

23. Wheeling in the Years

What's it like outside? Riders hold strong prejudices about when to go, at what temperature to ride, under what conditions they'll endure this indignity. Typically this is between 50 and 80°F, never below their age. Humid Summer days in 90's or deep freezes below 20's could actually prove life threatening. Bright sun creates deep shadows that obscure cracks, grates and potholes. Some riders await faultless days: dry, high-60's, slightly overcast. Happened perhaps 20 times a year, unless you're fortunate to live in an ideal weather microcosm.

There are excuses aplenty for not starting a ride: a dawn too late to get in a decent sunlit workout before business, or heavy overcast, or not bright enough with rain in forecast. Those gruesome first few miles before body shrugs off leg and rump twinges are a reason enough. Al asked, of nobody in particular, "What's the difference?" then went all year despite pain under almost any conditions. He actually preferred Winter riding. In Summer, thunderstorms roll in unpredictably, and, anyway, he couldn't keep up with youngsters who average as much as 18 mph. They're seldom around during Winter, and he often set pace around 14 mph, when fog, heavier clothing, ice, sand and sketchy pavement impeded everyone's progress. Not only an ego and mood boost, Winter riding presented other items of interest.

During rest of year, Mother Earth is draped in green. December stands in sharp contrast. Places previously ridden look totally new. He cut to 45 miles a December century tour because of snow on Cape Cod, unnervingly unfamiliar to him in Winter. Got an eyeful of what was usually hidden behind hedgerows in Summer's green glory, now unattractive bramble and dumpsters next to dirty snowbanks insulated against sunshine. Light was special, a unique feel with half frozen coves surrounded by ice and mists. At its very tip, Race Point has a technical bikeway, their objective, that cruises up and over twisty white sand dunes high above a royal blue sea, as alien a landscape as you're likely to visit in a lifetime, but that would have to await another year. The Cape, jutting farther out into Atlantic than anywhere on East Coast, has its own weather patterns, and is sometimes battered by Winter storms that miss everywhere else. In contrast, it was often warmer off-season, surrounded by tepid Gulf Stream currents from South, the same flow that warms England and Iceland. During another ride, sky opened and pelted his small group with sleet bouncing everywhere like tiny

ping-pong balls; reminded him of a film depicting nuclear explosions, a hint of nuclear Winter? One tends to remember such experiences vividly, as opposed to more numerous and ordinary mid-season jaunts.

Those who abstained below 40°F didn't know what they were missing. More special than Winter Solstice was the vestal virgin first snow of year, the real seasonal demarcation. Initiates can read patterns of black moisture and white salt stains around cracks as if they were runes of portent. Beware of shiny pavement, whether black or white. Dark brownish mushy spots on snow covered streets were where salt was working, and so made for steadier riding. Skinny scraggly birches stand starkly in frozen landscapes, twisted by competing with hardier species. Short days bring on blues, ennui, SAD, a medically recognized seasonal disorder. The best tonic for depression, according to psychologists under whom he studied, is, remarkably, frequent moderate aerobics. Bicycling nicely fits this prescription.

However, a good ride is spoiled when you go overboard. His rides averaged around 25 miles. Centuries were few, although he averaged nearly that per week. Your 2 hours in a saddle should be succeeded by considerable rest; a century should contain 4 hours of resting, an hour between quarters, but there's only so much daylight to work with. He wasn't much interested in ascending mountain peaks, riding very long rides in Winter, or taking ocean ferries. Did enjoy island destinations in Summer, but drivers were often drunk and roads were narrow. Once he raced on his good bike 25 miles to last ferry after work, knowing full well if he'd gotten a flat it would have been a disaster, family had gone ahead, stuck overnight without a place to stay—too anxious, breathless, risky—making it there with only moments to spare. Once in December he barely managed to finish a half-century in a relentless headwind; gusts plagued his entire return loop, which was planned to dodge wind as much as possible by sticking to main arteries that were not recommended on tour maps. Had to use easiest gear combinations for almost half these miles.

You can warble of snow drifting dreamily down as if it personally affects your well-being, like some wannabe who writes of *echoing silence*, a nonsense phrase which betrays writer's self indulgent privilege of never having to deal with real low lifes. For those engaged in society, there's no silence, nothing but noise, period. Or you can simply shovel snow out of your way without a thought. He chose to do both, although poetry wasn't profitable.

