail clippers, glasses, aloe, lip balm with sunscreen
Personal Items	Fuel
ID, debit card, cash (\$40), passport, smartwatch, sunglasses, tablet, phone, charger, cords, port, paper maps, tennis ball, massage stick, ultralight backpack	Varies: electrolytes, instant coffee, tea, canned meats, fresh and dried fruit, avocados

*items lost, sent home, or damaged during the journey

Mileage Route Log

Day	Route	Miles	Accumulated Miles
1	Minneapolis, MN to Prescott, WI	61	61
2	Prescott, WI to Wabash, MN	55	117
3	Wabash, MN to La Crosse, WI	71	188
4	La Crosse, WI to Prairie du Chien, WI	69	256
5	Prairie du Chien, WI to Elkader, IA	25	281
6	Elkader, IA to Monticello, IA	65	346
7	Monticello, IA to Muscatine, IA	74	420
8	Muscatine, IA to Kewanee, IL	79	498
9	Kewanee, IL to Streator, IL	82	580
10	Streator, IL to Watseka, IL	86	667
11	Watseska, IL to Logansport, IN	95	762
12	Logansport, IN to Huntington, IN	54	816
13	Huntington, IN to Defiance, OH	85	902
14	Defiance, OH to Avery, OH	109	1,011
15	Avery, OH to Woodmere, OH	77	1,088
16	Woodmere, OH to Conneaut, OH	76	1,164
17	Conneaut, OH to Fredonia, NY	83	1,247
18	Fredonia, NY to Niagara Falls Canada	78	1,325
19	Niagara Falls Canada to Rochester, NY	91	1,415
20	Rochester, NY to Fulton, NY	101	1,516
21	Fulton, NY to Boonville, NY	79	1,595
22	Boonville, NY to Long Lake NY	77	1,671
23	Long Lake, NY to Ticonderoga, NY	57	1,728
24	Ticonderoga, NY to East Middlebury, VT	31	1,760
25	East Middlebury, VT to Bradford, VT	85	1,845
26	Bradford, VT to Bridgton, ME	101	1,945
27	Bridgton, ME to Wiscasset, ME	76	2,021
28	Wiscasset, ME to Belfast, ME	62	2,083
29	Belfast, ME to Bar Harbor, ME	57	2,140
30	Cleveland, OH to Canal Fulton, OH	51	2,191

31	Indianapolis town ride to bike shop	11	2,202
32	Indianapolis Loop	50	2,252
33	Indy, IN to Bloomington, IN	61	2,313
34	Colville, WA to Republic, WA	52	2,365
35	Republic, WA to Twisp, WA	101	2,466
36	Twisp, WA to Newhalem, WA	82	2,548
37	Newhalem, WA to Anacortes, WA	81	2,630
38	Coville, WA to Ponderay, ID	94	2,724
39	Ponderay, ID to HW 2 & ST 56 MT	79	2,802
40	HW 2 & ST 56 MT to Eureka, MT	84	2,886
41	Eureka, MT to Columbia Falls, MT	70	2,957
42	Columbia Falls, MT to East Glacial Village, MT	76	3,033
43	East Glacial Village, MT to Shelby, MT	73	3,106
44	Shelby, MT to Harve, MT	103	3,209
45	Harve, MT to Malta, MT	92	3,301
46	Malta, MT to Glasgow, MT	72	3,373
47	Glasgow, MT to Circle, MT	102	3,476
48	Circle, MT to Beach, ND	90	3,565
49	Beach, ND to Dickinson, ND	69	3,634
50	Dickinson, ND to Bismarck, ND	103	3,737
51	Bismarck, ND to Jamestown, ND	104	3,842
52	Jamestown, ND to Fargo, ND	94	3,936
53	Fargo ND to Fergus Falls, MN	81	4,017
54	Fergus Falls, MN to St. Cloud MN	105	4,122
55	Brainerd, MN to Hackensack, MN	50	4,173
56	Walker, MN to Bemidji, MN	51	4,223
57	Walker, MN to Park Rapids, MN	50	4,274
58	Carlton, MN to Two Harbors, MN	50	4,324
59	White Bear Lake MN to Harris, MN	52	4,376
	Total Accumulated Miles		4,376

