2017

Retracing John Muir's Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf

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Digital Object Identifier: https://doi.org/10.13023/ETD.2017.197

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RETRACING JOHN MUIR'S THOUSAND-MILE WALK TO THE GULF

THESIS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
in the College of Arts and Sciences
at the University of Kentucky

By

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2017

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

RETRACING JOHN MUIR'S
THOUSAND-MILE WALK TO THE GULF

In 1867, the budding naturalist and future father of our national parks, John Muir, embarked on his thousand-mile walk to the Gulf from Jeffersonville, Indiana, to Cedar Key, Florida. Almost 150 years later I undertook the same journey, retracing the wilderness advocate's footsteps through the South to catalog all that has changed in a century and a half of progress, to try and better understand the inception of his environmental ethics, and to learn to see the world as he did, harmonious, interconnected, rejuvenating and imbued with a pervasive spirituality. The chapters of this thesis retell selected legs of that journey.

KEYWORDS: John Muir, National Parks, Wilderness, Thousand-Mile Walk, Creative Nonfiction

Chad Gilpin

4/26/17

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The following thesis, while an individual work, benefited from the support, insight and direction of several people. First, my thesis chair, Erik Reece, has been an invaluable source of encouragement and direction. His work exemplifies the creative voice and penetrating insights to which I aspire. In addition, Dr. Janet Eldred has guided me and challenged me, providing instructive comments and thematic advice. The final member of my thesis committee, Dr. Morris Grubbs, has been an astute and insightful reader of my work, offering valued suggestions and thematic advice. These individuals, along with many other professors and advisors, played a crucial role in the creation of this thesis.

In addition to the support above, my wife and family have been encouraging, supportive and unbelievably patient with me throughout this process. I am forever grateful for their love and support.

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Chapter One: The Falls

On a gray, unseasonably cold day in early summer, my wife and I sit in our car, in the parking lot of the Falls of the Ohio State Park, watching the swollen river rush past us beyond a line of trees. Dismal clouds hang heavy and low, drizzling a cool rain on the windshield. We pull on our rain jackets in apprehensive silence and drag ourselves out into the dreariness. I pop the rear hatch, wrestle the rain cover over my backpack, and we walk along the hill toward the interpretive center.

Famous for its exposed Devonian-era fossil beds, the park lies on the banks of Jeffersonville, Indiana, just across the Ohio River at its widest point from the city of Louisville, Kentucky. The current here once cascaded over a series of limestone shelves, dropping twenty-six feet in the course of two-and-a-half miles and creating the only natural shipping impediment along the 981-mile river. "The Ohio is the most beautiful river on earth," Thomas Jefferson wrote in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. "Its current gentle, waters clear, and bosom smooth and unbroken by rocks and rapids, a single instance only excepted." That instance was the falls, which formed a sort of natural bottleneck, not just for the river but for humans and wildlife as well, a place of passage and transition, of confluence and commencement.

Paleo-Indians camped near the falls as the glaciers receded. They collected clay for pottery and chert for spear points to hunt mammoths and mastodons around the enormous glacial lakes. Archaic tribes later established residence along the river, gathering mussels and discarding the shells to form massive middens up to a mile long. At European contact, a buffalo trace led across the rock shelves where Native Americans forded the river when the water was low.

In 1778 George Rogers Clark built a fort on nearby Corn Island, thereby establishing the city of Louisville. He launched his raids on the Northwest Territory from the falls, and later retired to a cabin on a nearby hillside overlooking the river. In 1803

George's younger brother William convened with Meriwether Lewis at the falls to recruit the fabled "Nine Young Men from Kentucky," who would form the heart of the Corps of Discovery commissioned by Jefferson. While running a general store in Louisville, John James Audubon frequented the falls between 1808 and 1810 to sketch the diversity of birds that congregated here, including woodpeckers, buntings, tanagers, kingfishers, hawks, owls and mergansers; fourteen of the paintings in his famous *Birds of America* were made from specimens he obtained from the falls. Abraham Lincoln escaped by skiff through the rapids after defending a slave from flogging at a tobacco warehouse in Louisville, and Walt Whitman called the falls ugly, preferring instead the view of riverboats docking at the city.

But I have come here today in search of a different history, a specific history. In 1867, the naturalist John Muir, embarked from Jeffersonville, Indiana, on a long walking journey, a self-conceived botanizing expedition, that took him through five states. He traveled from the knobs of Kentucky, across the Blue Ridge Mountains of Tennessee and North Carolina, through the swamps of Georgia, down the intracoastal waterways of the eastern seaboard, and across the Florida peninsula to the Gulf of Mexico.

When Muir arrived in Jeffersonville by train from Indianapolis, he hadn't yet founded the Sierra Club or published any of his famous articles advocating for our national parks. He wasn't yet rubbing elbows with presidents or politicians. He wasn't hanging around with railroad tycoons or high-profile magazine editors. He had never even visited California, where he would later find his muse in the glacier-carved peaks of the Sierra Mountains and the verdure of Yosemite Valley. Muir was just twenty-nine years old at the time and a college dropout, but the walk proved a formative experience for the young naturalist, during which he kept a journal and began articulating some of the environmental ethics he would spend much of his life advocating in print and lectures. After his death, these journals were edited into a book entitled *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, which offers a peek into the developing ecological mind of the man now known

as our country's wilderness prophet, the father of our national parks.

Edward Hoagland once wrote that we must go halfway with John Muir since he was more of an explorer than a writer, more confident in his knowledge of botany and geology than in his command over the written word. "...But we have other writers who have chronicled domesticity," he wrote, "and scarcely any who have gone up unravished rivers to the meadows, rock, and ice of origination." So I have come to the falls today to go more than halfway. I have come to Jeffersonville, almost 150 years after John Muir, in an attempt to retrace his thousand-mile walk through the South. I am seeking a challenge, an adventure, and a chance to spend long, unfettered days in the outdoors, but my trip is also intended as an inquiry into Muir's convictions, into the walk that helped form his environmental ethics. And since we, as human beings, are rapidly altering the dynamics of our planet, it seems pertinent to try again to see the world the way Muir did: harmonious and interconnected and rejuvenating, every element wonderfully beheld and imbued with a pervasive spirituality. So my trip is also about time and progress, something of an evaluation, a taking stock of all that has changed in a mere century and a half. I want to see first-hand how we've altered the landscape. And not least of all, I hope the journey will teach me, as it did for Muir, more about myself, about the world around me, and about my place in it.

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Of course it would rain on the very first day. My wife Virginia and I brave the nasty weather, walking around the park's interpretive center, along the observation deck, and down the concrete stairs to the rocky outcroppings, picking our way down to the rushing water. She looks up at me with glassy green eyes from under the flap of her hood, flashing a melancholy expression. Wild strands of thin blond hair curl around her face, and her eyelashes smudge black rays of damp mascara under her eyes as she blinks. Right up

until today, Virginia has been supportive of my plan, although she now exudes decidedly less support than before. She gets quiet when she's anxious or nervous, and she's barely spoken a word since we got out of the car.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" she asks. I shrug and let out a nervous laugh.

By the time Muir began his journey, he had shown but fleeting interest in the opposite sex, and he wouldn't settle down and get married for another fifteen years—after he had walked to Florida, sailed to Cuba and New York and back down to Panama, where he crossed the isthmus and then sailed around to San Francisco. From there, he wandered into the Sierra Mountains and didn't come down for another six or seven years after that. On the inside cover of his journal from the walk, Muir inscribed a sort of address indicating his detachment from any specific person or place at that point in his life and proclaiming himself a citizen of the world, devoted to no state or nation or sect so much as to nature. "John Muir," he wrote surrounded by a cloud bubble, and underneath: "Earth-planet, Universe."

I cannot proclaim such detachment. I'm thirty-three years old, and I've been married for five years now. Virginia knew exactly what she was getting into when she married me, and I think she knows the wanderlust that lies within. I've often left her for a week or two at a time on my outdoor adventures, backpacking or canoeing, fishing for smallmouth in Canada, pheasant hunting in South Dakota, or bear hunting in north Georgia. Two short months after our honeymoon, right as she was getting ready to start her first real job, I left for a backpacking trip through the Honduran rainforest. And while she's been supportive of my plan for this trip, I am also beginning to fear that she sees it as my last great adventure before I settle down and start thinking about children.

But Virginia knows I need this journey. Less than a year ago, we were living just across the river in Louisville. I had compromised the idealistic (and unrealistic) aspirations of my undergraduate years—a double major in Art and English—for a limping career in advertising, and I was then working as a marketing director for a floundering

furniture company. The pay was good, but the owner was a petty tyrant, narcissistic and vindictive. He wore loafers with silver pilgrim buckles and his shirts unbuttoned to his chest hair, pursing his thin lips together and speaking barely above a whisper when he was lying to you—which was most of the time. He was the worst kind of control freak: too scattered and inattentive to complete anything on his own but too domineering and distrustful to fully relinquish tasks to his subordinates. Within six weeks at the company, I knew it was a bad situation, a slowly sinking ship with a mad Captain Ahab at the helm, yet I stayed there for over five years, hating myself a little more each day.

Muir originally conceived of his journey while in the throes of a similar vocational crisis. His family immigrated from Scotland to a farm in Wisconsin when he was eleven years old, and after that time he received almost no formal schooling. But he was mechanically gifted and, despite his lack of education, managed to finagle his way into college mostly on the merits of some of his novel inventions, like elaborately constructed clocks and thermometers. But the Civil War began during his first year of school, tearing the country apart. Muir was a pacifist, and though he had expressed opposition to slavery, as an immigrant he felt no particular loyalty to the Union or Confederacy. The increasing tensions deeply affected him, and after only his second year, Muir left the University of Wisconsin-Madison for, as he later romanticized, "the university of the wilderness," although this was far from the simple truth.

He embarked on a geological and botanical excursion from Wisconsin into Iowa, returned to his family farm for a spell, and finally decided to follow his brother to Canada. Dan had earlier crossed the border to avoid being conscripted into military service, but Muir's intent was less clear. While the war was certainly a motivation, he continued to write home and ask whether he had yet been drafted. The brothers eventually settled together for a time, working at a mill in a village called Meaford on the Georgian Bay, and Muir soon found that he could put his talents to work for industry. He distinguished himself quickly, and was eventually hired to build an addition to the mill, where he

produced rake and broom handles. But when the mill unexpectedly burned to the ground, Muir found himself out of work and his employers unable to pay what they owed him for the handles he had already produced. He graciously decreased his bill to two hundred dollars and left with an I.O.U., which he trusted the owners to pay when they could. Much of that money, entrusted to his brother for safekeeping, would fund his walk through the South and subsequent travels.

In 1866, with the Civil War now over, Muir returned to the United States and eventually ended up in Indianapolis, where he found a job at a factory that produced hubs and spokes for wagon wheels. He quickly worked his way up to sawyer, and spent much time repairing and renovating equipment. He designed an innovative self-centering lathe, which drastically increased production, and he constantly tinkered with mechanical inventions that increased efficiency.

In his teens he had dreamed of becoming an explorer, like his hero Alexander von Humboldt, the Prussian polymath who was a close friend of Goethe and wrote extensively about his travels in Latin America. While in college Muir considered becoming a doctor and began a serious study of botany and the natural sciences. But now he was feeling his mechanical talents pulling him in a different direction. “Circumstances over which I have had no control almost compel me to abandon the profession of my choice, and to take up the business of an inventor,” he wrote in a letter to his sister, “and now that I am among machines I begin to feel that I have some talent that way, and so I almost think, unless things change soon, I shall turn my whole mind into that channel.” He’d had a horrible time finding what he considered adequate boarding in Indianapolis, he was working harder than ever, and wilderness was less accessible from the city than it had been around the mill in Meaford. “I feel something within,” he wrote, “some restless fires that urge me on in a way very different from my real wishes, and I suppose that I am doomed to live in some of these noisy commercial centers.”

But one evening as he was repairing the leather belt that powered a circular saw,

the file he was using to loosen the laces slipped in his hand and punctured his cornea, blinding him in the right eye. He went straight to his boarding house and crawled into bed, fearing the worst. Soon the left eye went sympathetically blind, leaving him completely sightless.

In the dark days that followed, Muir dwelt on the natural beauty of the world he thought he had forever lost. He grew physically ill and spent an entire month in a dark room. "I could gladly have died on the spot," he wrote in a letter, "because I did not feel that I could have heart to look at any flower again." But a friend brought an oculist who gave Muir good news, assuring him that the injured eye would heal in a few months' time. After the rest, sight quickly returned to his uninjured eye, more slowly to the injured one. He visited the factory and took long walks in the woods, which helped him recuperate and regain some of his zest for life. Local visitors also helped to raise his spirits, and he began to daydream about Humboldtian walking tours through the South, the West Indies, South America and Europe. By the time his sight was nearly restored, he had hatched the plan for his thousand-mile walk, to be followed by a boat trip to Cuba and then on to South America, a "grand Sabbath day three years long," he called it.

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I first learned about Muir's thousand-mile walk in my undergraduate years. At the University of Kentucky Arboretum and State Botanical Garden in Lexington, a walking trail in the woods passes through an enormous fallen bur oak, several centuries old at the time it fell. A two-foot section cut out of the trunk allows the trail to transect the tree, and the diameter is so large that I used to place my palms on either side of the trunk and swing my legs freely in the air when I passed through it. A nearby placard shows a diagram of the tree's growth rings. Arrows link regional history with the approximate growing seasons in which the events occurred, reminiscent of the musings of Aldo Leopold as he cut

a cord of good oak for firewood. At the bottom of the plaque is a quote from John Muir: "I have seen oaks of many species in many kinds of exposure and soil," he extols, "but those of Kentucky excel in grandeur all I had ever before beheld." The first time I read the sign, I was surprised that the revered naturalist, whose name was synonymous with California and the Yosemite Valley, had spent any time in my home state. When I got home, I looked up the story behind the quote online, and I read all about his trek through the South.

But somewhere along the way, I guess I forgot about Muir's first great journey. After I had begun reading his books in earnest—while living in Louisville and in the throes of my own vocational crisis—my wife and I visited Asheville, North Carolina, for our anniversary, and I found a copy of *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* in a used bookstore. It was the Sierra Club paperback with a woodcut of a cypress swamp and a salmon pink background. The foreword was by Colin Fletcher, a veteran backpacker and author, the first person to hike the length of the Grand Canyon in a single outing. I remember sitting on a bench outside of a clothing boutique, reading while Virginia shopped. I was reading and formulating a plan: a plan to quit my job and retrace Muir's walk, to try and reclaim for myself that "earnest, childish wonderment" with which he saw the world around him and absorbed its natural beauty—in everything from a glacier to a housefly—to try and breathe from my heels, as Chuang Tzu said a True Man breathes, and to test for myself Muir's optimism in the inherent beneficence of the world. My work life had become a farce, a parody of productivity lacking any sort of efficiency or progress, so I had begun to lose my sense of purpose in the world. I wanted to rediscover the concrete, everything that was here before the abstractions of advertising and marketing and copywriting and brand loyalty—and everything that would be here after. I wanted to step out into the world to see if I might wring the truth out of existence at last, or rather if it might wring some truth out of me.

It was that simple. I would walk to Florida and arrive a new man, attuned to the

natural world and with a new direction in life.

But, alas. Marriage and a mortgage and car payments and life got in the way for a couple of years. Yet it was a lingering, germinating version of that plan which consoled me through many sales pitches and advertising propositions and my boss's baffling business decisions. So, when Virginia took a new job in Lexington and we moved back home, I decided there would never be a better time. And, after much naiveté and slightly less planning, and then some packing and rambling explanations to friends and family, who collectively thought I was insane, I came here, to the Falls of the Ohio, this place of transitions and new beginnings.

***

The falls, of course, has changed significantly since Muir may have glimpsed it, and yet it's also a place where past and present commingle in a sort anachronistic simultaneity, a fugue of vast and disparate times all at once. On a given summer day, you can pick your way down fissured rock formations, past glacial erratic sandstone boulders, to wander around on the limestone fossil beds. But from any point on the sun-soaked rock shelf, you can lift your eyes from the sponged texture of petrified honeycomb coral to the skyline across the water, comprised of branded buildings named after fast-food franchises and corporations, like Papa John's Stadium, the KFC Yum! Center, and PNC Plaza. Or you can hike through the woods and up the hillside to a reproduction of the log cabin where George Rogers Clark retired. You can sit on the porch watching the sun set, while a great blue heron perches on a tree limb, and in the background steam escapes the smokestacks of the Duke Energy Gallagher Power Plant downstream.

But today is not such a summer day. Today the railroad bridge disappears into a dreary haze, and the cityscape barely swims into view through the fog and rain. The river runs high behind the closed walls of nearby McAlpine Dam, and the fossil beds are com-

pletely covered with churning water, lapping almost to the top of the channel wall. The banks are deserted except for two fishermen on the far point. Their silhouettes dissolve in the haze as they cast. I try to imagine the falls the way Muir might have seen them: a wide and reckless, cascading waterfall. But this is not the same river. Construction began on the Ohio's first dam the year after Muir passed through. Today there are twenty-one locks and dams on the river that Jefferson praised as so gentle and smooth, and a recent Courier Journal article bemoaned that the Ohio, once again, lead the nation in industrial pollution.

Besides, Muir never mentioned the Falls of the Ohio in his journals. He says he took a train from Indianapolis to Jeffersonville and steered through the city of Louisville by map and compass only, speaking a word to no one. The railroad bridge into Louisville wasn't completed until three years after Muir's trip, so there were only two ways for him to get across the Mighty Ohio at the time. The first was to catch the ferry at the landing a few blocks from the train station, about a mile up river from the falls. It was by far the most sensible option. But then Muir's trip—only two years after the Civil War when the South was in the throes of Reconstruction—wasn't exactly a sensible notion. The second route across the river, the old buffalo trace, was accessible only at low water and required fording at the falls.