Winter Cadence

Predawn rain always slows.
Indistinct buildings loom,
rustlings in roadside gloom,
noisy caucus of black crows.
Swept patterns in sand
where cars violate lines
for seconds defy fines
and bikes overtaken land.
Bare lines of pleached trees
blasted free of leaves
by passing traffic breeze
match chainlink memories.
Lips shaping masked breath
avoids frozen glasses;
tip bridge until fog passes,
otherwise can't see path.
Repeated freeze and thaw,
profiles of snow persist,
slick sheens that sun resist,
potholes where never saw.
Insulated from news—
inputless, free to dream,
faith for our tragic team;
can't master what we choose.
Felt canopy above;
hold flicking off light
until past lines of sight
and just awake aware of.
Murky heatherless moors
instead gray city spaces
for now far green places;
all too soon back indoors.
Salty white, gray spatter;
hose if can, when in doubt
haul tepid water out.
Lube quiets rusty chatter.
More laundry, muddy pants
study weathercasts, maps,
thumb catalogs, take naps.
Window another chance.

Spontaneous poetry always on tap, writing was something you could do when weather didn't cooperate. He wrote those quatrains just before news broke of the shocking tragedy of Space Shuttle Columbia. While heartbreaking for families and friends, everyone inside industry was aware of its risks and courageously took them anyway. Space shuttles are not only the most complex machines ever conceived by man, flying them into orbit is among the most dangerous activities anyone could ever attempt, what a free society does despite danger, hostile detractors, power mad enemies and their superstitious minions. It's a price crew was willing to pay for a better future for all mankind, an example to all on how they should live, freely, hazarding fate, head on into the unknown. Heroes all, lost but never to be forgotten.

At their best, men move forward together, plan progress, seek new challenges, tear down fences, wonder what's around next bend. He felt the same way about both bicycling and writing, but few shared his views except some literary giants, like William Saroyan, "My bikes were always rebuilt second-hand... lean, hard, tough, swift and designed for usage. I rode them with speed and style. I found out a great deal about style from riding them. Style in writing, I mean. Style in everything. I did not ride for pleasure. I rode to get somewhere, and I don't mean from the house... to the Public Library. I mean I rode to get somewhere myself... I learned to go and make it fast. I learned to know at one and the same time how my bike was going, how it was holding up, where I was, where I would soon be, and where in all probability I would finally be." For some, to be sure, that included becoming cannon fodder or dying in space. Hooking up with people can get you into trouble, but running away to be alone is worse.

Anyone in high office didn't get there without many others allowing it. All share in glorious triumph or ignominious shame after such a mishap. Policymakers listen to detractors, permit funding to be cut, risks to mount, shortcuts to be taken, and a troupe of fine young men and women die. Too many don't vote, cynical of process as it exists, probably rightly so. All passiveness does is give rise to bean counters, lawyers and totalitarian dictators. So in slips a stingy administration. Then nobody holds it responsible, even reelect. Beloved lives and billions lost were nearly enough to make you vomit, surely enough to make you bow in disgrace. He could only hint at solutions; people must forge answers together. Frozen rocket launches seem fraught with danger, yet lift off timetables carved in stone, inflexible, perhaps to avoid budget overruns, are just as bad. Graves, too, are mercilessly cold.

For Columbia's crew, instead of graves, their ashes spread across icy sky above the gray shroud that hung over him that late Winter day, someday to fall as fine dust and join cast off cells and hair thinnings under one's bed. When he got a little lazy, dust might prowl out and roll across floor as dust bunnies, tumbleweeds, wuffies, seemingly born of immaculate conception, somehow verging on spontaneous life, symbolic of more than death after all. Dust is definitely on life's continuum, something power mad egoists hope to dominate along with billions of jostling individuals, none among them at all organized or successful. You can't justify exploring space if your only priority is quarterly gain.

Familiar places can take on a strange aspect: ever changing, sometimes horrifying. You can sometimes catch numinous images in the corner of your eye or project them from memory, hardly any difference in their creepy effect. Not a single spin he planned was contemplated without misgivings, a sick feeling, perhaps butterflies or worrisome premonition something bad would occur. People act out little social habits while reveling in work—bubbling about something they were about to do, building courage, challenging others, questioning motives, seeking validation—annoying habits not always appreciated except in uniform social beehives. Nothing truly bad ever occurred, however, which created a false sense of security. Doesn't one suddenly become dead? Happens fast without warning, unanticipated, while highly focused even. Do angels watch over those who are pointlessly reckless? What can go wrong does, isn't it said? Yet reasons you should ride still outweigh reasons you shouldn't.

Proper equipment makes a difference. Bought right stuff. Carefully maintained his bike and inspected each time out. Kept it clean. Paid meticulous attention. Didn't get terribly cold after he'd mastered layering. Many clothes he picked were specifically designed to keep chill out and warmth in, with special flaps under zippers and wrist cinches that wrapped around thumbs. Proper underlayer materials, in increasing desirability, are polyester, Cool Max, spandex, wool, fine wool, and silk. Long silk blouses and pants that fit properly—cuffs not overly elasticized and sleeve lengths right—are hard to find. Only a few places sell either silk or wool at reasonable prices, mostly through mail order catalogs. Idea is to wick away moisture from skin. Fleece makes a reasonable insulating layer between base layer and windproof outer garment, although nothing beats camel hair, evolved upon deserts with wide temperature swings daily. Polyester takes on body odor, unlike wool. Wool has antibacterial properties and doesn't stink much,