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About the Author

Laura Madeline Wiseman is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Velocipede*, a Foreword INDIES Book of the Year Award Finalist published by Stephen F. Austin State University Press. Other books of poetry include *What a Bicycle Can Carry*, *Through a Certain Forest*, *An Apparently Impossible Adventure*, *Wake*, *Some Fatal Effects of Curiosity and Disobedience*, *Sprung*, *American Galactic*, and *Queen of the Platform*. Her newest poetry book is *Journey to Nowhere* from Finishing Line Press. Her newest chapbook of poetry is *Diversions* from Dancing Girl Press.

Madeline has collaborated on books with writers, artists, designers, and illustrators, including *Intimates and Fools* and *Leaves of Absence*, both with Sally Deskins. Other collaborative books include *People Like Cats* and *The Hunger of the Cheeky Sisters*. Her newest collaborative chapbook is *Every Girl Becomes the Wolf* with Andrea Blythe, published by Finishing Line Press. Madeline is also the author of prose. Her collection of creative nonfiction is *A Bicycle's Echo* published by Red Dashboard. She edited *The Chapbook Interview*. She edited two poetry anthologies, *Bared: Contemporary Poetry and Art on Bras and Breasts* and *Women Write Resistance: Poets Resist Gender Violence*.

Her poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and reviews have appeared in *Margie*, *Mid-American Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Blackbird*, *Arts & Letters*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Feminist Studies*, *The Iowa Review*, *Ploughshares*, and *Calyx*.

She earned a B.S. in Women's Studies and English Literature from Iowa State University, an M.A. in Women's Studies from the University of Arizona, and a Ph.D. in English the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She recently earned a second M.A. in Integrated Media Communications from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

She has received an Academy of American Poets Award, a Louise Van Sickle Fellowship, the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation Fellowship, a Hitchcock Fellowship, and grants from the Kimmel Harding Nelson Center for the Arts and the Center for the Great Plains Studies.

Also by the Author

Books

Journey to Nowhere (Finishing Line Press, 2019)

What a Bicycle Can Carry (BlazeVOX [books], 2018)

A Bicycle's Echo (Red Dashboard, 2018)

Through a Certain Forest (BlazeVOX [books], 2017)

Velocipede (Stephen F. Austin State University Press, 2016)

An Apparently Impossible Adventure (BlazeVOX [books], 2016)

Drink (BlazeVOX [books], 2015)

Wake (Aldrich Press, 2015)

American Galactic (Martian Lit Books, 2014)

Some Fatal Effects of Curiosity and Disobedience (Lavender Ink, 2014)

Queen of the Platform (Anaphora Literary Press, 2013)

Sprung (San Francisco Bay Press, 2012)

Collaborative Collections

Yoga Birds with designer Adam Wagler (Zea Books, 2019)

Every Girl Becomes the Wolf with poet Andrea Blythe (Finishing Line Press, 2018)

People like Cats with artist Chuka Susan Chesney (Red Dashboard, 2016)

Leaves of Absence: An Illustrated Guide to Common Garden Affection with artist Sally Deskins
(Red Dashboard, 2016)

The Hunger of the Cheeky Sisters: Ten Tales with artist Lauren Rinaldi
(Les Femmes Folles Books, 2015)

Intimates and Fools with artist Sally Deskins (Les Femmes Folles Books, 2014)

Letterpress Collections

Unclose the Door (Gold Quoin Press, 2012)

Farm Hands (Gold Quoin Press, 2012)

Chapbooks

Diversions (Dancing Girl Press, 2019)

Threnody (Porkbelly Press, 2014)

The Bottle Opener (Red Dashboard, 2014)

Spindrift (Dancing Girl Press, 2014)

Stranger Still (Finishing Line Press, 2013)

First Wife (Hyacinth Girl Press, 2013)

Men and Their Whims (Writing Knights Press, 2013)

She Who Loves Her Father (Dancing Girl Press, 2012)

Branding Girls (Finishing Line Press, 2011)

Ghost Girl (Pudding House, 2010)

My Imaginary (Dancing Girl Press, 2010)

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