I can't imagine that Muir forded the river without writing a word about it in his journals, but this natural promontory seems to me like a fitting starting point for my own journey. One of Louisville's nicknames is the Gateway to the South. The falls is that same gateway for the Ohio, and I share a common destination with the river, albeit by a different route. From here it winds its way westward almost four hundred miles, where it spills into the Mississippi, and together they flow south over a thousand miles more to the Gulf of Mexico.

If it's hard to imagine that Muir crossed the falls without at least mentioning the experience, it's equally difficult to imagine him—with his wondrous curiosity and

his interest in geology—passing so close to this open page of fossilized history without venturing to inspect it. He included a flowery and somewhat abstract first page in his journal meant to explain his desire for the journey he was undertaking. He may just as well have written this passage on the train from Indianapolis, or perhaps in a green wood somewhere south of Louisville, where he spread out his map and charted his route, but I imagine him here at the falls, staring out over the water and trying to express the tugging currents of his soul. A photo, taken four years earlier, during his college days, shows Muir in a dark suit with a long jacket and matching vest, his shoulders squared and his curly hair slicked down in an attempt to tame it. He wears a full dark beard and raises his eyebrows faintly, almost imperceptibly, in a friendly and inquisitive gaze. His eyes are clear and penetrating. The man I see at the falls, wandering the fossil beds, is a little older now and world-wearied, but his eyes are the same, youthful and desirous. His wool suit is well-worn and his boots are steady. He carries a rubberized bag on his back, inside a single change of underwear, his plant press, and a few books—Milton, Burns, a copy of the New Testament, and a tome-like volume on botany. Maybe the brim of his hat is crumpled and his beard tousled from sleeping on the train. He sits down on the edge of the rock with his notebook on his lap, dangling his feet out over the river and watching the rivulets in the rushing water.

"The sea, the sky, the rivers have their ebbs and floods," he wrote in those opening passages, which were later crossed out and cut from the book when it was published, "and the earth itself throbs and pulses from calms to earthquake." And here he references a speech by Brutus in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*: "So also there is a tide not only in the affairs of men but in the primary thing of life itself, which in some is slight & easily obeyed or overcome but in others is constant & cumulative in action until in power it is sufficient to overmaster all impediments & accomplish the full measure of its demands." The passage is one of raw yearning, and while in hindsight it may exude an early and resolute faith in natural cycles, which would later distinguish his writing, it also betrays

a need for explanation, for self-justification, and in his reference to Brutus a lingering doubt as to whether that flood "leads on to fortune" or if it be "bound in shallows and in miseries," as Shakespeare wrote. Muir knew keenly that he was doing something counter-cultural, that he was committing a sort of social suicide, turning his back on everything the country's burgeoning industrial society prescribed as the new American dream.

As though caught in the current of a river, he felt pulled in his own distinct direction. It's easy, with the weight of history, to accept with open arms any justification he was compelled to offer because we now know the things for which he was destined. But it's much harder to be a man well into adulthood with few life accomplishments, leaving everyone you know and love and turning your back on so many of life's expectations. Despite his elegant words, he must have been plagued by a vast uncertainty. I know, because I too am uncertain.

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Virginia startles me out of my daydream and takes my hand. She doesn't like the rain and cold, but she's not yet ready to leave me. We walk upstream along the sandy bank in the spitting rain to the high-water mark, a field of whitened driftwood piled like the bones of so many mammoths. Smoothed deadwood lays basket-woven together in a seamless flotilla, waiting to be whisked away again by the next flood. We pick through the pile here and there, retrieving curious pieces and contemplating their softened edges, worn by the current. For years they have been tossed against rocks, rounded by the river, rolled along the banks. They have been smoothed by time and by the river's current.

Even the detritus intermixed with the driftwood seems like ancient fossils from our present lives. Cracked coolers and refrigerator door handles, plastic toys and tubs, deflated basketballs and splintered two-by-fours, flip flops and bobbers, all waterlogged, sun-bleached and half embedded in sand and mud like the washed-up contents of the

city dump not visible but so necessarily implied by the skyline across the water. These remains are branded like the buildings on the opposite bank: Coleman, Nike, Mepps, Maytag, Rapala.

Under the canopy of trees on the outer edge of the pile, I find a long, slender piece of driftwood with a slight bend at the thicker end and nicely tapered. It's sufficiently dry and lightweight but strong. I hold it out at my chest, it's narrow end in the sand, and estimate the length. With my knife, I notch near the bottom all the way around and then shorten the stick some five or six inches by sharpening it to a blunt point. I stand it in front of me again. It's the perfect height for a walking stick.

***

Back at the car, along the ridge above the river, I am preparing to leave Virginia with our perfectly good automobile and begin walking. Her facade of support starts to crumble, and she hugs me with urgency.

"Do you have everything?" she asks. I nod. "Are you sure?" I'm only carrying a small pack today with some water, a granola bar or two, a map of the city and my phone. The rest of my gear will wait in the trunk of the car. I've arranged for this first day to be sort of a soft beginning, a trial run for the actual start. While I am walking, Virginia will drive across the river and spend a few hours at the gym, maybe grab a bite to eat, and kill some time at the park. This evening we will reconvene at Jefferson Memorial Forest, a 6,000-acre woodland southwest of the city, where we will spend one last night together camping out, before I begin the walk in earnest tomorrow morning and she drives an hour and a half back home to return to work. We've also scheduled several visits when she'll come see me on the weekends, until I'm out of convenient driving range, so we don't have to go two straight months without seeing each other. The first is this coming week-end in Horse Cave, Kentucky, some eighty-five miles south of here.

"You'll be okay," she says, as much for herself as for me. "You can do this." Her eyes are filling up.

"Yeah," I answer, trying to sound nonchalant. "It's just walking." She forces a smile and it squeezes a tear down her cheek. "Look, I'll see you again tonight. It's just a few hours."

"I know," she says. But as she wipes the tear off her cheek, I understand she isn't crying about today. She's crying about what this moment represents, about the two months that I won't be home, won't be there to cook dinner with her or walk the dog and talk to her about her day. I won't be there to nestle her under my arm as I read a book and she falls asleep. And I'm starting to feel pretty guilty about all of this.

I give her one final hug and kiss and turn and walk away along River Road toward downtown Jeffersonville. When I look back, she's waving. I follow along the flood wall past industrial buildings and factories and gravel lots, and then riverside restaurants and apartment buildings. I walk beneath the interstate and pass the quaint clapboard and red-brick houses of downtown. An old railroad bridge spans the river nearby the place where the ferry crossed in Muir's day, and it's been recently converted into a walking bridge for pedestrians and cyclists. I climb the spiraling ramp, sweating beneath my rain jacket, and walk out over the Ohio.

Upstream the river disappears into a white wall of mist and haze. Downstream traffic hums on the new interstate bridge, and just beyond it the old bridge sits vacant, while construction crews weave their ways between its piers. Barges dock together in rafts against the far shore and the Spirit of Jeffersonville riverboat paddles beneath me, pulled swiftly along by the heavy current. The bridge is almost empty except for a young couple walking their dog. She tucks herself behind his shoulder to block the rain.

At the other end of the walking bridge, a man paces back and forth, waving his arm above his head in my direction. I glance behind me. There's no one there. The couple with the dog has disappeared in the haze. For a moment, I think he's waving at me. He's

wearing a hat, and when he turns to the side I can see a disheveled hump on his back. I let my mind wander and imagine for a moment that it's Muir waiting for me at the bridge, wearing his plant press strapped to his pack, already hairy with specimen leaves and stalks flailing wildly about. It's a calming thought, having a companion for my journey. Not just a companion, but a guide, like Dante had Virgil, to lead me along the way.

As I grow closer to the waving man, my apparition of Muir dissipates. He wears a damp and peeling patent leather jacket and camouflaged hat. What looked like the hirsute dishevelment of a plant press on his back proves to be a soggy blanket, fruitlessly wrapped in a haphazard attempt to keep his backpack dry. The man is homeless. And he isn't waving at me. He's pacing back and forth across the width of the bridge, raising his smartphone up in the air as though searching for a signal.

Chapter Two: Road Rage

Like most rural roads, Route 61 south of Shepherdsville, Kentucky, is not intended for pedestrian travel. The sidewalks disappear at the bridge over the Salt River, and just outside of town, past a gas station and self-storage facility, the narrow gravel shoulder gives way to a precariously banking incline. Everything I've read online about walking roadways suggests doing so on the opposite shoulder into oncoming traffic. In fact, Kentucky State Law requires it when there are no sidewalks present. But the northbound shoulder of 61 dips directly into a thick tree line, which blocks visibility around turns, and the 55 MPH speed limit means cars tear past me at well over 60 MPH. Drivers can't see me until it's almost too late, and I have to leap into the trees to avoid getting run over. So I've found it safer to walk well off the right-hand side of the road in the shallow ditch between the roadbed and the mostly parallel tracks of the old Louisville and Nashville Railroad line, stomping through brush and standing water and all manner of trash and debris.

When the railroad tracks diverge from the roadside, a thick tree line emerges between them, and I walk along the tracks to get some reprieve from the highway traffic. But the tracks are as littered as the roadside ditch, and the large crushed rock of the track ballast makes each step difficult. Still, it's a relief to be hidden from the leer of motorists for a moment, and I decide to plop down for a rest beneath a cedar thicket on the earthen berm beside the tracks. A small garter snake, no bigger around than a pencil, slithers away between the rocks and through a black sludge puddle of leached tar and drainage water soaked with tannins. Broken glass telephone line insulators and old iron railroad spikes litter the berm. But even this destitute spot affords me a much-needed moment of solace. Walking the roads is far more stressful than I anticipated, and now that I stop for a moment, the full realization of my situation washes over me. I feel lonely and neglectful. Solace only reminds me of Virginia, who I left bawling in an empty roadside parking lot this morning.

Yesterday I hiked through Louisville much like Muir, speaking a word to no one—although I didn't need a compass and barely referenced my crumpled roadmap. I walked along River Road to Main Street where I witnessed a photo shoot in progress. A group of young men wearing matching suits and vests—probably groomsmen—milled around in front of an old building while some others peered over the LCD screen of a camera. I turned down Third Street and walked past the historic Seelbach Hotel where F. Scott Fitzgerald was known to frequent when he was stationed at Camp Taylor in 1918. Local lore holds that he was once kicked out after a long night of drinking expensive bourbon. If the story is true, it didn't keep him from using the city as Daisy's hometown in *The Great Gatsby* and the hotel, itself, as inspiration for the Muhlbach, where Daisy and Tom were married in the novel. I walked past the Victorian-era mansions of the Old Louisville neighborhood, some of which have been divided into apartments, now slipping into disrepair, and others still as elegant as the Cherokee Park houses that supposedly inspired Daisy's childhood home.

Past the University of Louisville campus, I walked by the sports stadiums and then Churchill Downs racetrack, the home of the Kentucky Derby. The surrounding neighborhood is impoverished, with graffitied plywood covering the windows of abandoned homes and old charcoal grills laying on their sides in dirt lots overgrown with weeds. I smiled at an ancient woman wearing a burka and wrapped in a blanket, sitting on her front porch, but she eyed me distrustfully. I passed two guys hurriedly pulling a bicycle from the trunk of a car and walking it up the front porch steps. The one in the back paused to glare at me before slamming the front door. He was carrying a toolkit and what looked like a cut lock.

Third Street turned into Southern Parkway, and the houses grew larger and upscale again as I passed under the Interstate 264 overpass. Virginia got bored in the late afternoon and picked me up somewhere just inside of Interstate 265, a few miles from Jefferson Memorial Forest. We grabbed a bite to eat at a Vietnamese restaurant and then

drove the winding back roads into the forested knobs. Unbeknownst to us, Jefferson Memorial Forest was holding their annual Forest Festival, so we wandered the booths of local artists and craftsmen and listened to bluegrass bands perform onstage before returning to our campsite and pitching our tent.

"Beyond the city I found a road running southward," Muir wrote in his journals, "and after passing a scatterment of suburban cabins and cottages I reached the green woods and spread out my pocket map to rough-hew a plan for my journey." A pencil-and-ink sketch shows Muir in his coat and hat, kneeling before the large trunk of a tree, his arms stretched out to the map on the ground before him. While he had long dwelt on the general path of his trip, the exact route he took was somewhat spontaneous. My route, on the other hand, is a little more planned out. I spent weeks online, downloading topographical maps from the United States Geological Survey, and I bought an atlas and gazetteer for each state I will be passing through, cutting them up to save weight and organizing only the pages I think I'll need.

After pitching the tent at Jefferson Memorial Forest, I dragged my pack from the car and laid out all my gear in the grass to go over everything one more time. Virginia and I were camping in our two-man tent, but I opted to bring the much lighter combination of a single-person hammock and a silnylon tarp for my journey. It's still early enough in the year that the evenings get chilly, so I brought a three-quarter-length closed-cell foam pad to block the wind beneath the hammock and my old thirty-degree sleeping bag, which is probably overkill, but it's the cheapest option since it's what I've got. I bought a tiny alcohol stove for the trip, along with an aluminum pot and a lid that doubles as a frying pan. The kit's not great for gourmet camp cooking, but it should be sufficient to boil the one-pot meals that Virginia helped me dehydrate—supplemented, of course, by ramen noodles, dried fruit and trail mix.

My clothing system mimics a technique I learned when backpacking in the rainforests of the Mosquito Coast. I brought two sets of the basics—pants, t-shirt, underwear

and socks—one set for hiking and a clean set for sleeping. I also brought a long-sleeve shirt and light windbreaker for additional insulation, a waterproof rain jacket and pants for inclement weather, a packable hat and sunglasses, and an extra pair of socks and sock liners so I have a dry pair when I need them.

The rest of my gear is sundries and essentials: some cordage for hanging a bear bag when I reach the mountains; a headlamp to see in the dark and a Bic lighter to start my stove; a pair of sturdy hiking boots with only a few hundred miles on them and a pair of sandals to wear in camp at the end of the day; a hydration bladder, two water bottles and a gravity filter for fresh water when I'm no longer near towns; a multitool and hunting knife for cutting rope and processing wood for a fire when I'm allowed to have one; and finally a five-by-eight-inch softcover notebook and pen to record my thoughts and observations, along with copies of Muir's *Thousand-Mile Walk* and *First Summer in the Sierra,* cut and trimmed from my hardcover copy of the *Eight Wilderness Books* to save weight on book covers and extra pages.

Virginia required I take my phone for frequent communication, the poor battery of which requires an additional portable USB charger. She also demanded I purchase an emergency satellite beacon. It tracks my movement in real time so she can follow me from an app on her phone, even when I'm out of cell service, and always know where I am. An emergency button on the beacon—which I hope to never use—can summon help if I were to break a leg or fall off a cliff.

Besides his books and plant press, Muir took only an extra pair of underwear, and I am jealous of his minimalism. The last time I weighed my pack at home—a few days ago, just before the bathroom scale I'd purchased at a garage sale went haywire—I had gotten the max weight down to just under forty-five pounds, including around a week's worth of dehydrated meals and a maximum capacity of five liters of water. I didn't expect to need that much water on most legs of my journey, so my average weight would run just over forty pounds—as light as I thought I could get it without investing in new and

insanely expensive ultralight backpacking gear.

Satisfied I had everything, I repacked it all with my dried food in my bag for what seemed like the thousandth time. I reviewed my maps for the week and double-checked all routes and destinations, then Virginia and I climbed into our tent and went to sleep.

In the morning we were both quiet and pensive. We packed up camp and drove to a nearby diner for a hearty breakfast where we lingered over subsequent cups of coffee and I tried to remember last-minute things to tell her about paying bills or feeding the dog. She rolled her eyes at me and assured me she had it all under control. After breakfast we drove out past the southern end of Jefferson Memorial Forest, where the winding road comes out of the knobs, and pulled into an empty parking lot. Virginia started crying in the passenger seat as I parked the car, and we sat there embraced over the center console for a long time. Finally I got out, shouldered my pack and just started walking.

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But despite all of my preparation, I've already deviated from my plan. I intended to ease into the trip with a light first day from Jefferson Memorial Forest to the KOA campground on the Salt River in Shepherdsville, less than ten miles away. But when I called the KOA, they wanted $45 a night for a tent camping spot—twice as much as any other campground I've ever stayed in—and they wouldn't allow me to hang my hammock. So, as I approached the Salt River, my legs still felt fresh, and I decided to just keep on walking. I hiked over the river, past the KOA, and into the town of Shepherdsville, where a pit bull lunged out of a storefront at me. I jumped back, wielding my stick, and its owner called it back into the store, glaring at me suspiciously. I continued on through the city, heading south into the rural countryside, and finally to this berm beside the railroad tracks where I rest and study my maps.

Skipping the campground in Shepherdsville may have been a blunder. Certain

legs of this journey are going to require what people online call "stealth camping," which basically means trespassing: you find a secluded place out of sight and camp without permission, setting up after dusk and breaking down before dawn. There are legs of my journey where I will have no other option, with no hotels or campgrounds or even public land within several days' walk. But I was careful to schedule the first few days according to the campgrounds that were available to ease myself into this lifestyle. Instead I veered from my carefully laid plan on the very first day. It's another twenty miles to the next campground in Elizabethtown—a full day's walk—and I've already come twelve or fourteen miles.

So on a whim, I decide I will veer off of Muir's path slightly and follow Highway 245 toward Bardstown, the bourbon capital of Kentucky. There's another campground in Bardstown, and before that, on Highway 245, is Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest, a 14,000-acre private forest owned by the state of Kentucky in trust. Bernheim doesn't allow camping, so I'll still have to stealth camp, but at least I won't have to worry about getting shot by an angry property owner. More importantly, 245 is a four-lane highway with large, spacious shoulders—and I could use the space.