unless wet wool itself smells bad to you. Fine merino wool from Italy or New Zealand isn't itchy while it also regulates cold and warmth; Smartwool makes comfy socks of it. Silk seldom needs care—ironing, washing—other than hanging it to air it out, which is why it's so highly prized. The heavier silk is, the higher its thread count, longer it lasts, and more it costs. Silk-wool blends are highly desirable, as silk extends life of fabric. He'd buy garments if they weren't impossible to find, like real camel hair turtleneck sweaters, incredibly expensive and rare. People make do with whatever nearby retailers offer.

Pedaling raises hundreds of BTUs, so, while moving, a properly layered torso hardly gets uncomfortable in Winter. Areas of concern are feet, hands, and head surrounded by cold air. Always took special care to protect them with booties, extra layers, gloves with Thinsulate, and a head covering called a balaclava, nothing more than a sock with a hole in it. Its name comes from a battle in Crimean War near namesake town, where soldiers thereby enclosed their heads to avoid frostbite. Over 80% of body heat is lost off your noggin. Works surprisingly well, although better to buy relatively inexpensive pre-made versions of polyester or wool. When using booties, don't fully unzip them or you'll find it difficult to restart zipper with fingers frozen or gloved. For insulation, feet should also be layered inward from Neoprene to acrylic socks, shoes, then wool socks. Would've appreciated a better sole to booties, 1 that won't get chewed up walking or jam between cleat and pedal, but apparel designers didn't bother to consult him. Double or single tights are decided between at about the freezing point. Turtlenecks (or gaiters) bunch unhappily at back of neck because head tilts up from crouch, but do add an extra layer for ears, neck and nose when it's frigid, plus provide a mask against lung burning road salt. You must be wary of all dust kicked up by passing vehicles, neither to be allowed into eyes (use safety glasses or goggles) nor inhaled (use a mask). Ski goggles are sometimes used for bicycling, but they fog up and otherwise restrict vision, so are not recommended.

Any exposed skin or moisture on skin's surface quickly/painfully freezes. Being out at -10°F, his breath turned to ice immediately. There are many dangers associated with such cold making it imprudent for the uninitiated: Equipment failure, frostbite, hypothermia, even heart attack. All riding requires good planning, but a flat tire at such a time could prove fatal. Had tastes of when things go wrong, for example, some dismal time standing shivering under

an overhang 25 miles from home bitterly waiting out a thunderstorm after forecast promised plain overcast. Rather than risk trouble on a secluded country road, during coldest months he tended to ride close to city services where EMTs and shelter were never far off.

He thought of travel in segments, between start and subsequent 4 corners, or out to a district, or hollow, or plat, then loop around a pond or trace a lane. He thought of life's journey in segments, training hard to get employed, working harder than he imagined for pay, being forced into premature retirement, never having saved enough after paying more than his share, buying products to support industry and occupations, and giving what little remained to charity, finally seeking charity to survive. Having been beaten out of career promotions, inheritances, and shareholder dividends, sustenance always seemed to show up unannounced from an unknown angle just when all looked as bleak as it could get. You can plan a trip, spontaneously change it, but were you ever in control of your life's entire journey? You will always wind up doing something beyond your control or you've never imagined.

Theoretically, sticking to major roads in Winter is a good strategy. Main Street is more likely to be plowed, is usually flatter, but pavement may be worse, although defects are more likely to be seen under decent lighting. Bad cracks or ruts covered by puddles occur more often where drainage is bad and sewers are few. Summer may be prime time for peaceful country lanes, but as long as they remain clear of ice, frozen lifelessness presents Currier & Ives vignettes. Just like bicyclists, many motorists gravitate to better roads in Winter, and margins become piled with snow, both of which increase likelihood of collisions. So, he'd mix roads when he planned Winter rides. Wouldn't want to be frequently descending treacherous hills, or pushing bike around ice or through slush. Since roads not recommended go alongside miserable traffic and through terrible intersections, you'd have to sequence ride segments to hit these obstacles at just the right time, hard to do, or just avoid altogether. Enduring bad stretches once in a while reminds you that good routings are well worth your effort.

After November and until April, club routes generally didn't exceed 30 miles. Otherwise, they were seldom shorter than 50, even up to 200 miles mid-Summer. There'd always be challenging terrain to contend with. Didn't make much difference to him, though. He disappear for 8 hours or more on Sundays, even sometimes midweek, go as far as he wanted, riding to, then from, rides

all over State. He had a goal of riding every route endorsed on State's Bicycling Map, and had nearly completed his quest, despite some roads being darned tricky to access depending on season. Even rode those not recommended. He remembered how families once drove for pleasure on Sundays after church, or thrill of hurrying to varied destinations and visits to relatives. They actually looked forward to it, a tiny reward for working diligently 6 days before. But all pleasure had been stripped from driving by too many others doing likewise. Bicycling, he would stop to admire scenery, get off bike to view a double waterfall from a better vantage point, or listen to its babble while soaking up moments of sunshine. He'd then push off refreshed and repeat often. If you drove this way, you'd be arrested or, at least, questioned.