As I plan my new route, I feel something tickling the hairs on my leg, and I look down to find a tick crawling up my calf. I forgot to put on any bug spray, so I flick the tick off of me and turn to my pack, which I find covered in ticks. I pick it up and smack at it, running away from the spot and shaking the pack as hard as I can. Ten or fifteen yards away, I set it down and inspect it, pulling off another tick or two, then I inspect my legs and spray repellant on my pants before trudging back to the dreaded roadside.

When I reach Highway 245, a gas station sits just off the interstate, and I'm almost out of water. It's late Sunday afternoon, and the station is busy with weekend boaters and travelers from the interstate. People stare at me gape-mouthed as I walk through the parking lot. They make no effort to conceal their gawking. A woman in the passenger seat of a pickup truck leans over and knocks on the driver's window to get the attention

of a man pumping gas, then she points at me urgently. I drop my pack on the side of the building and buy a gallon of drinking water and a Gatorade, then I refill my hydration bladder and head back to the road while people at the pumps stare at me with what feels like a mix of curiosity and disgust.

I reach Bernheim Forest an hour or so before dusk, and I walk well past the main entrance to the roadless eastern end of the property, dipping into the woods at a culvert when no cars are coming on the highway. I push through low-hanging limbs into the shade of the woods and pause for my eyes to adjust. A trickling stream snakes around moss-covered rocks and deadfalls, running into a tile beneath the highway. Enormous pines droop with an insouciant ease. Towering oaks spread a magnificent canopy. The scene is startling in its tranquility compared to the roadways, but I am too skittish to fully enjoy it. Instead, I scramble up a steep hill and find a powerline easement running parallel to the highway. A hiking trail loops through the woods on the other side of the clearing, but the thin stretch of mature trees between the power lines and the road appear unused by man. I descend just below the peak of the hill toward the road, out of view of the clearing and thirty or forty feet above the passing cars, then drop my pack.

It's not quite dusk and still too early to set up camp, so I pull out my cook kit to make a little dinner. I dump a sandwich bag full of dehydrated venison chili into the pot and pour in about 300 milliliters of water. In the stove, I squeeze a few tablespoons of denatured alcohol, ignite it with the lighter and set the pot on the stand with the lid on top. In about ten minutes, the water boils and I remove the lid, adjust the burner and let it simmer to cook off the excess water. As it cooks, I pull off my boots and sweaty socks to discover that the hotspots I started to notice the last few miles have already become white, sweat-soaked blisters. I dust my feet with medicated powder to help them dry and pull on my fresh pair of socks. When the stove's alcohol burns out, I enjoy a hot meal, sitting on my foam mat and resting against the trunk of a massive oak.

By the time I finish dinner, it's almost dark, and I begin stretching my hammock

between two trees, about twelve or fifteen feet apart from one another. Bug netting drapes overtop of the hammock's ridgeline to keep mosquitos at bay, but it offers no rain protection. The night is clear, so I hang my silnylon tarp between the trees above hammock, only staking it down on one side, and tying off all four corners as a wind barrier, leaving the top open to the stars. I stuff my sleeping bag and pad in the hammock and hang my food sack from the ridgeline to keep it away from raccoons or field mice, then I strip off my sweaty clothes and put on my clean, dry ones. I stretch my wet clothes out on the ridgelines to dry and then crawl into the hammock, leaving one leg hanging out to rock myself as I watch the stars swimming in the night sky beyond the canopy of leaves and black bifurcating limbs.

Despite my exhaustion, sleep comes slowly and fitfully amidst the hum of traffic and whine of gears. Every stick cracking out there in the night, I assume, is the cops combing the forest for trespassers like me.

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I wake up early, break camp right at first light, and sneak off of Bernheim Forest's property before I can get caught. The highway roars with early morning traffic, so I sit in the thick brush by the roadside ditch, applying moleskin pads to my blistered feet and waiting for the traffic to die down.

It does not.

Cars and trucks zip incessantly along all four lanes. Semi-trucks and gravel trucks and cattle trailers and low flatbeds loaded with heavy machinery and all manner of industrial and agricultural vehicles rush past with the stench of too-rich gasoline and the garage-door-down-suicide smell of billowing exhaust. I came to this four-lane highway because I thought it might be safer than the curvy, shoulderless state road, but the concession is a drastic increase in traffic. The highway is a virtual wall of roaring automobiles.

But the shoulders are wide, four feet or more from the white fog line to the edge of the asphalt, which makes for better walking than yesterday. I don't have to keep diligent watch, stepping off the shoulder every time a truck approaches. I bow my head and try to clear my mind amidst the frenzy of the incessant traffic. I try to remember why I am walking and what my purpose is. But no amount of mindfulness or mental calisthenics can block out the vehicular onslaught. Even with the wide shoulder, every vehicle is a threat. They are scary and imposing and impersonal machines like pacing beasts. And they are unpredictable. It's impossible to keep from flinching at every passing car. The wind and the whine and the blur never abate. The rhythm is just irregular enough to keep from numbing your senses, from lulling you into an ignorant daze. The traffic puts you on edge and holds you there, proffering short silent stretches only to toy with you, to show you how peaceful your path might otherwise be.

I feel myself growing nervous and twitchy. Every mud-tired pickup has a different ominous moan. A Celica with a mangled bumper hammers past, the loose plastic slapping against the frame like a jackhammer. An eighteen-wheeler releases a high-pitched, *Psycho*-sounding shrill when it coasts or downshifts too soon. A fat kid with a flattop screams at me out the window of his mom's minivan as they pull into Hometown Pizza.

On the shoulder, I pass hubcaps and car bumpers and beer cans and cigarette packages and plastic water bottles and soda bottles and smashed beer bottles and ropes and chains and soggy magazines and pink tampon applicators and torn flannel shirts and shredded tires curling menacingly up like black rubber flames welcoming me to the hell that is American highways.

And this is a special sort of purgatory; I feel like a modern Dante observing the unique new circle. My punishment, my *contrapasso*, is to endure the roadside—poetic justice for so many years of driving alone on the highway in my pickup truck, the bed empty, air conditioner blasting, my eyelids drooping in comfort and boredom. From inside an automobile, you float down the highway with the radio blaring, carefree. The

speed of life quickens to the measure of your speedometer, and anything operating at a slower pace is an obstacle or impediment. But outside of the trappings of an automobile, up close and personal, a highway is a very different place.

And I am here in this hell with the dead: dead skunks, dead snakes, dead deer, dead coyotes and dead rabbits and dead squirrels and dead turtles and dead birds and buzzards and butterflies. Unidentifiable bones lay strewn, bleaching in the sun. Dark feathers flutter in the hot wind off the cars, their shafts mashed in a syrupy mixture of blood and tar and innards, garnished with gravel and broken glass. Bloated bodies like half-inflated balloons cling to the asphalt, surrounded by halos of slipped fur. Snakes smashed flat, sun-starched and stiff like shredded tire rubber. Trash and lost lives intermingle in indistinguishable refuse.

I am beginning to understand the worried waddle of the possum, the furious flush of feathers, the clamber of the alley cat. I am becoming that ricocheting raccoon. I am the skittery squirrel scrambling away from your car. I am the deer in your headlights—not the proverbial one, but the very real one that startles and stares and throws itself into your speeding bumper, smashing your windshield, either in errant escape or perhaps to finally end the furious rush of it all.

I think my proximity to automobiles might be giving me a nervous disposition.

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"Just as writing allows one to read the words of someone who is absent," wrote Rebecca Solnit in her history of walking, "so roads make it possible to trace the route of the absent." I intended to follow Muir's route as a means of understanding his unique love for the natural world, deciphering the conception of his environmental ethics by retracing his experience, but so far my experience has been nothing like his. I wanted to trace his personal growth and reclaim his state of mind, his zeal for all things natural and the spir-

itual beauty that permeated his every vision, but so far I've noticed very little outside of the constant incursion of automobiles. "Roads," Solnit wrote, "are a record of those who have gone before…," and I naively thought I could read those routes like lines in a ledger, summing up the man that became John Muir.

But I also came to the road to see what had changed in the century and a half since Muir passed this way. And it turns out, the roads themselves *are* the change, or at least the most affronting and pervasive change. Motor vehicle traffic, and the infrastructure it requires, is the biggest and most blatant difference between my walk and Muir's. Perhaps that's too obvious to bother stating, but it's the all-permeating ubiquity of roads and automobiles that's so inundating from the shoulder where I walk. I see almost *nothing* else.

When Muir unfolded his map in the woods south of Louisville, he said he charted his route by the wildest, leafiest and least trodden way. I had fantasies of traipsing off across fecund farmland and dense forests, but I hadn't counted on my own conspicuousness as a solitary walker amidst a steady flow of harrying automobiles. So far I have seen exactly one other person walking. He was headed toward me on the opposite shoulder, exuding no enjoyment in his trek. Instead, he emanated a sort of post-DUI bitterness at his current condition and intentionally snubbed me when I waved.

And as for nature, nearly every inch of roadside is lined by fencing—four plank or wire, sometimes a strand or two of barbed wire running along the top—and motorists leer at me as they pass, distrusting and suspicious. I don't dare cut across someone's property for fear of Bobby's brother's neighbor's friend seeing me from the road and calling the cops—or worse, calling Bobby himself, who might show up with a double-barrel 12-gauge, hunting hikers trespassing on his land. When I want to take a break, I wait—sometimes rather absurd amounts of time—for a lull in the traffic along a wooded stretch of road where I can dive off into the underbrush without being seen.

So, I have resigned myself mostly to the roadways. There will be precious little

leafy leisure on my route. Highway 245 cuts between Shepherdsville and Bardstown, neither booming metropolises and both boasting populations less than 15,000 each. Yet, the Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) at last count for this stretch of road two years ago was over 20,000 vehicles, with a 10% increase from the year prior. If the same rate of growth continued to present, that makes for an average of just over 24,000 cars per day or a thousand cars per hour. Of course that's a daily average, which means the peak hour traffic I am now experiencing is far heavier.

This year there are almost 253 million cars on roads in our country, a 1.5% increase since last year. The EPA reports that as of 2014 the transportation sector was responsible for 26% of the total U.S. greenhouse gas emissions, the second largest sector behind electricity production, releasing 6,780 million metric tons of carbon dioxide. And passenger vehicles account for over half of those emissions.

This is not the world Muir wandered. The first gasoline powered combustion engine was built only three years before he embarked on his journey. Locomotives were still a relatively new transportation phenomenon. The first transcontinental railway opened two years after his walk to Florida, and as they say, the world grew a little smaller. The railway drastically increased westward expansion, carving up the landscape and facilitating resource extraction at a previously unprecedented magnitude.

In 1880 when Muir was getting married at the ripe old age of 42, the Good Roads Movement was officially founded, not by motorists but by bicycle enthusiasts, under the pretense of providing rural populations better access to urban amenities, but with the convenient side effect of furnishing miles of smooth cycling. The first production automobile wasn't constructed in Germany until the later years of that decade when Muir was running his father-in-law's ranch outside of San Francisco and his second daughter was born.

The first American automobile manufacturer formed in 1893, after Muir had retired from ranch work, founded the Sierra Club and was travelling in Europe. And it wasn't until the early 20th century, after Muir had published *Our National Parks* and

written many of his most influential articles, that the automobile industry began to take off in the United States. The year of his death, 1914, saw a boom for American automobile manufacturing with the production of just under half a million cars, half again as many of the mass-produced automobiles in the country at the time. Reflecting on Muir's journal from his walk is to intellectually recognize just how extensively the automobile has altered our world, but simply walking on the shoulder of a road for a day is to understand the gravity of those changes on a very visceral level.

But the ubiquity of the automobile in our age obscures its relative newness. I remember visiting my great-grandmother a few counties away from here when I was a kid. Virgie Mae Williams was born in 1900, fourteen years before John Muir died, and by the time I remember visiting her, she was a widow in her nineties who had lived alone in a tiny stone house for twenty-some years. The front room was full of picture frames and trinkets my sister and I weren't allowed to touch. We were constrained there on the sofa where we had to endure the the suffocating heat of her wood stove and the sluggish pace of conversation. My father enjoyed teasing great-grandma about a widower that lived up the road. The old man had once courted her, she said, long ago, before she met her husband, and she remembered the experience well because it was her first time riding in a rubber-tire buggy. That cracked my dad up. Every time we visited he asked her if she'd been courting lately in a rubber-tire buggy.

We drove home in our Cadillac, and she died at ninety-five, having seen the arrival of electricity and running water and refrigeration and air conditioning and automobiles and airplanes and telephones and televisions and robotics and antibiotics and satellites and spaceships and cell phones and five American wars—the first of which was fought from trenches, the second with nuclear weapons, and the last of which she saw with remotely guided missile attacks broadcast across national television.

On his trip, Muir would've appreciated the simple luxury of a rubber tire buggy. He passed very few people on the roads but willingly accepted rides in wagons and bug-

gies when they were offered. In the mountains of Tennessee, he found himself walking behind one particular wagon, his description of which provides a poignant reminder of the extraordinary developments in transportation since his trip. Three mountaineers, he said, "sat, leaned, and lay in the box of a shackly wagon that seemed to be held together by spiritualism, and was kept in agitation by a very large and a very small mule." He described how the hills sent the passengers careening forward or backward. "Before they could unravel their limbs from this unmannerly and impolite disorder," he wrote, "a new ridge in the road frequently tilted them with a swish and a bump against the back boards in a mixing that was still more grotesque." Today we ride in minivans with Wi-Fi and GPS and satellite television playing on multiple monitors. Soon we will ride in self-driving cars.

Around a decade ago, John Muir's descendent Michael Muir retraced his great-grandfather's thousand-mile walk by horse-drawn carriage to celebrate the abilities of people with disabilities. Michael has always had a love of horses, but at age fifteen he was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis, and when he was no longer able to ride on a horse's back, he took up driving carriages. Today he runs a nonprofit called Access Adventure, based in Napa, which employs horse-drawn wagons and carriages to provide the elderly and people with disabilities access to some of the very same wilderness that his great-grandfather so eloquently praised. Like most equestrians, his life is devoted to horses, which must be fed and watered, brushed and shoed and exercised.

Compared to a car, a horse may seem an antiquated and inefficient means of transportation, but as Guy Davenport, eminent author and literary critic, wrote, "It is useful in talking about the automobile to think of it as a creature…." He invoked Diogenes' dictum that a man who owns a lion is also owned by that lion. "We are all owned by automobiles," he said, "creatures whom we must feed gas and oil…, shoe with rubber, wash, and lavish with other attentions, not the least of which are lifelong car payments." The car, he said, "is the most successful of parasites, far beyond the wildest hopes of microbes or

rats." He described it as a bionic roach eating cities.

Because cars and horses are two completely different kinds of beasts. Proper use of a horse or mule or ox requires husbandry, some kind of selfless care and mutual reliance which draws one closer to another being, another element of the natural world, while use of an automobile elevates one *above* the natural world and separates one *from* it. The waste from a draft animal can fertilize a pasture, while the waste from personal transportation accounts for a fifth of all US emissions contributing to global warming. Around nineteen pounds of carbon dioxide escapes into our atmosphere for every gallon of gasoline burned in your car. And while manure is naturally recycled and beneficial to the ecosystem, auto recycling is a multibillion dollar industry worldwide, requiring the stripping and then hydraulic crushing of vehicles, which are then ironically transported, sometimes thousands of miles, to a massive shredder that beats the vehicles to tiny pieces, which in turn are sorted by ferrous and nonferrous metals. One of the world's largest mega-shredders is powered by a forty-ton engine pumping out over 9,000 horsepower. It eats 450 cars an hour and processes 50,000 tons of metal a month. By all accounts, recycling auto steel is better for the environment and more cost efficient than mining more heavy metals, but such mega-shredders transform the environment around them. They make very palpable the carbon dioxide pollution we often no longer notice from our automobiles. They are loud and smelly and ugly. They contaminate the air with emissions and fine particulates and the storm water with contaminants. Nearby neighbors despise these monstrous machines, but perhaps we should all live near one to remind us of the effect our new form of transportation has on our world.

And that's Davenport's main complaint, that the automobile, and the mindset that conceived of it, is destroying American cities. He spoke of a certain technological retrogression that's paradoxically associated with our modern sense of progress. This retrogression is often bureaucratic or inconvenient, but sometimes it's selfish or prejudiced or violent or destructive. The question, then, is whether we can call such destruction ad-

vancement, and at what cost are we achieving this progress?

"What I think all this keeps adding up to," Davenport wrote, "...is distance." Perhaps the dominant force of the 20th century in the United States was to eradicate distance and the time necessary to span it. "With all the technological advances of modernity we made distance negligible," he said, "and now we are in a position to ask what was wrong with distance that we employed all our ingenuity to obliterate it?"

Muir must have felt similarly when he arrived in the Yosemite Valley by way of San Francisco. He had walked from Kentucky to Florida, caught a ship to Cuba and then New York and then Panama, where he crossed the isthmus by rail, and took another ship to San Francisco, through which he walked straight to the mountains. And when he arrived in the valley, he found that laborers in Utah were laying the last ties and hammering the last stakes of the transcontinental railway. Tourists soon rode in relative comfort and luxury across the country and began pouring into Yosemite Valley, having experienced no more sense of *journey* along their way than these cars speeding past me on their morning commutes.

And I am now feeling distance more acutely than I have ever felt it. What once took a matter of moments in my truck now takes hours. I fixate on a marker down the road, but it takes me a half hour to reach it, and a thousand or more cars thunder past me in the meantime. *There is no possible way*, I think, *to reach Florida at this rate*. I know that's not entirely true, though. Muir did it, for one. And I may only be on my second day, but I'm already slightly ahead of schedule. My route is broken up into 63 days, although some of those I won't be walking, like this weekend when Virginia is scheduled to meet me in Horse Cave. I need to average around sixteen to eighteen miles a day over the course of 56 days of actual walking. Muir completed his walk in just 53 marathon days, averaging around twenty miles a day but covering as much as forty miles in one particular day. While daunting, his example proves the walk is a physical possibility, but the real problem is that the speeding cars are so utterly demoralizing. Their pace and distance

make my rate seem so much slower, and their drivers are either imposingly affronting, swerving toward me in a feint to scare me or honking and yelling, or dangerously aloof, looking up from their phones at the last minute to see me and jerking the wheel—and sometimes looking back down at their phones as they pass.

And that's the fallacy in thinking of the automobile as a beast like Davenport decried. It excuses us, the drivers. Such language imbues the automobile with a false sentience and autonomy which externalizes the fullness of human culpability. And our separation from that culpability is its own type of distance. Davenport explained how our obliteration of distance also facilitated it in some way. The telephone, for example, allowed distance into human conversation. Indoor plumbing allowed distance from water sources, and toilets allowed us to distance ourselves from our own excrement. And automobiles allowed distance between the places where we live and work and play. But this is philosophical distance as much as literal, and that type of distance is far more nefarious. "Distance negates responsibility," Davenport wrote in a pithy sentence which I believe is the most indicting truth of our modern industrial society—perhaps more so of this pending post-industrialization.

"If you want to see where you are," Wendell Berry wrote, "you will have to get out of your spaceship, out of your car, off your horse, and walk over the ground. On foot you will find that the earth is still satisfyingly large and full of beguiling nooks and crannies." He's right. I am discovering that the earth is still bafflingly large, even if it is now crisscrossed with highways and railroads and fences. And every time I stop to rest, I discover a neglected nook where nature is busy reclaiming the space with blossoming weeds and tangling vines and bursting grasses and buzzing insects. And so I have to ask myself as I walk, "What *is* wrong with distance?"

I trudge on, one step at a time, as cars surge past me in rushing waves.

***

By late morning I have decided that I, too, hate automobiles. And by early afternoon, I have resolved to sell mine—and try to convince Virginia to sell hers too, right after she picks me up in Horse Cave this weekend and I abandon this whole fruitless endeavor. I will never own a car again. That's it. I've made up my mind. I will never drive a car again. I will never ride in a car again. *Never*. They are ruining the American landscape and way of life. They are pampering and spoiling and polluting. They are dangerous and expensive and inefficient. They guzzle natural resources. They transform space, rewriting natural wildlife corridors and migration paths and geographic boundaries. They are slaughtering innumerable species. Muir called the sheep that he shepherded through the Sierras "hooved locusts" for the ruinous way they descended on a lush landscape and left it denuded of any vegetation, stripped of leaves and stalks and buds and blossoms. But sheep have nothing on automobiles. They are metal menaces. They are a petroleum-powered plague. Their impersonal, abstracted drivers are heartless sociopaths. They are evil and ignorant and incalculably destructive.

As I brood on my newfound hatred and plot the execution of my new resolve, a white, flatbed pickup truck heading southeast turns around and pulls over on the westbound shoulder. Airbrushed powder-blue horses gallop along the doors.

"Want a ride?" pipes a pudgy kid from the cab. I'm only a couple of miles from Bardstown now. *What's a couple more miles?* I think. *What's wrong with distance?*

"Absolutely!" I say, wedging my walking stick between the bed and the cab and hopping in.

"I seen you this morning near Bernheim Forest on my way to Louisville," the kid says. "I thought maybe you were a forest employee or something. But when I seen you just now, I figured you might want a ride into town."

We shake hands, and the kid introduces himself as Pete. He calls me sir, though he clearly suspects me of being homeless or itinerant. I instantly decide that I like him—and

his truck—and I tell him so. He beams with pride, relating a tedious story about how the truck was once his daddy's, who sold it off and then wished he hadn't but fatefully found it for sale again through a friend of a friend of a friend. Pete and his dad bought it back, and Pete's paying him off, little by little, as he can.

A hardworking kid, this Pete. He has close-cropped straw-colored hair, rosy cheeks, and he drives with his arm propped out the window. He's respectful, no matter my perceived station in life, and he chats me up like stranger at the farm store. Pete, I learn, is sixteen years old and going to be a senior at Bardstown High School in the fall. He's studying to be a welder, and I tell him of my failed attempts with the craft. I only ever learned to tack weld at best, couldn't run a proper bead to save my life. Pete tells me his tricks of the trade. We talk MIG and TIG and arc welding, and he tells me about his job prospects on graduation.

Currently he's working at a fast-food restaurant and helping his father mow for his landscaping business. He took the day off school to drive to Louisville for an orthodontist appointment, from which he is now returning. He has some mowing to do later on today, right after he swings by the fire department where he's trying to get on as a volunteer. Like I said, a hardworking kid.

Pete has never heard of White Acres Campground on 62, but the fire department is out that way. He says he'll take me up the hill past the station, and I think that's mighty considerate of him. We shake hands when he pulls over on the shoulder, and I offer him a genuine thanks. But when I hop out, I land on a hunk of blasted rock from the shoulder and roll my right ankle. I yell and grimace and hop around like an idiot for a moment, and when I straighten up I think I catch a look of bewildered pity on Pete's face. If so, I can't say I blame him.

"Don't forget your stick," Pete hollers out the window. Clearly I'm going to need it—maybe even a crutch.

***

I hobble down the road a mile or so and into the White Acres campground, which is nothing but a field behind an old guy's house. I stand sweating in the stagnant air of the trailer that serves as the office, arguing with the owner, an obstinate octogenarian slipping toward senility, about what precisely he wants me to write in the "License Plate" slot on the check-in form.

"I walked here," I explain again, "I didn't drive a car." He passes gas audibly but holds a poker face like a pro. We get through it somehow.

He takes no credit or debit cards, though I note he has all the apparatus to do so. But, as he explains, he has no idea how to work any of it. All I have is a hundred-dollar bill, and he doesn't have change. He says I'll have to drive back into town to break the bill. I explain the whole car thing *yet again*, and finally tell him that either *he* can run into town for change or I can keep right on walking down the road and sleep in a ditch tonight. After last night, I really don't want to do that, but by the looks of me I think he sees it as a valid threat. He rummages his drawers and discovers the change he had all along. I make him count it twice.

I pitch my hammock in a tree line by the spot he designates and then head for the bath house, which is inside of a semi-converted dairy barn. It looks and smells exactly like it's inside of a semi-converted dairy barn. The cinderblock walls bead with condensation. The tile stalls crack and mildew. The hardware rusts. But the shower works, and I clean my body and my clothes as best I can, wringing them out in the shower stall.

Back at camp, I discover my neighbors have returned to their pop-up camper, and they find me quite peculiar, hanging wet clothes over my tarp line to dry. They are construction workers from Western Kentucky who live in the campground while they work a job nearby. They prefer the outdoors, they say, to a hotel room, and I can respect that.

Most of the other residents, I notice, begin showing up about this time, returning

home for the evening from work. This "campground" is less a ground for camping with tents and roasting marshmallows than it is a trailer park, if not somehow *more* transient. I am the only tent camper on the grounds, although to be fair it's a Monday evening. My next nearest neighbor gives off the distinct impression of living here full time. I watch him haggling with the owner about something before parking his asphalt paving truck by his camper and cooking a cut of beef over a portable grill on the tailgate.

"We can, and have, adjusted to the automobile," Guy Davenport wrote back in 1987, which must have seemed, even then, so obvious and trite, but he goes on: "It has a room in our houses (the carport…), we have turned it into a house (mobile home), and have pretty well relinquished the house itself in favor of living in the automobile."

The sound of a television game show spills out of the asphalt paving guy's camper door as he emerges with a beer in hand to check on his steak. The construction workers climb back in their truck to make another run to the store. I lay on the ground on my foam pad in the evening sun, jotting some notes about Pete and my conflicted new relationship with automobiles, when a hen turkey comes ducking and bobbing its head around the front of the little Amish-made cabins. She stops when she sees me and stares for a long time, her neck reeling and head rotating as she studies me. At last, she turns and eases away through a field of tall grass toward the road.

Chapter Three: Sonora

I am walking on the renowned Dixie Highway somewhere south of Elizabethtown, Kentucky, past rolling hills and tilled farmland interspersed with little brick houses set just off the road on five and ten acre lots. The traffic is still incessant. It's overbearing. I can't think or meditate or contemplate as I walk. Half the vehicles or more are either eighteen-wheelers or dump trucks hauling dense grade gravel from the interstate exit in Elizabethtown to jobsites somewhere south of here. Rocks hop out around the mesh tarp covers and bounce along the shoulders as they pass. The trucks are so large that the wind they generate blows my hat back off my head, catching by the string around my neck. They are so scary and intimidating and relentless that I have opted to walk the edges of the fields whenever possible, and even down in the soggy ditches when not—anything to stay off the shoulder of the highway.

The Dixie Highway was an interconnected system of roadways built between 1915 and 1927 to connect the Midwest with the South. It was more recently immortalized in a song of the same name by the band Journey, although musically I prefer the reference in Bruce Springsteen's "Darlington County." The Interstate System effectively replaced such highways for long-distance travel in the late-1950s. Much of the eastern portion of the Dixie Highway became US 25, and the western portion, between Louisville and Nashville, became the very busy US 31W on which I now walk—although most folks around here still call it the Dixie Highway.

The sky, which has been growing steadily overcast, begins spitting rain, and I duck into the brush next to a long gravel driveway to throw my pack down and dig out my rain gear. Someone at the house must have seen me because, as I wrestle my pack cover over my bag, a white SUV pulls down the drive to the fence and stops beside me. I half-heartedly wave, and a middle-aged woman with bouffant brown hair eyes me suspiciously. I heft my covered pack back on my shoulders, and she lowers her window about

six inches.

"Caught in the rain," she says. It isn't a question. I smile and nod. She sits in the driveway watching me as I scramble back on the shoulder and down the road a quarter-mile or so before she pulls out of the driveway in the other direction.

The rain comes in fits and starts, threatening a downpour but hardly dampening my jacket. Sweat from the inside, on the other hand, soaks me. I stop again a mile or so later—this time staying right on the shoulder—to stuff my jacket back in my pack.

As my stomach begins to growl and ache again, I dip off the road into a tree line running perpendicular to the highway to eat a little something. A tangle of honeysuckle beneath a couple of short, bushy maples line a ditch running into a tile beneath the roadway. Beside the tree line is a neglected acre or so of tall grass and what looks like an abandoned barn of some kind, a weathered white cinder block building, too big to be a shed, with four bay doors along its length.

Tucked into my little honeysuckle fortress, I can hear the hum and spray of gravel trucks on the wet pavement, but I still enjoy some respite from the stress of the road. I dig out my phone and make a call. After the campground where I stayed last night, outside the little town of Glendale, there is neither hotel nor campground until Munfordville, twenty-some miles away. But there's a little guesthouse in a town called Sonora, a bed and breakfast type of place, where the owner agreed to let me pitch my hammock on the grounds.

My original plan was to stop there after Elizabethtown and then cover the remaining eighteen miles to Munfordville in one long day. But after an excruciating nineteen-mile hike into E-Town from Bardstown, I was exhausted and lightheaded and somewhat ill, not to mention the excruciating blisters on my feet. So, yesterday it was all I could do to make it the ten or eleven miles to the campground in Glendale. When I got there it was an RV-only campground, but the owner graciously let me stay, charging me only $10, the cheapest rate I've gotten so far. I pitched my tent between two towering

white oaks by a large pond and woke to mist rising off the water in the morning. When I came back from the bathhouse, a squirrel had helped himself to my trail mix, ripping a hole in the Ziploc bag and spilling nuts and dried fruit across the picnic table. Muir loved gray squirrels, finding them to be happy and energetic and entertaining. I spent my morning scribbling in my journal and tossing peanuts and cashews and almonds to the squirrel, which would leap off the trunk of the oak, search out the nut in the thin grass, and then retire to a low branch and munch on it.

So, since I stayed in Glendale, I need to cover more ground today than the seven or eight miles to Sonora. I'll have to spend tonight in a clump of trees off the side of the highway somewhere this side of Munfordville. I call Charlie, the owner of the guest house, to tell him I won't be coming, but he doesn't answer. I pull off my boots to air out my feet and chew on some granola. My stomach has been uneasy for the last couple of days with a hollow knock that feels like hunger. There's no telling how many calories I'm burning in a day, so I keep eating to assuage that feeling, but it never seems to subside. After a few bites, I lose my appetite despite the stomach ache, so I lay back to rest.

When I sit back up, fifteen or twenty minutes later, the sky has grown darker. The wind is starting to whip the trees in the fencerow, tossing them back and forth in ecstatic rustling. A storm is coming. I hate to lose time walking, but I don't want to be back out on the open road in the middle of a thunderstorm, so I decide to tight and see if I can wait out the storm.

The wind continues to whip, growing fiercer with every gust, and the sky turns darker. The bottom of the clouds that drift over the tree line from the northwest and behind the old barn are so dark they seem a purplish black. Just as the first fat drops of rain begin to fall sporadically, an old pickup truck towing some kind of farming implement whips into the gravel drive in front of the old barn, and two Hispanic men jump out to open the closest set of bay doors. The truck backs in, and I watch them jealously as all three men stand just inside the doors watching the rain begin to fall. They are only sixty

or seventy yards away, and it occurs to me that I could run over and ask to take shelter with them, but then I imagine how I might react if a large, sweaty man with a huge pack burst out of a tree line in a dead run towards me.

Somehow the wind continues to escalate and my discomfort with asking them for shelter fades as I begin to realize the storm might be more dangerous than I initially expected. The trees bend to thirty degrees or more in gusts. I put on my pack cover and rain jacket, and just as I am preparing to sprint through the tall grass and ask the men for shelter in the barn, the sky breaks loose with a torrential downpour. The Hispanic men slam the bay doors shut.

Thunder claps and lightning flashes across the black clouds. Cars on the highway pull to the shoulders, their headlights and flashers on, windshield wipers swishing fruitlessly. For the first time it occurs to me the full extent of my situation. The wind is so bad that I am now fearing a tornado—expecting one, really. I nestle back into the brush and up against the embankment. My pants were already wet with sweat, so I didn't bother pulling on my rain pants, just my jacket and pack cover, but now the cold, sheeting rain has me shivering uncontrollably. I pull off my pack cover to get my pants, soaking half my gear in the process and then pull the pants on. I unstrap my foam sleeping pad and sit on the solarized side in an effort to reflect some of my body heat, then I nestle down as small as I can make myself, watching the clouds over the barn for any sign of a funnel and listening for the sound of a freight train. My only option, I decide, if a funnel cloud appears is to climb down into the road tile now choked with runoff.

I don't know how long I sit, shivering and clutching my knees and shoulders. The trees thrash back and forth alarmingly. The thunder claps so loudly that I can feel it at the base of my spine, and I flinch at every flash of lightning. I am miserable, and for a brief, fleeting moment, I think of Muir. He wrote ecstatically of the midday storms during his first summer in the Sierra Mountains. He loved watching the "big, bossy cumuli" growing above the mountains. He called the thunder sublime and startling, "gloriously impressive,

keen, crashing, intensely concentrated, speaking with such tremendous energy it would seem that an entire mountain is being shattered at every stroke," and he spoke in awe of "the silvery zigzag lightning lances" streaking across the clouds. "Now comes the rain," he wrote, "with corresponding extravagant grandeur, covering the ground high and low with a sheet of flowing water, a transparent film fitted like a skin upon the rugged anatomy of the landscape, making the rocks glitter and glow, gathering in the ravines, flooding the streams, and making them shout and boom in reply to the thunder." He seemed in awe and ecstasy at all the workings of nature, even those that threatened his comfort or safety. "From form to form, beauty to beauty," he wrote of the majesty of each raindrop and echoing the language of Ovid, "ever changing, never resting, all are speeding on with love's enthusiasm, singing with the stars the eternal song of creation."

In one particularly well known instance from *The Mountains of California*, Muir wrote about what he called one of the most beautiful and exhilarating storms he had ever enjoyed. He was visiting a friend near the Yuba River, but when he heard the wind whipping up, instead of bedding down in the cabin, he pushed out into the woods. "For on such occasions," he explained, "Nature has always something rare to show us, and the danger to life and limb is hardly greater than one would experience crouching deprecatingly beneath a roof." He hiked along the ridges, watching the wind storm's effect on the different species of trees. "Each was expressing itself in its own way," he wrote, "singing its own song, and making its own peculiar gestures." He marveled at those gestures until he couldn't stand but to experience them himself. On one of the highest ridges, he climbed up to the top of a Douglas Spruce tree, around 100-foot tall. "...Never before did I enjoy so noble an exhilaration of motion," he said. "The slender tops fairly flapped and swished in the passionate torrent, bending and swirling backward and forward, round and round, tracing indescribable combinations of vertical and horizontal curves, while I clung with muscles firm braced, like a bobo-link on a reed."

When the wind slows slightly and the torrential, flooding rain subdues to a steady

downpour, the cars ease back onto the road and putter by at a slow pace. I sit shivering, morally defeated and ready to quit. I am not John Muir—that much is clear. As I try to psych myself up to return to the road in the rain, I notice something moving in the tall grass and draw my legs up a bit. *Nothing*, I think, *could be out in this weather*. But as I think it, a young rabbit, not quite half grown, works its way out of the grass and under the low bows of the maples in that awkward, half-hopping way that rabbits amble slowly. It seems completely unaware of the storm. Despite the rain, the rabbit appears almost dry, as though it had just hopped through the morning grass and glistened itself slightly with dewdrops. A clap of thunder rumbles, and the rabbit doesn't even flinch. It picks through the weeds toward me, oblivious to all of the elements. As it nears, I cluck with my tongue to see what it will do. It pauses to look me over but keeps coming, all the way up to my foot, and nearly hops over my ankle before it seems to notice me, as if for the first time, at which point it turns warily and hops back into the grass the way it came.