A few sheets of downpour couldn't spoil his romp when he rode to honor a fellow route designer, who had certainly scouted some charming backwaters: farm scenery galore, good roads, and light traffic. He couldn't remember ever enjoying a more fragrant tour. Lilac bushes everywhere were in full bloom, almost intoxicating. His French ancestors seemed to favor lilacs, and so many French settled nearby it was state's leading nationality, although crowded by Italians, Portuguese, and a wide sampling of practically every other paisan from all corners of globe including Southeast Asia. A given front yard might include anything from an alcove of Mater Dei to statue of seated Buddha. He never knew quite what to expect, not necessarily a bad thing.

France today really disappoints, with their aggressiveness toward America and lack of support. During 2004 Tour de France, newsmen interviewed French bystanders, all of whom said they would've preferred a Frenchman to win. They spit on Johnny Legstrong. It's well known that France's diplomats used their position on United Nations Security Council to sanction Iraq, then illegally exploited situation by buying oil without competition at bargain prices in violation of sanctions other states were honoring. Russia, too. As an example a bad faith, it was 1 Satre might use. Over their stance on Iraq, Americans retaliated with a moratorium against French products. This impromptu embargo aided local growers. Average folks trying to eke out a living are made to suffer because of their affiliation with government by country of origin, former status, green carder or once friendly. Citizens of foreign origin are rounded up in concentration camps, as were Japanese in America during WWII. You can even be a dissident ex-pat and still be branded "one of them". Nothing was done to curtail Chinese products after they invaded Tibet. Trade should promote peace.

So much for diplomacy. Made UN look foolish. Undermined international law. They might as well disband UN's Security Council, a leftover from when France and Russia had some influence on a World stage. France expected Americans to elect their employee, Jerk Springster. Yes, the same traitorous *game* show host who hunts down and displays trailer trash as if they represent all Americans, who can't even win a dance contest let alone a Senate seat. People overestimate their popularity. Yet, if someone as poorly qualified as Dudbubba can be President, or an actor Governor of California, or a California actor President, for that matter, anyone might succeed. These crooks seem to get elected in spite of themselves, almost as if a cynical protest of a process in which no referendum you vote for ever gets enacted and nobody you vote for ever gets elected. Where's the democracy?

Don't underestimate World's dissatisfaction with America. When USSR got mired dominating Afghanistan and other small countries, it was sanctioned, and split up into dysfunctional fragments. In the resulting power vacuum, America enthusiastically assumed the burden of making the World a *better place*. Unfortunately, under its conservative, reactionary, right wing, totalitarian leadership, it has failed miserably in this mission. Who can define *better* anyway? Certainly no bomb throwing anarchist, Christian zealot, Chinese party boss, or Moslem cleric. Average Americans now suffer 1 terrorist plot after another, the latest an attempt in NYC to blow up JFK airport's fuel tanks. Big statement! Jetliners—already an industry scraping for survival—would be dangerously back flying in a week sending free people cheerfully around spreading dangerous ideas of freedom. There's a lot wrong there, as there is everywhere. And yet, whose fault is it? Unwittingly, by accepting existing policies, Americans are waging an anti-nature battle *and* a massacre of indigenous people with unrestricted resource depletion and sales of assault weapons and landmines. This just enables petty dictators to rise in ROW, gives them a scapegoat, stirs ignorant masses against a seemingly powerful foreign foe. Meanwhile, most Moslem men are secretly drinking alcohol and exchanging porn. You can't shut out the World. Stupid to try.

What happened to Soviet empire may happen to America, China, and European Union, too, if citizens don't straighten up, dump idiots in office, and move forward with sound domestic and international policies. By sound, one means immediate help when *asked* for it, anywhere in the world, which obviously includes New Orleans, not decimating labor unions, destroying the middle class, meddling imperialistically with weaker nations, paying workers less

per hour in foreign countries than at home, using more than its share of clean water, gas, minerals, and oil while creating global warming, pockets of jobless despair, and toxic technologies. What if they start wars and nobody shows up? What if you simply decided not to acquire wealth, bartered instead of bought, met your own needs among yourselves? Do-it-yourselfers are already cutting into retail sales, Home Depot building new and Wallymart rolling back store startups. With no income, they can't tax you, build war chests, wage war. Politicians couldn't run for election, wouldn't want the job, since there'd be no power left. Policies that destroy the middle class, who pay for everything, will just hasten this eventuality. Corporations and industries would have to start coughing up their share. But the middleclass will never revolt as long as they perceive a chance of comfort from hugging status quo.

Frenchmen invented personal freedom after putting up with centuries of imbecile kings. Rousseau single-handedly changed civilization. *Emile* was a seminal leap in public education, while *The Social Contract* fueled French Revolution, not that any book today would exert a similar influence or get read, for that matter. Jean-Jacques forever delineated why governments are servants, not masters – fewer of them than any *organized* population. French are sensitive about freedoms and worship anyone who demonstrably expresses it. World has a lot to thank France for, although they're generally so arrogant they make more enemies than admirers. Of course, their idea of freedom has been impugned by scientists as no more measurable than hate or love, an emotional or psychological construct that's not real. If someone *really* fills your needs, you say you love them; if only partially, you like them; if not at all, when called to testify, you despise them. You are indifferent to those you've never heard of or met, but generally dislike them, too, resent their competing needs. Consequently, almost everyone dislikes everyone else just like a Frenchman, only they're in denial about it. At least French are consistent in their universal contempt; honesty is always commendable.

It's sad about America today. All it has left as an advantage is its rapidly disappearing expertise. Only remaining bike makers are custom builders using advanced materials. Only manufacturers are new pharmaceutical companies, rocket scientists, secret weapons developers, these high cost, high end, tax paid enterprises with huge obstacles to start up, and, thus, little competition. It's the real *tax and spend* of which conservatives accuse liberals. Forget automakers, job shops, soap boilers, steel plants, widget makers, anyone who competes with what you can buy cheaply from

overseas and throw out, which fills landfills—from carton to compactor, in no time. Domestic manufacturers are disappearing, along with their engineers. A service-based economy never works. Ask England or France. Dudbubba's administration is a textbook case on how to completely derail a gross domestic product, without which you can't ensure national security. Who's answerable for this treason? Like Frenchmen, Americans have a lot of enemies, but hardly any friends. Why? Presenting themselves as a demented superpower? Trying to force unfounded opinions on others? Perhaps both should concentrate on assisting and educating instead of dominating and exploiting.

When you take time to really look around you, you primarily see financially strapped families who overachieve keeping their properties neat and tending gardens with soothing lilacs. Nurturing flowering and showy plants might be a somewhat demented way to spread love, but only the vilest villain would disparage. What's there not to like? Bicyclists get to experience gardens from all angles. In the rain, blossom aromas fade, and woody dead leaves and wet ferns take over with complex pungency.

It was a rigorous route, but tilts weren't terribly bad, several nice rollouts, especially late, when you appreciate it most. You can't fear terrain; hills simply slow you down, more of an inconvenience to impatient than a physical barrier. Neither can you fear friendships or international diplomacy, simply hills of cooperation to climb. When conditions turn cranky, riders may decide to cut it short, or start earlier or later. On that particular May Sunday he was on another mission, to take in more roads he'd never done. He substituted a long slow grind up a bumpy lake road, around a cinderblock barn, and down a gradual 2-mile rollout. Then deluge hit. He parked it on a dry bench outside a fire station in a small town under an old maple. Felt lucky to find just what he needed when he needed it. Whiled away this interval noticing drenched pelaton finally catch up, quaffing dilute Gatorade, regretting the failure of French and Indian [Native American] War, and thinking about trees.

You can learn a lot from studying these noble lifeforms. Trees stand tall. Sink deep roots. Never forget their roots. Provide shelter. Offer cool in Summer, warmth in Winter. Directly absorb sun rays and put them to good use. Serve mankind with selfless dignity. Provide more than they take. Are beautiful in Autumn, golds, oranges, reds, yellows, encroaching from green darkness to merrily announce their final performance of year. Even pines, after November winds, shed alarmingly bright bronze needles as if cut from

strands of copper wire. Trees sleep deeply and long, never let you down come Spring, and, rightfully, there are still more of them than people. Every street has a *tree*, if in name only, *street*, and planting some immediately increases neighborhood aesthetics and property values. Had French and Indians won, they would have driven out invaders. Anawan's betrayal and execution was another low point in English Colonial History. Dutch and English prevailed, and they've been milking this American cash cow ever since, defoliating and despoiling, out of touch with an organic cooperation with environment which typified native culture.

Rolling into Mapleville, lightly clad, came upon some riders shivering in heavy togs under an artificial awning; no inspiration there except a few more insults to suffer. In particular, a reference to extra body fat was made by a guy who probably had more. Rolled off his back like a duck. Extra padding didn't really mean warmth. Only lean muscle generates enough heat to desensitize anyone to Spring chills. Obviously, they should have done more riding in the 30's, rather than suffer on a day in the 60's. They were like housewives who set their thermostats at 80 all Winter, when a little aerobic activity and a pair of sweats is all it takes to raise internal temperatures to toasty levels. Laziness luxuriates on long chain hydrocarbons in more ways than 1.