I sit brooding for a moment longer, and then I can't help but burst out laughing at myself. I laugh at my shivering. I laugh at my fear of the wind and rain and thunder and lightning. I realize that I've taken the storm personally, like it was somehow coming for me specifically, trying to do *me* harm. I've reacted out of my arrogance and expectation of comfort, instead of taking everything in stride, like the tiny rabbit, and seeing the world around me like Muir, with awe and wonder, expecting nothing and grateful for all.

Still laughing at myself, I stand up, strap my pack on and watch for a break in the cars before scrambling back up to the road. It's still dark and raining heavy, but I don't have any other options than to continue walking. As I near the little town of Sonora, my phone dings, and I pull it out to find a message from Charlie, the owner of the guest house. The storm clouds must have obscured my cell service. I tuck the phone beneath my hood and listen to Charlie's message. I hadn't bothered to leave him one to tell him I wouldn't be coming, but he had seen my missed call was still welcoming me to come by the guest house. In light of the storm and my soggy state, I forget about my strict sched-

ule and demanding progress and just head for Sonora.

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A little ways down the road, just before the turn into Sonora, the rain lightens to a steady drizzle. As I pass a pharmacy, strange flashing lights approach in the northbound lane more slowly than the car headlights. As they get closer I can make out a bicycle tourist with bags on his panniers. I step off the shoulder into the pharmacy parking lot to give him space as the cars whiz past, but he pulls off into lot to chat.

"I thought I was the only one stupid enough to be out in this!" he exclaims in a thick Irish accent as he unclips his shoes from the pedals. A thin white windbreaker drips with rain and clings to his sweaty skin, and his bare legs below his cycling shorts are wet with rain and tire spray. I can only understand every third word or so due to his thick accent, heavy breathing from peddling up the steady incline, and the intermittent whoosh of cars spitting rainwater at us as they pass. We shake hands and introduce ourselves, though I can't really make out his name. He lives in San Francisco, he says, but he's riding north out of Arkansas.

"What'd you do during the storm?" I ask.

"Eh, pulled off the road a bit for the worst of it. But after that—just got to keep going, you know." He's headed to Elizabethtown and asks if there are any hotels there. When he asks my story, I give him the gist, and he seems thrilled by it.

"Most people think I'm crazy," I reply.

"We may be crazy," he says with a sideways smile, "but at least we're happy!" I like his mindset, and I really want to agree with him, but after the treacherousness of the roads and the horrendous blisters and then the thunderstorm, I don't want to admit to him that I'm ready to quit. He asks if he can take my picture for his Facebook page.

"I want everyone to know I'm not the only idiot out on a day like this," he says.

I shoulder my pack and pose with my driftwood walking stick, grinning as wide as I can muster, then we shake hands and wish each other safe travels. He clips in and resumes peddling up that long torturous incline. As with the rabbit, all I can do is admire his gumption, but I'm finding it difficult to replicate.

I turn off the 31W, walk over the interstate and into the tiny town of Sonora. I pass a dairy barn across from a Dollar General and a farm supply store across from a closed down salvage place that looks like it was once a Mexican restaurant. I walk past the crowstepped gables of cinderblock buildings, mimicking that old railroad town style, and then over the railroad tracks themselves and past the funeral home to Main Street. A woman in her late twenties or early thirties sits smoking in her car in front of a ramshackle painted-brick building with four front doors and a metal-covered shed roof with cedar log columns. There's a vintage Coca-Cola sign in the window.

I consider tapping on her window and asking her if she knows where the guest house is, but I can feel her watching me, and I'm acutely aware of my new class status, which seems roughly on par with a stray dog. I walk on past her car without slowing down, but when I hear her door behind me, I spin on her and ask my question before she can get away.

"Yeah, I know where it's at," she says, shuffling the things she's carrying. She doesn't seem creeped out in the slightest. "It's just right around on Broadway, the next street over. You can see it from here." She smiles at me and points in that direction. "Let me drop this stuff off and I'll drive you over there."

I stutter a little in reply. I was trying not to scare her or intimidate her, and here she is offering a large, smelly, soaking wet man she doesn't know a car ride for less than half the distance of the average city block. I'm twice her size, carrying a large stick, and it would take me longer to wrestle my dripping pack into her trunk than it would to walk the hundred yards myself. *Maybe my luck is changing*, I think. I thank her and move on.

***

One street over, I find the Thurman-Phillips Guest House, a grand old red-brick mansion with gleaming white railing and trim resting beneath towering maple trees that line the road. There's no sign, and even though I know it's the right place, I don't want it to be. It's far too fancy for the soggy state I'm in. The rain has stopped all together now, so I drop my pack on the old stone curb beneath the maples and dig out my phone, calling Charlie back to see if I'm at the right place. He pops out on the side porch in a moment and waves me around to the next door, another side entrance leading to an enclosed porch that connects the guest house with a "tea room," a small yellow converted house next door. He opens the door in a moment and bids me come in.

"No, no, I'm too wet and nasty to come in," I say, "but you said it would be alright for me to pitch my hammock in your backyard?"

"Yeah, you *could*," he says, pausing and looking me up and down, "or you could come in for a hot meal and sleep in a warm bed."

I argue with him until it becomes obvious he'd never intended me to camp out in his yard in the first place. He coaxes me into the enclosed brick patio. Charlie is seventy-some years old and wearing shorts, a t-shirt and sandals, which he shuffles around in like house shoes. He has waving reddish blond hair that flops all Sonny Bono over his ears, and it hasn't gone gray with age so much as it seems to have just lost some of its original luster, faded over time.

"You won't hurt anything," he says as I stand here, awkwardly dripping on the enclosed patio. "I get cyclists in here all the time. We park their bikes right here." Turns out, the TransAmerica Bicycling Trail (TAT) cuts through Sonora, which explains, I guess, why the woman on Main Street was less creeped out by a random guy with a pack than she should've been; and it ought to explain the Irish cyclist, except the TAT runs east-west on backroads, and he was headed north on one of the worst cycling road I can

imagine. Like he said, we might be crazy.

"Now, strip off your wet clothes and hang them over these chairs," Charlie says, dragging over some white plastic lawn chairs and pointing a fan in the corner at me while I pull off my rain jacket and pants. "You won't hurt a thing," he reassures. I lay out some of my things and tell him a little bit about my trip.

"That must have been you I saw walking this morning," he says. "You were off in the damn *ditch*." He has a way of speaking bluntly that's funny in its directness but never undermines his sense of hospitality. It's already clear he likes me and for that he isn't going easy on me.

When he assures me there are no other guests this evening, I strip down to my soaked underwear and follow him barefooted through the kitchen, into an elegant dining room with crown molding and high ceilings. He walks with an easy shuffle and a slight bend in the knees that insinuates the athleticism of a much younger man. We pass through a wood-paneled library with glass-front shelves and ancient cloth- and leather-bound volumes, through a stunning foyer, and into a cozy bedroom with antique furniture and a brick fireplace. I ask Charlie, a bit apprehensively, about his rate for the room.

"I'm about broke," he says so directly that I'm not sure if he's joking or not. "Whatever you've got isn't going to keep me afloat."

He leads me into the bathroom adjoining the bedroom and shows me how to work the shower, but I'm not really paying much attention, still somewhat overwhelmed at the situation. So when I can't get the shower to work, I have to wander back through the house in my skivvies to find him.

"Did you pull the lever down like I showed you?" he asks.

"Yeah, but it didn't work." He gives me a skeptical look. "Maybe I've been walking too long," I say.

"You've been walking too long, that's for *damn* sure," he mumbles, pulling down a ring concealed beneath the faucet spout.

"Oh," I say, "I guess I was pulling the drain lever."

"Yeah, and I bet it stopped the drain, didn't it?" he mutters over his shoulder, shaking his head as he shuffles out.

The hot water in a real shower instead of a damp campground stall feels amazing, and I am grateful for Charlie's hospitality. On Muir's trip he stayed in taverns and boarding houses often but more frequently in private homes along his route, simply knocking on doors and asking for lodging. The times were different then, and travelers of that nature were more frequent, but still he was sometimes turned away. At a home in Tennessee he told the woman up front that he had nothing smaller than a five-dollar greenback to pay her with, and she had no change, so she could not afford to take him. Greenbacks were printed by the North to help finance the war and their value was sometimes volatile. By 1867 the value of a single greenback was around 67 cents, but adjusting for inflation, Muir's five-dollar bill was roughly equivalent to me carrying a fifty-dollar bill today. Charlie wouldn't tell me what he charges for a room, but including meals, I have a feeling it would be around three times that much.

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When I emerge from my room after the shower, wearing my cleanest dirty shirt, as Kris Kristofferson sang, I find Charlie in the dining room between the library and a white-washed sunroom with bright floral upholsteries. He sits at the long table folding cloth napkins, and I try to sit down to help him, but he won't have it.

He takes me into the kitchen and sits me at the bar while he heats up a bowl of spicy potato soup with corn and carrots and makes me two chicken salad sandwiches.

"That's left over from a shrimp and crawfish boil," Charlie says, setting the soup in front of me, "so it's got some bite to it."

I worry at first that I can't eat all this food since my appetite has been so low, but

I guzzle the soup down and all but inhale the sandwiches. As I'm eating a woman comes down the kitchen stairs, and Charlie introduces her. "I want you to meet Miss Rose, the lady of the house." Rose is younger than Charlie by a decade or less, with curled brown hair, narrow eyes and an easy smile. She's wearing exercise shorts and a t-shirt and carrying a large plastic cup. Charlie tells her a little about my trip, and she sits next to me at the bar while I eat.

When I ask Charlie about the house and its history, he shows me a black three-ring binder on the bar with reproductions of old photos. The earliest were taken by Charlie's great-grandfather on an old Kodak bellows camera, which is still displayed in the library. I flip through the binder and munch on potato chips while Charlie and Miss Rose interject comments about the pictures. The original house was built in 1829, and Muir may very well have walked past it on his journey, but it burned down sometime after his journey. This Victorian-era mansion was built in 1897, thirty years after Muir's walk. One of Charlie's great-grandfather's photos shows the house during construction, with bare, spindly little saplings in the front.

"Those can't be the same trees," I say, thinking of the enormous trunks I had just walked past.

"Yep. Sugar maples," Charlie says, nodding. "120 years old."

Later color photos show the house in derelict condition, and a younger, shirtless Charlie demolishing walls, sawing two-by-fours, hanging drywall and renovating the old house. He tells me a little about his story as I flip through the photos. He graduated from the University of Kentucky with an advanced degree and moved to Louisiana, where he lived and worked for many years. The family home passed to a great aunt, who couldn't keep it up. Charlie lived there for a few summers during college, so when his aunt died, he decided to retire, move back to Kentucky and restore the home to its former glory. He has done all that and more. He bought the adjoining house, which he turned into a tea room, and then his grandfather's old house across the street, which was originally con-

structed in 1929 and sits on the banks of a large pond. He restored it as well, and he calls it his 1929 lake house, now renting it out as a wedding and events venue.

When I ask Charlie what he retired from, he tells me he was a geologist. I've been reading Muir's *Mountains of California* and *Travels in Alaska*, so my mind is swimming with jagged peaks and glacial moraines.

"What's a geologist do in Louisiana?" I ask naively.

"Probably the *oil* industry," Charlie quips in his dry way. I laugh at my own stupidity.

Charlie excuses himself eventually, and leaves Miss Rose and I in conversation. (She goes by Rose, I'm sure, but something about the stately way Charlie introduced her tickled me, so that's how I address her, as Miss Rose.) Rose's husband passed away several years ago, she says, and Charlie's wife died after a bout with breast cancer a couple of years back. The two met late last year when she moved back to Sonora.

She tells me how her husband was in the military, and they lived together in Germany for several years when he was stationed there. They opted not to live on the army base and instead rented an upstairs room from an older woman whom Rose would occasionally accompany to put flowers on the landlady's deceased husband's grave. "He must have been a Nazi during the war," she says, "but we never talked about it."

Miss Rose gets up from the bar as we chat and pours herself a vodka tonic with little more than a splash of tonic water. When she sits back down, she lights into a story about an environmentalist friend of hers who moved to Mexico and built an off-the-grid home entirely out of glass bottles. Then she tells me about her work in hospitals throughout Kenya and complains about the negative things she'd recently heard Anthony Bourdain say about Myanmar and its food. To the contrary, she says she found Burma—"it was *Burma* then," she specifies—a very hospitable place with wonderful people and food.

I start to notice that Miss Rose is slurring her speech a little now and then, and I begin to doubt her stories. She tells me of the Buddhist temples she's visited, the ornate

woodwork and the gilded statues, and I begin to ask her questions, trying to discern if all this is true or just the babel of a lush—albeit one who watches a lot of National Geographic.

"I might have some pictures," she says at one point, climbing off her barstool and disappearing up the steps. She returns a moment later with her phone and swipes through photos of the temples. She shows me the woodwork and the gilded statues and huts built on stilts and floating farms and a man poling a wooden longboat with one leg in the canoe-like craft and the other wrapped around the pole just above the surface of the water.

"That's Cambodia," she says, pointing to the swath of green on the horizon behind her in one of the photos.

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After dinner, Charlie and Rose give me a tour of the property, including the tea room and the lake house. As we're crossing the street, a minivan pulls into the drive, and they introduce me to Sarah, the cook for the guest house. She has her young daughter with her, and she's younger than I would've expected, in her early twenties, I'd guess, and wearing a tank top under an unzipped dark hoodie with a skull across the back. I can see tattoos running up both of her shoulders.

"You shoulda had the crawfish boil," she says when I compliment her on the spicy potato soup.

I follow the whole crew over to the lake house where Charlie is renovating the detached garage, turning it into another large kitchen for weddings and events. A kitchen island rests on a floor of freshly-laid tile, and a window above a stainless sink and bank of cabinets looks out over the pond in the back. This doesn't look like the undertaking of a man about to go broke, like Charlie said, but you never know. It could be a last-ditch effort to woo more brides to hold weddings here. But how many weddings could a tiny

town like Sonora have in a given year?

Sarah heartily approves of whatever changes have been made since she saw it last, and we move on to the house. In the living room of the house, floating bookshelves of Charlie's personal library line two walls, and wide glass doors overlook the pond beyond the deck. I peruse Charlie's books—mostly history, with a penchant for the Civil War, along with some geology books and popular fiction—while Charlie and Rose put some last-minute touches on the bedrooms upstairs in preparation for weekend guests.

Back across the street, as we return to the main house, another car pulls in the drive and Charlie introduces me to a kid he says used to work for him. The boy is still in high school and seems pensive and shy. While Charlie talks to him, he sets me down on the rich leather club sofa in the wood-paneled library and plays a short DVD on the television that his nephew had put together, a history of the Thurman-Phillips House. It's full of interesting facts about the old mansion, like how a thick piece of plate-glass sits between the foundation and the porous brick walls to keep them from absorbing moisture and deteriorating more quickly. Charlie's nephew narrated the video from a script, and he keeps referring to the Thurman family doing this and the Thurman family doing that. At the end he ticks off the three historic houses there in Sonora that "the family" owns, along with another recent acquisition or two farther away from town.

When Charlie returns to the library after the video, I ask him how many people in his family own these properties and he looks confused. "Just me," he says, putting in another DVD to show me. This one looks a little more homemade. It shows his enormous extended family converging on the Thurman-Phillips mansion, tea room and lake house, for a family reunion Charlie hosts each summer. Cousins and nieces and nephews eat and drink and shoot off fireworks and lounge on blow-up rafts in the pond. And then I begin to put it all together: Charlie is far from going broke. He was joking about that in his dry way. Instead, he's pouring his life savings into restoring the historic properties of his family for the enjoyment of his family and the betterment of his hometown. He employs

locals that need jobs, runs a guesthouse to meet interesting people, hosts his entire extended family—probably on his own dime—and even puts up derelicts like me. There's a blunt side to his easy gentility, though, that insinuates he has reached a point in life where he no longer cares to cow to anyone's demands and does exactly what he wants when he wants. That he is in the service industry, then, only speaks to his graciousness as a person, a sort of deeper humility behind his old guy swagger, and a genuine desire to help and serve others.

I retire to bed early in the evening, laying my clean body and full stomach between fresh sheets and marveling at my luck as I doze off to the clip-clop sound of Amish buggies passing on the streets of Sonora.

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In the morning I make up the bed even though I know Charlie will be changing the bedding, but he won't let me strip the sheets. He takes me to the kitchen, pours me a cup of coffee, microwaves a breakfast sandwich, and sets it in front of me.

"You're not going to keep walking down the 31W are you?" he asks, sipping on his own coffee.

"I was ready to give up yesterday," I tell him, "but I think your hospitality was just what I needed to push on a little farther."

"That wasn't necessarily what I intended." He looks down at his feet and wiggles his toes in his sandals. "Listen, I've been around a little bit, and I like adventure as much as the next guy, but walking that highway just isn't safe." I nod, and I can tell he doesn't want to lecture me but he's doing it out of genuine concern. "My son and I," he continues, "we used to race cars. Traveled all over the country doing it. Had a blast. But I wouldn't walk a single step along that road if I didn't have to." He gauges my reaction as he talks to see if he's getting through to me. "I've got friends that have hiked the Appa-

lachian Trail—never done it myself—and they tell me there's a pace to hiking, a rhythm to it. But you can't hit your stride stepping off the road into that damn *ditch* every minute for another truck. You're liable to get yourself killed."

He makes a lot of sense, but then so did the all of the people that entreated Muir not to continue his walk through the South, particularly through the Cumberland Mountains. When Muir was turned away for lack of smaller change at the woman's home in Tennessee, he found lodging at a nearby neighbor's house. He told the woman who answered the door upfront that he had nothing smaller than a five-dollar bill, and she called to her husband, a blacksmith, relating what Muir had told her. "Tell him to go into the house," the blacksmith said. "A man that comes right out like that beforehand is welcome to eat my bread."

After a long and serious discussion with the blacksmith who saw little value in Muir's botanical rambles, the man warned Muir about the danger along his route. "He then told me," Muir wrote in his journal, "that although the war was over, walking across the Cumberland Mountains still was far from safe on account of small bands of guerrillas who were hiding along the roads, and earnestly entreated me to turn back and not to think of walking so far as the Gulf of Mexico until the country became quiet and orderly once more."

After breakfast I thank Charlie for his hospitality and tell him I will earnestly consider his warnings. As I pack my gear up on his enclosed patio, I tell him my wife is meeting me this evening in Horse Cave, some twenty-five miles south here, so my plan is to hoof it as far as I can and meet her somewhere along the road into town.

"I'll have to bring her back to stay here sometime," I tell him, trying to lighten his mood. "You wouldn't believe it by looking at me, but she's about the prettiest thing you've ever seen."

"Oh, I believe it," he says. "And naive, too, to put up with this shit." I laugh out loud, but he seems genuinely concerned for me. I have a hundred-dollar bill wadded up in

my pack for emergencies, and I try to give it to him, but he refuses to take it. He gives me his card and tells me to drop him an email along my way to let him know I'm still alive, then we shake hands and I head back out to the road.

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Walking back across the interstate overpass in Sonora, a rickety red Chrysler PT Cruiser pulls over on the shoulder in front of me.

"Want a ride?" a man's voice barks from inside the cab before I can even sidle up to the window and peer in.

Immediately I think better of it. He's wearing a flannel shirt with the sleeves cut off at the shoulders and a dingy camouflaged bucket hat. Long graying hair splays out wildly beneath the brim. He's barrel-chested, with hulking arms to match, rough as a shucked cobb and as brawny a man as you can imagine. The floorboard of the passenger seat, I can see through the window, is covered with cigarette cartons and plastic soda bottles. The back seats are laid down and empty except for a hand truck and another bucket hat—*a spare?* I wonder.

I start to give him an excuse, to tell him I *want* to be walking, I'm doing it for *pleasure* and *purpose* and all that, but before I can speak he tells me that he saw me walking south on 31W yesterday and that he's headed down to Munfordville.

I'm not sure what makes me do it. Perhaps it's some renewed faith in mankind, instilled in me by Charlie's unparalleled generosity. Maybe it's the excruciating blisters on my feet or the lingering nausea in my stomach, or maybe it's just plain laziness. I'm behind schedule to meet Virginia in Horse Cave, so why not make up a few miles? I shrug my shoulders, toss my pack and stick in the back with the hand truck, and slip in the front seat, crunching bottles and rattling cans. The man doesn't mention the trash or even seem to notice my shuffling attempts to settle my feet. I introduce myself with a

smile, determined not to profile or lapse into stereotypes with undue assumptions.

"I'm Bubba," he says evasively, crushing my outstretched hand with his palm, which is as coarse as rough-hewn timber.

I begin to fully realize the stupidity of what I am doing. This man looks like the quintessential Hollywood version of a maladjusted Vietnam veteran with a chip on his shoulder. When he says "Bubba," I hear, "I'm not telling you my real name so the cops won't have anything to go on if you happen to escape."

Bubba then mumbles through the side of his mouth that he ain't going nowhere until I put on my seatbelt. I start to bail on him right then and there, to make up a story and tell him I forgot something back in Sonora, but instead I reluctantly buckle the belt, which now feels eerily binding.

"Not my rule," he says as he eases off the shoulder. "The law's."

"Well, Bubba," I ask, "what do you do?"

"I'm a loafering gopher," he responds. "I do a little here, a little there." It sounds like evasive, coded speech for "wandering serial killer" to me. You can't put "Axe Murderer" on your business card, so you say creepy things that make people nervous-laugh and regret their decisions. He lets out a wheeze and a snicker that doesn't help to ease my mind.

"Uh, okay," I try, "why you headed to Munfordville?"

"Getting a truck put in my name," he says. He doesn't say, "buying a truck," which would be normal. He doesn't say, "transferring the title of a truck that I purchased," which would also make sense. He may as well have said, "Going to see a man about a dog," for all the information he is willing to convey.

I can't help but think of Charlie's warnings to me this morning, or of the blacksmith's warning to Muir about thieves and guerrilla groups. At dusk on the very next day after leaving the blacksmith's house, Muir came upon ten mounted men riding abreast along the road. "They all were mounted on rather scrawny horses, and all wore long hair

hanging down on their shoulders," he wrote, and I imagine ten Bubbas on horseback as I think of the lines. "Evidently they belonged to the most irreclaimable of the guerrilla bands who, long accustomed to plunder, deplored the coming of peace." With no other options, Muir walked straight toward them confidently, and spoke cheerfully. He passed as quickly as he could, and when he looked back, they had all turned in the road and were watching him. "I was not followed, however," he wrote, "probably because the plants projecting from my plant press made them believe that I was a poor herb doctor, a common occupation in these mountain regions."

When I give up asking questions, Bubba loosens up a little bit. He's married, he tells me, but he "no longer lives with the bitch." And he has children and a couple of grandkids as well, but he doesn't see them much because, as he explains, "they're too much like their mother." He even tells me his real name, but I can't really understand him when he mumbles it, and honestly, Bubba fits him better.

I'm still a little spooked, but I desperately want to endear myself to this man, so I tell him that I'm married too. He asks if I have any kids. "Not yet," I say, "but I think my wife is starting to want them."

"Well, you better put one in there quick," he says, "before somebody else does." He wheezes through a closed-mouth smile that looks more like a sneer, and I laugh along nervously. He means it as a joke—I think—but it's also not the type of thing I want to hear when I just left home for two months.

I change the subject, and we talk a little about the perils of walking the highway. He used to bicycle and walk everywhere, including along the 31W, before he got a car. He says it like it was recently, though I would guess him to be in his late forties. It's dangerous business on that road for sure, he agrees. He murmurs and stammers as he talks, and I can't see that he has any front teeth.

As he warms up to me, he begins to give me tips for living life on the road. He tells me that a lot of gas stations will give you free ice. "Fill up a cup with ice, then go

around back and fill it with water from the spigot." And then he tells me to hit up every little church I pass. "A lot of them will help you out," he says, "give you a little money and such—long as you don't come back too often."

I see now how Bubba sees me. When other people along the way have treated me as destitute, it felt alienating, but when Bubba does it, it has the opposite effect, like he's accepting me as one of his own. So, I'm kind of flattered by his assumptions. And since I'm so fresh on the road, I take it as a complement that Bubba thinks I'm a seasoned bum—Bubba, whose bum cred, quite frankly, seems pretty high to me at the moment. But he's also speaking from his own experience. He sees me as a younger version of himself, and he's just trying to help me out in any way he can. I resolve not to tell him about John Muir or any of that foolishness.

"Is your momma living?" Bubba asks, and I tell him she is. My father, too. He nods. "When's the last time you seen them?"

"A couple of weeks ago, before I left." I answer instinctively, but this isn't technically true. I count back in my head and realize I saw them exactly five days ago. *Five days* ago. Not even a full week. But it feels like it's been weeks, maybe even months, so I let my offhanded estimate stand as the truth.

I tell him that my father had a stroke a few years ago, and he's been battling health issues ever since, but he's doing much better lately. I feel guilty as I say it, knowing I'm not around to help out if anything else should happen. I should be at home instead of hitchhiking with strangers and worrying my wife and mother to death. Bubba nods and urges me to see my parents as much as I can. It's touching to see that even a big, burly man like him can get emotional about family.

I ask him if his parents are still living, and he tells me that his father also suffered a stroke recently. His sister takes care of him.

"Do you get to see him much?" I ask.

"Eh," he shrugs, ignoring his own advice, "when I want to."

As we approach Munfordville, Bubba tells me he's going to drive me over the bridge because it's too narrow to try to walk across. Our conversation has put me at ease, but now I tense up again. "Over the bridge" sounds like he's taking me somewhere awful, somewhere permanent even, like he's Charon ferrying me across the River Styx. I watch out the passenger window as we pass the little historic downtown of Munfordville, and I try desperately to plot an escape.

As we cross the bridge over the Green River, I watch kids playing soccer at the riverside park, couples walking dogs, and a few people fishing from the bank. Bubba points out the narrow shoulder, which, to his credit, is pretty narrow, but not half as narrow as some I have already walked. How badly I wanted to be riding in a car as I hugged the rail of those other narrow bridges, and now how I long to be on foot, leaning my pack out over the railing as people like Bubba screech past me in their cars.

He doesn't pull over immediately past the bridge, and my mind starts racing through possible methods of escape. My only form of weapon, my belt knife—along with my phone and satellite beacon—is zipped up in my pack in the backseat, tumbling around with the hand truck. He doesn't pull over at any of the gravel pull-offs we pass on the shoulder either, or in the subdivision entrances, or in any of the perfectly formidable driveways, or the empty parking lots at an equipment rental place or an animal clinic. But, right as I start to say something, to ask him to just stop the car or pull off on the shoulder anywhere and let me out, we turn a corner and he whips into a gas station across from Hart County High School. He pulls over, shuts the car off, shakes my hand again, and, as I am pulling my pack from the back seat of his car, he urges me to visit my parents. "Go see your momma," he says again, paternally, "and say your prayers."

I say a quick silent prayer right then and there as Bubba drives away, and then I start walking south again on the dreaded 31W.

Chapter Four: Mammoth Cave

The sky is overcast again, but the forest is lush and green. Beech and maple and hickory blur past as Virginia and I drive through the fifty-thousand-acre woodland of Mammoth Cave National Park and toward the visitor center along a ridge above the Green River.

When Muir arrived at Mammoth Cave, he was pleasantly surprised to find it in so natural a state. "A large hotel with fine walks and gardens is near it," he wrote. "But fortunately the cave has been unimproved, and were it not for the narrow trail that leads down the glen to its door, one would not know that it had been visited." Virginia and I, of course, do not find the area in as natural a state as Muir. It's Saturday of Memorial Day weekend as we emerge from the long drive to a string of cars parked along the shoulders of the road. The parking lots are crammed full of vehicles and the overflow parking is packed with busses and campers. People walk back and forth to their cars, study the advertisement boards in front of the visitor center, and congregate under pavilions in preparation for their tours of the cave.

Inside, the center itself is humming with people. Ticket lines for the tours snake around the information kiosk, and people of all ages, from all over the world, wait in lines for the bathrooms, browse the exhibits, or pick through merchandise in the gift shop. August of this year marks the centennial of our National Park Service and already the gift shop is selling celebratory t-shirts and jackets and backpacks. I feel conspicuous at first around all of these people because I've become conditioned by the reactions I received this week. But without my pack and in my clean clothes, I look just like everyone else, yet I still feel clandestine in some way, like I'm hiding a secret.

After Bubba dropped me off in Munfordville, I walked six or seven miles toward Horse Cave but stopped just before town, dipping into a ravine by the railroad tracks and scribbling in my journal about the hospitality I experienced in Sonora. Such treatment has been rare this week. When I was planning my trip, I worried most about the long stretch-

es between towns when I wouldn't have access to certain supplies if I needed them. But since I've been walking, I've realized that along with the amenities and conveniences of towns comes a certain dehumanizing alteriority. The sidewalks, for example, seem surprisingly splendid after dodging cars on the cracking shoulders of rural roads, but those sidewalks come with an influx of people glaring and pointing at me. Many assume I'm homeless, especially in small towns like the ones I've been passing through where people aren't used to interacting with homeless populations. Before I left, when Virginia fretted about my safety, I told her I'd grow my beard out. "People will think I'm a bum," I said. "No one will mess with me." But the reality of this is more psychologically traumatic than I expected. I get all kinds of strange reactions from drivers, but they are filtered through the impersonal intermediary of their imposing vehicles, and I'm learning to tune them out. But the wide breadth I'm given on sidewalks in town, or the demeaning leer from shopkeepers or the slow pass of a police car—these reactions are debasing.

So, when I started walking toward town again and Virginia honked her horn and whipped into a gravel drive just outside of Horse Cave, and when she bounded out wearing an electric green and blue sundress, her blonde hair bouncing in loose curls as she ran toward me, I was glad to see her. I was sweaty and dirty and stunk to high heaven, but she bear-hugged me anyway and made me feel human again in some crucial way I didn't quite understand.

In the visitor center, Virginia and I study the available tours and pick the one we want to take. In Muir's time, there were only two tours available for the cave: the short one or the long one. The short tour lasted for four hours, and the long tour took a full eight hours to complete. Today there are a variety of shorter tours open to the public, but they are all sold out, so we buy tickets for the following day and wander around the interpretive area.

Boards and plaques explain karst topography and cave formation. One poster shows a rendering of the shallow Mississippian sea that covered the region and the

ancient Michigan River that deposited calcium-rich silt and sediment which compacted, over time, into the limestone bedrock on which we stand. Limestone is both brittle and soluble. When cracks formed in the rock, water seeped in. The water began dissolving the limestone as it flowed, channeling through cracks in the rock until entire underground rivers flowed. These rivers slowly carved the rock into the grand, hollow channels tourists travel today. A three-dimensional cast metal model shows the intertwined passageways wrapping over and under one another.

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After the visitor's center, we head outside to hike around a bit. A raised walkway leads to the park hotel and restaurant, though the hotel Muir encountered has long since burned down. Except for a few cleared acres of mowed grass at the west, the woods come right up to the back of the hotel and slope all the way down to the river. But this wasn't the case when Muir was here. "I never before saw Nature's grandeur in so abrupt contrast with paltry artificial gardens," he wrote. "The fashionable hotel grounds are in exact parlor taste, with many a beautiful plant cultivated to deformity, and arranged in strict geometrical beds, the whole pretty affair a laborious failure side by side with Divine beauty."

But Muir's descriptions more or less end there. Of the many things he omitted from his journals, his decision to leave out any account of his exploration *inside* the great Mammoth Cave is one of the most surprising and frustrating. Except for referring to the cave as a "magnificent hall in the mineral kingdom" and describing a knotty butternut tree near the entrance, the above passage consists of his entire commentary on the cave itself. For a man so enamored by the grandeur of nature to pay such little attention to one of its most amazing anomalies is astounding, even more so since the cave would eventually benefit from Muir's most enduring legacy as one of the biggest advocates for our National Parks System. Mammoth Cave was officially named America's twenty-sixth

National Park in 1941, sixty-nine years after the establishment of the world's first National Park at Yellowstone in 1872, forty years after Muir published *Our National Parks*, and twenty-seven years after his death.

Muir may have been silent on the incredible formations of Mammoth Cave, but there is no shortage of accounts of the cave during that time period. Along with Niagara Falls, the cave was one of the earliest destinations of mass tourism in the country. As early as 1812, the owner of the time was charging visitors a fee to tour the cave, and by 1840 a large hotel had been built to accommodate the many visitors. "The Cave Hotel is large and commodious," wrote a physician who visited only a few months prior to Muir. "It is built in the Southern style, with wide verandas, is amply ventilated, and is said to be capable of accommodating between four and five hundred guests at a time. The rooms are of sufficient size, and are very well furnished." Of the grounds, he described "a long row of cottages, with a continuous veranda, extending at least three hundred feet," and "at least six hundred feet of portico, forming one of the most delightful promenades imaginable for summer weather." The lawn, he said, "comprises about two acres of ground, is laid out with gravel walks, and is tastefully ornamented with cedar and other trees."

The physician's experience is almost the exact opposite of my own. The hotel today seems badly in need of renovation, and, while I've never stayed there, the pictures online are long out of date. But the cave itself, and the surrounding infrastructure necessary to accommodate the large quantity of visitors—around a half-million per year—has been improved to the point that it feels like the parking lot of an amusement park. I don't know if this is proof of the value of Muir's vision or a harbinger of its undoing—or perhaps both.

Seventeen years before Muir's visit, Ralph Waldo Emerson, the sage of Concord, made his own expedition to the cave in 1850, leaving us, both in a letter to his wife and an intricate essay published in the Atlantic, his own accounts of the tour. The letter to his wife is a straightforward account of his struggles to get to the cave from Cincinna-

ti, where he had been on a lecture circuit, and a recollection of the amazing chambers through which he passed. But the essay that came of his experience is, well, more Emersonian.

He begins the essay in the cave, where he "lost the light of one day," describing the domes and pits, stalagmites and stalactites, the Echo River and the blind fish. "We shot Bengal lights into the vaults and groins of the sparry cathedrals, and examined all the masterpieces which the four combined engineers, water, limestone, gravitation, and time, could make in the dark."

"On arriving at what is called the 'Star-Chamber,'" Emerson says, narrating a cave trick that is still performed for visitors to this day, "our lamps were taken from us by the guide, and extinguished or put aside, and, on looking upwards, I saw or seemed to see the night heaven thick with stars glimmering more or less brightly over our heads, and even what seemed a comet flaming among them. All the party were touched with astonishment and pleasure." This is the illusion from which Emerson took the name of his essay, but, like Muir, he doesn't stay in the cave for long. From the Star Chamber he leaps to the social masquerades of men, to the many ways we deceive ourselves and others, and finally to the grand illusion that is life. "Science," he writes at one point, "is a search after identity."

When I read those words, I think of Muir's search for his identity, his vocation in life and how he could best serve mankind. He thought he was fulfilling his purpose in the factories and towns, but he found himself growing disenchanted and longing for the solace of nature. He was drawn to botany and embarked on this journey under that premise, but all the plants he collected along the way could not conceal his search for his greater purpose.