Riding a bicycle is the best way to truly experience an area quickly, not only sights you miss in cars, but smells, tastes, and touch. A long hot stretch by a cow pasture takes on an epic dimension. In thinner cold air, smells are particularly sharp. Winter riding unveiled sights never seen underneath foliage, a trade-off for its cold discomforts. Likened it to x-rays, revealing bony structure less flesh of foliage. Trees may stand starkly, to be sure, but also bridge buttresses, gravestones, stone walls, tumbled ruins. He hoped he'd never discover anything awful, like a rotting corpse. Because he saw everything motorists overlooked, such a thing seemed likely, missing persons and all, and prevailing attitudes in a disposable society, toss then forget. People's bodies and souls are not garbage, precious beyond all measure, sources of goodness, whatever there is of it in this untamed World, yet agents of evil, as well.

Weird coincidences had occurred. Once he was on a long commute home, having swung up into hills to extend a late Autumn spin. Chasing last moments before frost imposes its demands became an annual habit, rides to orchards with butternut squash and pumpkins piled on sleds, rough patches of scrubby grass where people trod it down in search of food cheaper and fresher than available in supermarkets even though costlier to you by having to

drive to farm yourself. Warmth of colors in frigid air, warmth of feeling after of another Summer of poking about on country roads being again a part of nature, wanted to shut down, too, start to hibernate. Thoughts as these were going through his mind when he came across a damsel in distress, pushing a bike with a flat. She was no spring chicken, blush drained in an eerie way, bluish lips, straggly hair, typical of bicyclists, though. Didn't say much when he offered to help. Mentioned she had some miles to go to get back, along general path he had come, past an old cemetery. Had nobody he could call on his cell phone for help. Nothing he had would work with her dated rig, so he apologized and departed. Later, 11 o'clock news had a story about spooky local legends, undead who were supposedly buried at that same cemetery. But when they showed their faded portraits, didn't one bear a remarkable resemblance to his damsel? Creepy.

Amy Ray wrote a song about looking for old Indian reservations and their evidence of inhabitation while on a bike tour of Vermont, then realizing that ghosts of dead always surround, no matter where you stand, having once passed every way you go today. She claimed she wasn't quite ready for Ezekiel, Jonas or other dead spirits to show themselves, although they probably do and you'd never know it. You get a feeling ghosts dearly desire but must expend enormous effort to communicate with you from beyond, which is why sightings are brief and usually overlooked.

Once, climbing past the reservoir, always a chore, was somewhat distracted at intervals by pages from a girly magazine. Wasn't clear whether someone recklessly ripped up rag and tossed out of a moving vehicle or weather had shredded and strewn. Was repeatedly enticed by exposed pink bits you seldom see except on European beaches. It wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last. Could've averted eyes, but why not see no matter how dark the reality? Whether alive or dead, anxious twitters or static roadkill, nature simply is, and you are there. Crested hill and nearly forgot about it.

Canadian geese flew overhead in a giant vee. To them it's not a bad year. They will fly south to escape a cruel cold, land to eat in fields they know, leave behind only nitrogenous biological waste that will fertilize future growth or kill it altogether. They don't complain that a recession means less for them, simply honk at everything. Sure, some starve, but that happens in the best of times. Some fall by the wayside or get shot wantonly by hunters. But most keep winging on a steady course. Geese help each other with their can-do, pull-together, steady way, each drafting a leader.

Humans can, too. People could make this a better World by doing what's right, rising up to responsibilities, standing against wrongdoings, voicing their moral outrage, and working together. But you can't be fooled by Kundera's moral judo, in which someone lords freedom, morality, nationalism, or righteousness over you only to goad you into time wasting acts from which they profit. In some ways, gagging imbecilic geese in their primal mission of species survival seemed smarter to him than many humans he'd met.

While biking numinous experiences occur with alarming frequency. Plying interstates with many other drivers gave some semblance of normalcy. Motorists are insulated from surroundings, tuned into the same TV channel. Anything horrifying or supernatural would appear nothing more than a special effect. Not so when you're out there unsheltered amongst phenomena. He spent so much time riding at night, he began to prefer its cleaner air, moonlit ambience, and reduced motor flux. But it wasn't very safe. Fewer people around made you more vulnerable to night crawling kooks and speeders. It was also harder to see obstacles. But to be a Master of Reality, you too must be able to sing, "Late at night/I get around/Pedal 'round this/Lonesome town/On a bicycle". Strange creatures began their prowl after sundown. On a January night down a long slippery slope he was startled by flapping of gigantic wings just above. Was it a pair of large pheasants or turkey vultures in overhanging branches, as he suspected from daylight encounters? Or was it dark angels, succubae, or vampires? Who could say? Didn't stop to investigate, hurried along, heart racing. Some facts may not be worth gathering. January is also when potholes return. Their grins widen, toothlessly gaping at your tires, hoping to bite or snag. Never stare at them, lest you fixate, then be drawn right in; avert your focus to only what's good or succumb to perils.