A mere four years after Muir's long walk, after he'd established himself as a sought-after guide in Yosemite Valley and was publishing his first article on the glacial formation of the valley, Emerson visited Yosemite. The two were somewhat enamored of

one another, although Muir was ultimately disappointed when Emerson's party refused to allow the aging author to accompany Muir on an overnight camping trip. Nevertheless, one would like to think that Muir was something of the type of man Emerson had been calling for all those years in his essays. In a letter to Muir the year after their meeting, Emerson referred to him as "the right man in the right place." It must have seemed sublime to Muir, then, after all those years of wandering and fears of purposelessness, to read these words from the American literary force whom he had so long admired.

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Behind the hotel, we find one of the hiking trails and follow it down to the river. We pass a few other couples and some families with dogs. The Green River is running, like the Ohio, high and muddy. The overcast clouds release a light drizzle, but the lush canopy catches most of the droplets. Along the bank, ferns and mosses spread in moist verdure while fleabane and wild basil bloom among them. We find a bench along the path overlooking the river, and we sit down to watch the brown water flow, enjoying each other's company after the long week apart.

"What's wrong?" Virginia asks. Ever since she picked me up, something's been bothering me, but I'm not sure how to vocalize it. If understanding how it feels to be treated like a homeless person this past week has been eye-opening for me, it also expanded my empathy to learn first-hand what men and women and children all across the country endure on top of their already uncertain circumstances. It's humbling and heartbreaking at the same time. But I can't find the words to explain all of this, so instead I tell Virginia a story about an encounter I had at a gas station in Elizabethtown.

My third day of walking, I covered almost twenty miles from Bardstown in an attempt to reach a campground in E-town, but by evening my feet were blistered and aching and I was exhausted. The whole country was flat fields and houses with few tree

lines. There was no secluded place to camp. I was losing daylight and had no idea how much farther I had to go to the campground when I came upon a gas station. There was a picnic table in the front under the awning, so I slung my pack beneath it, went in the store and bought two Gatorades. I drank one immediately, and I sat at the table staring out past the road, unsure what to do except keep walking and hoping I could make it before dark. It was a desperate, empty stare, born of the realization that there was no solution but keep going, to keep trudging on no matter how miserable I was.

As I was starting on the second Gatorade, a beat-up old Ford Explorer pulled around the pumps and backed into a space near the ice freezer. The vehicle squeaked and groaned as it rolled, sounding like it was about to lose an axle. Rust had eaten away a basketball-sized hole in the rear quarter-panel and gray Bondo patches spotted it like a Dalmatian. When it parked, the door moaned on its hinges, and the young man that stepped out eyed me curiously as he walked into the store. A few moments later, he came out and paused as he passed me.

"Hey, man," he said, "Are you okay?" He was an African American man in his late-twenties, eyebrows arched in concern. I was drenched with sweat and it was dripping onto the concrete beneath me.

"I mean, you need a Gatorade or anything?" he asked.

I smiled at him and lifted the Gatorade up from my lap to show him I had one. It occurred to me to ask him for a ride the rest of the way into E-town, but I could see his wife or girlfriend in the passenger seat and she kept talking and turning around to the backseat, so I assumed they had a child, too. I didn't want to put him in such an uncomfortable situation. Besides, I thought, I'm the idiot that's gotten myself into this situation, so I'm the one that needs to deal with the consequences.

"Thanks," I said, holding up the Gatorade. "I'm good." I smiled extra-wide in an attempt to say what I didn't know how to say.

"You sure?" he asked.

For all I know, that man had a nice house and a garage and two more cars parked in it, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I'd probably paid more for the backpacking gear in my pack than his SUV was worth—and yet he was willing to stop and ask me if I was alright, if I needed help, to offer to buy me a Gatorade.

What I'm trying to get at, what's been bothering me, is privilege. I walked down the 31W because I chose to, but when Bubba was walking it, he didn't have any other options. And the fact that I could just quit and go home if I wanted to makes my situation crucially different than his. And Muir was walking with a similar privilege on his travels, although he seemed blissfully aloof. And it's his aloofness that's problematic when reading him today. He was by no means a wealthy man on his walk, but he had saved some money and entrusted it to his brother in Portage Wisconsin to send by mail when necessary. He had far less of a safety net available to him then than I do now, but he was still intelligent and industrious—and white. By all accounts, he was a kind and considerate man, but as they say, he was a product of his time. He had expressed abolitionist sympathies in college, so he was far less prejudiced than the average white Southerner he encountered in his travels, but his language is still cringe-inducing to readers today.

As he prepared to cross the Salt River in Shepherdsville, Kentucky, a black woman yelled to stop him from the other side. In a few minutes, a young boy came across on horseback to pick him up. Muir referred to him as "little Nig" and described him as "a little sable negro boy" that looked like a bug on the horse's back. "He was a queer specimen, puffy and jet as an India rubber doll and his hair was matted in sections like the wool of a merino sheep." Muir was worried the horse might fall and dump them both in the river—but they could both use a bath, he allowed, and "little Afric looked like he might float like a bladder."

Days later, on his way into Horse Cave, Muir overtook "an old negro driving an ox team" and rode with him the rest of the way. "Many of these Kentucky negroes," he wrote, "are shrewd and intelligent, and when warmed upon a subject that interests them,

are eloquent in no mean degree." Voicing such a notion was downright progressive for the time period, but today it's difficult not to read a certain distasteful sense of surprise or even disbelief in his admiration. "The negroes of Georgia, too," Muir praised, "are extremely mannerly and polite, and appear always to be delighted to find opportunity for obliging anybody." I shudder to think of the generations of beatings and lashings and whippings and deprivations and psychological abuse that instilled such politeness, but Muir maintained a privileged position of preferred ignorance.

In Florida, he cautiously approached a light glowing in a pine wood, and found two shadowy figures around a campfire. "Seen anywhere but in the South," he wrote, "the glossy pair would have been taken for twin devils, but here it was only a negro and his wife at their supper." He approached their fire and asked for water to drink, which they graciously offered him, and after standing there for a moment, he witnessed the mother bend over "a black lump of something lying in the ashes of the fire" and offer it supper. The lump arose and "proved to be a burly little negro boy, rising from the earth naked as to the earth he came." In his later reflections on this moment, Muir seems to recoil from the image: "Surely, thought I, as I started for Gainesville, surely I am now coming to the tropics, where the inhabitants wear nothing but their own skins." He complained to himself that such was not in harmony with Nature. "Birds make nests and nearly all beasts make some kind of bed for their young; but these negroes allow their younglings to lie nestless and naked in the dirt."

Elsewhere Muir breaks into a tirade on human close-mindedness: "How narrow we selfish, conceited creatures are in our sympathies! how blind to the rights of all the rest of creation! With what dismal irreverence we speak of our fellow mortals!" And if he were admonishing his own thoughts on the family in Florida or the boy in Kentucky—because this was a *journal*, after all—one could forgive his momentary prejudice, his difficult acceptance of the precarious position of the Reconstruction-era freedmen in the South. But Muir wasn't talking about the family in Florida or the boy in Kentucky; he

was talking about alligators. It's a disturbing contradiction of his developing ethics that his verve and enthusiasm for nature, specifically for wilderness, seems to have leapt beyond human beings altogether. Even while he was preaching a humane consideration for plants and animals and *all* beings, he seems to have forgotten to apply those same considerations to all *human* beings.

Only once on his Southern journey did Muir directly acknowledge the psychological effects of the recent war. "The traces of war are not only apparent on the broken fields, burnt fences, mills, and woods ruthlessly slaughtered," he wrote, "but also on the countenances of the people." And, of course, he cloaked his comments in natural symbolism: "A few years after a forest has been burned another generation of bright and happy trees arises, in purest, freshest vigor; only the old trees, wholly or half dead, bear marks of the calamity. So with the people of this war-field. Happy, unscarred, and unclouded youth is growing up around the aged, half-consumed, and fallen parents, who bear in sad measure the ineffaceable marks of the farthest-reaching and most infernal of all civilized calamities." And while he briefly mentions certain of his hosts as being immovable on the topic of slavery—implying perhaps that Muir had taken up with them the debate—he never acknowledges the difficulties these previously enslaved people were now enduring in the aftermath of the war, in their attempts to claim their new freedom, and in their inability to find work or earn a living wage.

But Muir's contradictions run even deeper. In recent years, he has come under criticism for his xenophobia against Native Americans. In *My First Summer in the Sierras*, he described them like homeless beggars, much as I imagine townspeople who look upon me with disgust describe me later to their friends and families. "A strangely dirty and irregular life these dark-eyed, dark-haired, half-happy savages lead in this clean wilderness…" he wrote, and then said that the only consolations for their lifestyle was the pure air and pure water. "These go far to cover and cure the grossness of their lives."

In a memorable encounter near Bloody Canyon, Muir comes very close to ac-

knowledging this contradiction: “Just then I was startled by a lot of queer, hairy, muffled creatures coming shuffling, shambling, wallowing toward me as if they had no bones in their bodies,” he wrote.

> When I came up to them, I found that they were only a band of Indians from Mono on their way to Yosemite for a load of acorns…. The dirt on some of the faces seemed almost old enough and thick enough to have a geological significance; some were strangely blurred and divided into sections by seams and wrinkles that looked like cleavage joints, and had a worn abraded look as if they had lain exposed to the weather for ages…. How glad I was to get away from the gray, grim crowd and see them vanish down the trail! Yet it seems sad to feel such desperate repulsion from one’s fellow beings, however degraded. To prefer the society of squirrels and woodchucks to that of our own species must surely be unnatural.

Elsewhere in the book, Muir praised the wilderness over and over for its cleanliness—“Nothing truly wild is unclean,” he wrote—and yet he said the worst thing about the Native Americans he encountered was their uncleanliness: “...Though most Indians I have seen are not a whit more natural in their lives than we civilized whites. Perhaps if I knew them better I should like them better. The worst thing about them is their uncleanliness.”

Muir’s distaste for dirtiness, as with the impoverished family in Florida, seems to be the prime source of his prejudices, almost as if it was a lack of gentrified civility that turned him off and not any specific race or creed. In short, he was classist. He seemed to despise poverty as unclean and uncivilized, which is strange for someone who preached so fervently the virtues of the natural world—for those marginalized and impoverished people often live closest to the wilderness which he praised as cleansing and rejuvenating.

When Virginia and I tire of watching the river, we hike southwest along its banks while she tells me more about her week, about all the things that happened at her job, how she thinks my dog is depressed by my absence and how her cat, of course, hasn’t seemed to notice I’m gone. Following the muddy trail, we come to an inlet and turn up up its banks until we arrive at a wooden observation deck. This is the River Styx Spring

where one of the underground rivers that's continuing to carve the cave system emerges from beneath a limestone cliff and spills into the Green River. A shallow rock arch stretches across a milky gray pool, which flows past the deck and into the river. Park employees have poured dyes into the underground rivers to discover where they emerge. There is something inherently mysterious about an underground river, and we stare silently at the water, pondering the hidden world in which it flows.

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Not all accounts of Mammoth Cave during that time period are quite so high-minded as Emerson's. One account from 1879 caught my eye because the author claimed to have completed his visit a few years after the close of the war, which would've put his party there only a month or so after Muir's visit. *A Sucker's Visit to Mammoth Cave*, as the book is titled, recounts the misadventure of a group of young friends from Indiana who set out for the cave not by rail, which would have been the sensible option, but by horse-drawn wagon. They were, after all, searching for adventure, wherein the destination is the journey, and their story reminds me in far too many ways of my own journey thus far.

Despite trials of rain, difficult terrain, running out of food and getting lost, the kids finally make it to Mammoth Cave and fully avail themselves of the luxuries of the hotel and dining room. The next day, after rest and repast, the crew embarked on a long tour of the cave. Thompson wrote that he was looking forward to meeting Stephen Bishop, the world famous slave guide at Mammoth Cave, who also guided Emerson, only to learn of Bishop's death just before the war. "This Stephen was a remarkable character, quite a curiosity in himself," Thompson wrote. "He was altogether self-taught, understood something of several languages, something of geology, mineralogy, and other sciences, and a great deal of human nature."

Bishop was purchased by an early owner of Mammoth Cave to serve as an ex-

plorer and guide to visitors, and he took to the task. He was sold to the following owner, Dr. John Croghan from Louisville, who built the hotel, and Bishop was charged with finding new passages to show visitors. Croghan was the nephew of George Rogers Clark, who founded Louisville and lived in the log cabin overlooking the Falls of the Ohio, and William Clark, who led the Corps of Discovery with Meriwether Lewis. Bishop became the first great explorer of Mammoth Cave and the most knowledgeable and sought after guide. Oral tradition tells that it was on a visit to Croghan's family home, Locust Grove in Louisville, wherein many of the specimens collected by Lewis and Clark were displayed, that Croghan's brother asked Bishop to draw the first known map of Mammoth Cave.

But instead of Bishop, Thompson's guide was one of Bishop's contemporaries, a slave named Mat, who, Thompson wrote, "had learned much of [Bishop's] ideas, and doubtless picked up many terms and phrases from the professors and college graduates he has guided through these labyrinths; but he must be also a man of much natural talent."

Materson Bransford, also known as Uncle Mat, was one of the three original slave guides at Mammoth Cave along with Stephen Bishop, and he developed some renown of his own, especially after Bishop's death. In a portrait sketched by the Dutch artist Ferdinand Richardt, Mat wears his hat sat back on his head, showing his prominent forehead. His beard is thick and dark, and his clean, white shirt is buttoned up to the top. His face is stoic, but the lines around his eyes hint at a laugh waiting to erupt.

When Bransford travelled to Louisville in 1863, his presence attracted attention from the local newspaper. "No one who has visited Mammoth Cave during the last quarter of a century has forgotten Mat, the colored guide, to whose attentions they have been indebted for most of their pleasurable remembrances of a visit to that great subterranean wonder…. He is familiar with the geographical and chemical formations peculiar to the Cave, and discourses of all its wonders…. Mat arrived in this city yesterday and is a guest of our friends of the Louisville Hotel. He will sit for his portrait today at Brown's daguer-

rean saloon, after which he will take a shy at whatever is worth looking at above ground hereabout, returning to the Cave tomorrow."

The portrait that resulted from the trip shows Mat seated and holding his guide gear. His battered hat sits back on his head, and his coat torn at the shoulder and frayed at the hems. He holds a grease lantern out in front of him, with a basket hung from his arm. Slung around his side with a piece of rope is a can of extra fuel for the lanterns, and he holds a walking stick with his other hand. His full, thick beard is peppered with gray hair, and his eyes pierce through the centuries as through the dark.

As a light rain begins to fall. Virginia and I pull on our rain jackets and head up the hill, through the many switchbacks, out of breath and breaking a sweat. At the parking lot, we pull our car around to the picnic area and drag our cooler to a table, where we enjoy cold drinks and a late lunch.

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The next day, I return to the park at the appointed time for my tour and assemble with the other visitors under a pavilion off to the side of the visitor's center. Jerry Bransford, our guide for the day, is an African-American man in his late-sixties with a thick mustache and gentle eyes. He's wearing a ranger's uniform with a wide-brimmed hat and speaks to us with a smooth, lilting drawl, elongating syllables in practiced oration like a Baptist preacher.

"In 1799 a pioneer named John Houchins of Kentucky shot a bear along the Green River, one mile from here," Jerry begins in practiced fashion. "He didn't mortally wound the bear, so he chased the bear up the ridge and down into the twilight zone of the cave where we are going on tour today." Jerry stops and spans the group with a quizzical look on his face. "Quite honestly, I find it strange that anyone would chase a wounded black bear *into* any cave. Would you agree?" Everyone laughs. "But we also know that

John Houchins was not a true Kentuckian. He must have been from another state because, if he'd been a true Kentuckian, he would have killed the bear with the *first* shot."

I have specifically requested a tour with Jerry as my guide today because of his unique connection to Mammoth Cave, which he relates to our group as he continues his opening monologue: "You probably drove by Little Hope Cemetery today. Did you see that cemetery?" Jerry asks, raising his voice and drawing out the last word of his question. "That's one of approximately sixty-six graveyards on the 53,983 acres. So I was up Flint Ridge last Sunday after church, and I went down there to the bottom of the hill, and there are the remains of the home where my daddy was born in nineteen-and-fourteen." Jerry pauses after the date to let the information sink in. "His daddy was born there in 1876. My great-grandfather was born up there in slavery in 1849." He pauses again and scans the group. "And my great-great-grandpa Materson and his brother Nicholas were brought in from Nashville, Tennessee, in April of 1838, and they were leased to the proprietor of the cave, Franklin Gorin, for a hundred dollars a year as two of the three original slave guides." Jerry's great-great-grandfather was Uncle Mat, the guide from Thompson's account, and very likely the guide that may have shown Muir through the cave if, indeed, he took a tour.

Jerry tells us the stories of Materson and Nick and how they created a guiding legacy at Mammoth Cave. Materson Bransford was the biracial son of his owner Thomas Bransford and one of his slave girls. When Thomas Bransford died, Materson became the property of his own half-brother, who continued to lease him to Dr. Croghan as a guide. Materson eventually married a slave woman from a nearby farm, and her owner sold three of their four children away from the family. A prominent abolitionist of the time visited the cave and asked him, "Uncle Mat, I don't suppose you missed these children much? You colored people never do, they say." Materson was quick to set him straight, explaining that he felt the same as any white person would.

Mat led tours for some fifty years at Mammoth Cave, and he tutored his fourth

child, Henry Bransford, who wasn't sold away from him, in the guiding profession. Three of Henry's sons guided in Mammoth Cave as well as several of his grandsons, continuing the legacy unbroken for over 100 years until the park service took over in 1941. Many years later, after Jerry retired from a long career at Dow Corning in nearby Bowling Green, the park service invited him to bring the Bransford legacy back to Mammoth Cave as a part time tour guide.