November encounters with living hunters were more worrisome. On a lonesome long country spin, planned to take a short unpaved crossroad past a point where 4 towns met. State and town borders are interesting. There's as often a reluctance to fix roads but elsewhere an eagerness for commerce. Where highways pass, they build shopping malls, like spider webs to lure motorists. Was curious if there was a signpost, something bicyclists find gratifying, unlike normal people, who smirk at such giddy gyrations. Racers in a group enjoy sprinting to them. As he made turn was forced to stop for a big pool of mud. This proved fortunate. Not 100 yards ahead a hunter had trained his shotgun directly at him, trying to lead some pheasant or turkeys being flushed by bird dogs. Ducked! Spun around. Sped off another way. Never went back there in

hunting season, even though he was annoyed by broken pavement of alternate route and missed allure of standing on the only 4-town spot in his state accessible by road. Should've picked a better time. He had heard shotgun blasts earlier, but attributed it to another of those rod-and-gun clubs that his country cruises sporadically passed. What a way to spend your time, smashing plates slung out of a sling. Filling plates with soup for the homeless was a lot more interesting and macho. Surviving was something to be grateful for on that Thanksgiving.

An infatuation with guns is triggered in a part of one's psyche that's childishly fascinated with genitalia. "Oooh, it's growing, isn't that interesting?" Bigger is better. That's how anyone toting around a shotgun feels, proud, powerful, possessor of a dangerous tool. It's really pretty infantile. They form gun and *rod* clubs so they can compare their tools, display their superiority, snare innocents in their mania. After age 13 you'd think they'd outgrow this sexual fixation. Among huggers roles become so predictable for her and him: he the hunter and killer from Mars, she the gatherer and nurturer from Venus. He wasn't altogether con or pro. A fully actualized adult who communicates across both cerebral hemispheres and still wants some protection might consider owning a weapon under certain conditions. They never made him feel any safer. However, if you have a tyrannical government, you might need armed civilians in order to maintain liberty. Of course, what you wind up with are factions and fiascoes, like in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Somalia. Entire world should disarm, but that's not likely to happen soon. A projectile from a low powered .22 caliber round, unobstructed, can carry over a mile. There have been many unbelievable coincidences of 1 finding an unintended moving target. A windshield in his pickup was broken on the interstate by what appeared to be such a projectile. Every so often someone was arrested for taking pot shots at passing innocents. Kids think nothing of shooting other kids and pets with beebees, bullets and pellets just to see what happens. Guns don't belong in cities, suburbs, or such places people congregate including national parks or wilderness. This leaves only huge farms, gun ranges, or military camps. So, if you're not a farmer, police or soldier, you probably shouldn't be handling weapons.

Late next Spring he did return, only to find mercator in error and road terminated in a sandy cul de sac with loose dogs on all sides, not at all what he envisioned. Penetrating abandoned sites and dead ends seemed nothing but a sick quest perversely akin to necrophilia and, one can only assume, as eerily unnerving.

One should be satisfied with what's familiar, since few really see all details of what's already in front of them, never mind what's new. Yet many who are addicted to notion of progress and stimulus of shock always look for something uncanny.

Thus began his Thanksgiving tradition for celebrating this harvest cornucopia of consumerism, this paean to plenty. Some people make a fowl sacrifice abhorrent to vegans. Glad they ate, others watch or snooze through games of gridiron gladiators. It's their right, thanks to television advertisers and pigeons they prey upon. He went out early on his bike. Provided weather is decent, Thanksgiving morning is the absolute best time to ride all year. There is zero traffic. People are cooking dinner or sleeping in. You may go without fear on the state's most dangerous roads, past the airport, places you never get to see otherwise. These are the flattest and smoothest roads around, but bicyclists—*marginalized*—seldom get to use them. No size rally of Critical Messers would be noticed. Aromas become delicious around noon, and by then he'd be done, appetite piqued for feasting. It's fun, invigorating, and surprisingly safe, but without elements of danger, who would be attracted?

Other than hearty hunters and outdoorsmen, few people ventured out on the coldest days, unless surrounded by luxurious warmth, having run out and thoroughly preheated thirsty SUVs or pushed key-chain buttons to start remotely. As if it wasn't bad enough that motorists didn't organize their trips and rode around unnecessarily, maddeningly more wasteful was remote starting. Homeless unfortunates shiver over subway grates while smug motorists use fuel foolishly. If they didn't, and instead put aside some of their dimes and quarters burnt each minute engines run, they could contribute to shelters. But they'd put any thrift to other selfish uses, cigarettes and gambling, he suspected.

Whatever the season, he'd spontaneously seize whatever outside offered. In damp cool, late Winter with its depressing grayness and mostly melted snow can be mild enough to let green grass poke through in spots. Snowmelt filled reservoirs, which caused long dormant waterfalls to flow. On a certain ride took in 2 extra waterfalls because he remembered this. Both were roaring thunderously, like trees falling in woods unheard but existing all the same. Impressed Pope Boys, his riding buddies, who'd never before been there. Without such distinctive memories, rides were somewhat bland; with, memories worth savoring, not so much for a change in scenery but as an act of sharing. Riding solo wasn't usually as rewarding; unfortunately, it had to suffice, because organizing group activities has become impossible in a polarized society.

Alone at dawn on a late Summer century he plied sacred riding territory through a bird sanctuary shrouded in mists. Air was still, and he heard his ears pass through it in that prolonged breath, that sound previously described. For once, though, it resounded more like a hauntingly ambiguous aria, "An Echo, A Stain", totally appropriate for a being wrapped in a cocoon with a gauzy glimpse of a wider enticing world beyond one's ability to touch or see with clarity. This impression lingered for an hour, winked in an out all day, then for weeks after, and totally became nefariously entwined with that place and time. There's a frightening confluence of ideas when bad things occur and unrelated concepts superimpose. He had decided to pirate this for-pay century after having previously picketed it, a statement nobody heard and he only regretted for lack of personal communion never offered, never received. Having suffered insults, he retaliated; without options to sate cravings, this is what people do, intensify situations, never gracefully accept or thoughtfully dissolve. The song was about having offended, with an attempt to track down why, denial. He surrendered to mom's breath on his neck, loosened his grip on self-imposed guilt that blocked him for years from productive interaction with kindred souls, let himself free fall in nothingness, Zen-like. A spark of hope, 1 candlepower, glimmered within his shadows. This subdued his internal mutterings for once, 1 of his better days. Yet magical moments don't reoccur. A few years later, it was again simply a nice place to ride through at dawn, no more a numinous pool.

Being an intensifier made others even angrier. They were angry enough already. Every day was a series of frustrations from long unavoidable lines, nowhere to park, and poor treatment without provocation. Those dedicated to their career get cranky about having to bear too much of life's burden themselves. Like rockets in silos, people were forever primed to go ballistic with a flip of a switch. Shit storms as this are restrained only by people's better etiquette and distractions of duty. Subtract both and you get hostile polemics and whiny rants. You should choose better terms for your anger. Cruel powers increase their enjoyment by adding fuel to fires, making someone suffer, pushing the weak to extremes, stirring up trouble for their insular amusement. Experiences get you closer to truth. Books never get written unless there's suffering. Is it right to start wars just to give somebody a reason? He'd rather have empty libraries. There's always someone in a crowd ready to yell, "Crucify him!" Mob mentality just takes over, even among otherwise normal people.

An essential skill is an ability to assuage anger, defuse conflicts, save an adulteress from being stoned to death by hard, mean folks who'd been kicked around like junkyard dogs for millennia. He wondered who was worse, those chronically deprived who made do for so long that they were resigned to swimming in scum, or those so well off they react with hate every time they're in the least bit threatened. Too few among them peek above their pond to perceive a better tomorrow. Consuming passions of the moment are what matter to them. A crowd of compassionate citizens drawn into a situation might help absorb and balance mania. But you can't believe this will occur, or live your life as if it someday will.

Wheeling in the years? Generously, he took a decade to write this book. You don't suddenly intuit all this content. No, it gradually unfolds to you. In this slow dance you take notes, weigh facts, whip them into paragraphs; later you edit, reedit, and, in between, ride a lot. Riding's small irritants accrue, like stress, until another paragraph appears, pearls in oysters. Automotive impatience means almost everyone is agitated into a frenzy to get to a destination, when what's in between is really what this trip is all about. You write a book to do the writing. What becomes of it doesn't matter. Where you get to is another point of origin for the next ride. The road ahead stretches into infinity, even if you sleep in your own bed every night, or at least until death.

For bicyclists, there were many seasons, not just 4, but transitions between. There was a month in early Spring, as March gave way, of rain and wind when redwing blackbirds laughed as you shivered, which seemed even colder than bone dry mid-Winter. Dry cold is always preferable to wet. No matter what he was doing or whatever the weather, he always rode on certain anniversaries, February 19th (Bruno's immolation), April 19th (Bicycle Day) or Bike-to-Work day in mid-May. Late April gave chilly starts that relented into stripped arm protectors and leggings in Summer-like warmth. A reverse uncertainty arose on September evenings, which suggested carrying a balaclava or extra layer should it suddenly turn cold. Variability of Indian Summer and winds of late Fall did discourage but didn't forbid, including quiet outings on Christmas and Thanksgiving. Yet other riders abstained all the more, and he found himself as alone as ever.