Jerry guides the group with a certain gravity punctuated by humor, and he uses his familial connection and childhood experiences with the cave to great effect. Explaining the biomats we will have to cross when we leave the cave, he introduces us to White Nose Syndrome, a disease that is killing bats across the country. "As a matter of fact," Jerry says, "when I was a kid, this one room where we're going to stop had like four- or five- or maybe eight-thousand bats. My great-uncle said this one room had one million bats when he was a kid in the eighteen hundreds."

Near the entrance to the cave, Jerry points everyone's attention to the tulip poplars growing tall and straight along the hillsides. "These trees were cut down by slaves and hollowed out with a spoon bit auger to make wooden pipes," he explains with a heavy countenance. "Getting ready for the War of 1812, we needed black gunpowder. You are going to see some of the pits that these black men worked in—a dreadful environment—supporting the U.S. of A., who saw them as less than second-class citizens." Jerry pauses for effect, and our knowledge of his lineage adds additional weight. That's the power of Jerry's stories. A moment before the silence gets uncomfortable, he continues, lightening the mood with a joke. "So, this particular tree was used because its soft in the middle. They're straight and tall and their soft in the middle. I would think that if they'd chosen Kentucky White Oak in 1812, they'd still be working on the first one."

Jerry adds a personal connection to almost everything he tells. When he talks about John F. Kennedy's executive order attempting to turn the passage known as Audubon Avenue into a fallout shelter in the sixties, he recalls his school days when they were

required to run duck and cover drills. He goes on to explain how the cave breathes, exchanging its air supply every day and a half, making it a poor choice for a fallout shelter.

When Jerry explains the saltpeter hoppers from the War of 1812 in the Rotunda room, he tells the story of his great-grandfather Henry Bransford, Materson's son. Henry used to collect and sell as souvenirs the old corn cobs that remained preserved in the cave from feeding the oxen that hauled the hoppers. When the "perfectly preserved" cobs began to run low, Henry would bring in some more of his own for other visitors.

When I see the hoppers and beams and logs in that magnificent subterranean room, I wonder if Muir gazed on these same artifacts, if he saw them as an imposition on the glory of the great hall. But when Jerry sees these things, he thinks of a more complicated history. He thinks of the institution of slavery. When he guides tours through the cave, he sees Materson's name written in charcoal on the walls and ceilings, and he knows that Uncle Mat was forced to be there. When he goes up on Flint Ridge Road near his father's home place, he sees where the colored school used to be. I ask Jerry what it was like to be connected to those painful reminders of our country's past, and he responds with optimism for the future. That's one of the reasons he enjoys his work for the park service. It gives him the opportunity to educate young people in hopes of bettering the future.

I shake Jerry's hand and thank him for his time after the tour, then head out to the car. On the drive out of the park, I see a deer crossing the road and a bearded Tom turkey milling about the shoulder, and I think about the many other people from all races and walks of life that have been able to enjoy similar scenes this weekend. If the development and infrastructure of the park is not the wilderness Muir was advocating for, at least it makes nature and her grandeurs available to everyone.

Chapter Five: John Muir Highway

When Emerson said he became in the woods a transparent eyeball, being nothing and seeing all—I mean, at the precise transcendent moment when he was inspired to write those words—he clearly didn't have to poop.

I, on the other hand, don't feel the currents of the Universal Being circulating through me right now. I feel stomach cramps. Diarrhea—*that's* what's circulating through me as I crouch somewhere in a dense wood off of Highway 90, a half a day's walk east of Glasgow, Kentucky. I don't feel all part and parcel of God, like the Sage of Concord; I feel like a savage beast excreting unholy things from my body.

The mature woods in which I do my business offer good cover from the road. Their edges are thick with sprouting cedars and drooping with the exotic and invasive tree-of-heaven, giving them an unfamiliar jungle-ish vibe that seems to match what feels like Montezuma's Revenge rumbling in my belly.

When I finish the dirty deed, I scrape as much surrounding dirt as I can on top of the puddle and then finish it off with a patch of moss and a rotting log. I intended to employ a strict "Leave No Trace" ethic on this trip, but today I'm leaving my fair share. There is simply no time to dig a proper cathole. Nature has been calling with a wild and sudden desperation.

With the evidence sufficiently hidden, I sit back against a tree trunk to rest, my hand still clutching my stomach.

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As Emerson took his leave of Yosemite Valley, his entourage demurred a private camping trip with Muir in Mariposa Grove, among the giant Sequoias, on the grounds that Emerson, in his old age, might catch cold laying out in the night air. "In vain I urged," Muir

wrote, “that only in homes and hotels were colds caught, that nobody ever was known to take cold camping in these woods, that there was not a single cough or sneeze in all the Sierra.” Later, in *Our National Parks*, he wrote, “No American wilderness that I know of is so dangerous as a city home ‘with all the modern improvements.’”

Muir’s logic is quite the opposite of my mother’s lectures about rain and cold in my childhood, but I’m starting to agree with him. The air conditioner in the small motel where Virginia and I stayed a night in Horse Cave was set right at bed-height and no more than a foot away. The room stayed insufferably hot until the air conditioner kicked on, and I woke each time chilled, pulling the blankets up around me until I awoke again a few minutes later sweating.

I passed a miserable night in this feverish state, and in the morning the vague sickness I had felt those last few days while walking—the hollow stomach, fatigue and lack of appetite—had turned into a full-blown sinus infection. After Mammoth Cave we drove to the nearest Urgent Treatment Center in Glasgow and got some antibiotics from a nurse practitioner.

The next day Virginia insisted on buying me some probiotics—to help my stomach deal with the antibiotics, she said. I thought that was silly, but shoved the bottle into my pack to appease her before she dropped me off in the parking lot of a Dollar General. In hindsight, I might’ve chosen a better location. She sat in the car, crying again, while I stomped off down the road, stuffy-nosed and sullen with my bulging pack, feeling twice as lonely to be leaving her again, and customers gawked at what must have seemed like the world’s strangest domestic dispute.

Highway 90 between Glasgow and Burkesville is named John Muir Highway because it loosely traces his route between those towns, and green road signs posted at prominent intersections announce the title in white capital letters. This is the first public acknowledgement of Muir’s walk that I’ve seen on my own journey, and it sort of excites me, as though I am finally escaping the trappings of civilization and entering a rural area

that more closely resembles the one which Muir experienced. This is true, but only in some small degree. There isn't a campground or a hotel in the forty miles between those two towns and only two gas stations. But this also makes the stretch one of the more awkward legs of my journey—although it may have been a little less awkward had I taken the probiotics as my thoughtful wife suggested.

My initial plan was to rally through two marathon days of near twenty miles a piece, stealth camping in the woods one night in between. From Burkesville, it's another twenty miles to Albany, which is, itself, only six or eight miles from the Tennessee state line. But I am weak and lonely. My head is heavy, my sinus cavities are throbbing, and then there's that whole diarrhea thing, which sent me bounding into these woods where I'm now sitting, listening to bird songs and wondering what Virginia is doing now—wondering if she'd consider coming back to get me.

I haven't always been so lucky today as to find good cover nearby the road like these woods. Much of the land is rolling pasture or farmland for a hundred yards or more off the road, with distant hills draped in the welcoming trees I so desperately need nearby. At one point several miles back, the only place of concealment within a couple hundred yards in any direction was under the highway bridge that spanned a small stream. Proper wilderness practice requires doing your business at least a hundred feet from any body of water, but I short-stepped down the embankment and did the dirty deed with a heinous urgency, shovelling soft mud overtop of the evidence with my trowel and then slinking away like a fox from the henhouse. I rationalized with myself that this wasn't exactly wilderness, and the plentiful cows in the area were doing far worse to the stream on a daily basis.

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Sufficiently outside of Glasgow, houses become more sporadic and the landscape opens

up to rolling hills of farmland and forested knobs. Fence posts line the roads in rhythmic intervals. The asphalt shoulders are narrow, but the roads are flat and the dirt shoulders are shallow and accommodating. There are no dump trucks or semi trailers barrelling by due to the holiday weekend, but every other truck is pulling a boat or a camper trailer. The tiny towns that dot the highway are little more than clusters of small brick homes by the road.

As I walk, I've begun to notice the roadkill, along with the landscape, is changing on me. Deer and possums and skunks and snakes are common, and I've even seen the bloated body of a fox and the remains of a wild turkey. However, on the highway out of Glasgow, snapping turtles grow more common. I pass another one every mile or so. But I've been surprised to notice that birds are by far the most frequent roadkill I've come across. A recent study found that the United States has over a billion fewer birds than it did just forty years ago, and many species are in alarmingly rapid decline. The causes range from increasing urbanization, loss of habitat to agriculture and urban sprawl, and possibly global warming. Urbanization includes everything from birds flying into power lines or the windows of skyscrapers to getting hit by cars or killed by domestic cats.

I have seen all manner of dead pigeons and sparrows and crows and robins along the roads, and I've even seen a dead cardinal and a quail and an unidentifiable hawk, not to mention that turkey I listed above. But a ways back, just out of a tiny town called Eighty Eight, I came upon something that truly puzzled me: a sopping wet chicken head. There was no body nearby and no feathers. Just a wet, disembodied chicken head lying on the dry road, it's paper-thin eyelids half closed over cloudy, lifeless eyes. I stood there staring at it for a long time, trying to come up with some sort of logical explanation, but I was perplexed.

After the chicken head, I began to notice white feathers floating around the shoulders, caught in the dry grass next to the asphalt and in the roadside ditch. I thought maybe a farmer nearby had free-range chickens that got into the road and hit by a car or some-

thing, but there were no barns or working farms very close to the road. Just rolling hills and trees.

And that's when I remembered a scene from James Dickey's novel *Deliverance*. Not "the" scene—which is to say the brutal rape scene made famous by the film, starring Jon Voight and Burt Reynolds—but another scene before that one. As the four men float down the fictional Cahulawassee River towards a small town, they pass under a highway bridge, and with their proximity to civilization comes a proliferation of trash and pollution. Ironically, just after Ed sinks an empty can of beer in the river, the men notice the mud banks covered in rusted metal, engine parts, broken glass and shredded plastic, much of the same trash I've tallied on the Kentucky roadsides. Beyond the town they pass a poultry plant, and the underwater features of the river begin to turn white with chicken feathers, "a vague choked whiteness," as Dickey described it. Ed, the protagonist that Dickey modeled in many ways after himself, sees a log covered with feathers, and imagines it "a perfect physical representation of nausea. When you are sick enough," he says to himself, "*that* is the thing you feel."

The feathers I am still passing as I walk aren't nearly as populous or as sickening. If it hadn't been for the chicken head I might not have even noticed them in the first place, but it's became a sort of game with myself to try and spot them wisping in the grass and thistles, to try and tell them apart from the blooms of daisy weed and flowering clover, and to see them furling up behind passing cars. When one floats by in front of me, I jab at it with my walking stick as Ed had swept one up with his canoe paddle in the novel.

Like myself, Dickey once worked in advertising. He found the job of copywriting demanding and sometimes stifling of his creativity, although he appreciated the steady income. That role became the basis for the fictional agency where Ed works as a graphic designer in *Deliverance*, wearying of his day-to-day job. "The feeling of the inconsequence of whatever I would do," he says in the midst of one bout of disillusion, "of

anything I would pick up or think about or turn to see was at that moment being set in the very bone marrow." He expresses a fear of being—even if just for a moment—"some poor fool who lives as unobserved and impotent as a ghost, going through the only motions it has." The acuteness of these feelings is one of the biggest impulses that convinces Ed to go on the fateful canoe trip.

Even apart from his own early occupational crisis, Muir understood the soul-souring demands of the workaday life. In the often-quoted lines from the beginning of *Our National Parks*, he wrote that "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life." Muir was setting nature and wilderness up as the antidote to the modern malady of the industrialized world. "Awakening from the stupefying effects of the vice of over-industry and the deadly apathy of luxury, they are trying as best they can to mix and enrich their own little ongoings with those of Nature, and to get rid of rust and disease." These are the same inclinations that have often driven me away from my home and out of my office to the fields and woods and streams. They drove me to attempt this walk, and in Dickey's novel they drove Ed up into the North Georgia mountains to canoe a river before it was dammed and lost forever.

Moments after noticing the feathered log in the Cahulawassee, Ed looks down to see a chicken head, with its eye half-open, like I saw on the road, looking at him and *through* him. It's a haunting image, and the moment is based on a true story. Before *Deliverance,* Dickey wrote a poem about the same experience, which is perhaps less polarizing than the novel, focusing more heavily on the ecological implications of the experience and portraying a much more favorable side of the local mountain folks. Dickey modeled the fictional Cahulawassee on the Coosawattee River in northern Georgia. On a canoe trip down the river, as they float through the town of Ellijay, Dickey and his friends pass a poultry processing plant just like Ed and the guys in the novel. But in "On the

Coosawattee," it's the ecological implications of the discarded chicken offal that disgust Dickey:

> All morning we floated on feathers
> Among the drawn heads which appeared
> Everywhere, from under the logs
> Of feathers, from upstream behind us,
> Lounging back to us from ahead,
> Until we believed ourselves doomed
>
> And the planet corrupted forever…

In the next section we learn about the damming of the river and Dickey's near-death experience overturning the canoe in the rapids. Toward the end Dickey says he cannot sleep until he has watched, in his mind, the waters rising behind the dam, water skiers already poised at the creek inlets. It's similar to the stunning scene in *Deliverance* when, after Ed climbs the rock walls of the gorge, he imagines the dammed water rising slowly, overtaking the crevices in the rocks where he had found lifesaving hand- and footholds. In the poem, the water covers Dickey too, "but breathable, like cloud," and the mountain man, "Who may have been the accepting spirit of the place / Come to call us to higher ground," raises him from "the sleep of the yet-to-be-drowned."

This vision is, in many ways, opposite of the novel, but both works seek to impart the theme of deliverance from those very things Muir was listing in the beginning of *Our National Parks*, from all the abstracted entrapping elements of our lives as we have dissociated and distanced them from the natural world to the live-and-die reality of all other beings on earth. For Dickey, this was the ultimate baptism.

***

I feel weak and lonely and sad, and I'm making poor time with the frequent stops, rushing into the nearest tree line to do my business. Near the town of Summer Shade, I begin looking for a secluded place where I can hang my hammock for the night. I don't like stealth camping because I don't like trespassing and I worry about getting caught, but

there are no other options until Burkesville. I find a low stretch of woods right next to what looks like an abandoned lumberyard. The sign is old and worn, the fence is falling over in places, and the metal buildings are rusted and faded. Beyond the mill, on the inside of a curve in the road, is a floodplain that was once cleared and then long neglected, sprouting with elm trees and a few maples, one on top of another. The result is a dense wood of spindly, immature trees no more than twenty or thirty feet tall, but the ground is dry enough to walk on without sinking in the mud. I like the place precisely because it has been so long neglected. It's bounded by thick cedars along the perimeter of the road, offering good cover, and the low ground on the inside curve means headlights won't pan across in the night, reflecting off my tarp. If Muir encountered unbroken stretches of woods and wilderness on his Southern journey, most of my experiences with nature thus far have been relegated to neglected places such as these, useless or forgotten realms being reclaimed by plants and trees. A small stream—apparently prone to flooding—trickles past on the opposite side of the woods from the lumberyard, and the mud is crisscrossed with deer and raccoon tracks. I cook a meal of ramen noodles on my little alcohol stove and mix some powdered Gatorade into my water, then wait for dusk to set up my hammock. The thin trees bend with my weight as I lay back, and they sway in the smallest breeze, rocking me to sleep.

In the morning, what I thought was an abandoned lumberyard proves very much *not* abandoned. The mill starts up at six o'clock sharp, with car doors slamming, machinery buzzing and humming, and trucks and forklifts beeping. Semi-trucks pull in the gravel drive next to my patch of woods and hiss their air brakes. Drivers honk and holler over the din.

I scramble out of my hammock and break camp. I don't feel quite so concealed in the morning light, but I'm still half asleep, so with my bag packed, I lean back against a tree trunk, nibbling on a granola bar and trying to wake up. As I sit here, I watch a semi pull into the gravel drive and park along the edge of the woods. The driver hops out of the

cab and walks around to my side of his truck, opening the passenger door and rummaging around. Then he slams the door and turns into the woods, walking directly towards me. I freeze. He's a little overweight, with close-cropped hair and wearing an untucked brown work shirt. My muscles tense, but I can't stand up and run away or he will see me and assume I'm up to far worse than I really am. So I just hunker down, making myself as small as I possibly can, and hope he doesn't see me. This is it, I think. I'm caught.

The man walks straight towards me into the woods about ten or fifteen steps, stopping no less than forty or forty-five yards away, then he turns, drops his pants and squats. My heart is pounding. I've never in my life wanted to watch a stranger take a dump, but I don't dare take my eyes off of him. He stays squatted there unceremoniously for several minutes, then stands back up, and with barely a wipe, he wriggles his britches up and lumbers out of the woods toward the mill.

As soon as I'm sure he's gone, I shoulder my pack and run out to the road on the other side of the woods, eager to put the incident behind me. The traffic is steadier today than yesterday, and I step off the road frequently for large trucks. As I hike I can't help thinking about my own upset stomach from the antibiotics. How many times yesterday had I bounded into the woods or a dense tree line, assuming, like the man at the mill, that I was alone? Who might've been watching me in disgust? More importantly, who might've been filming me on their phone and livestreaming it to social media?

I walk fast and hope the probiotics will kick in soon. No more than a few hundred yards down the road, a semi passes me headed back west, and the wind that hits my face smells so putrid that I almost wretch. It's stale and sick and dense, like breathing in a fine, choking dust. I look over my shoulder at the truck, but it's stacked with empty wire cages. Not a mile further, a truck headed east wafts that same scent over to my side of the road, except this truck's cages are packed to the gills with snow-white broiler chickens, hundreds of them, one atop another. These trucks, I realize, are the source of the feathers along the road, and I guess the severed chicken head as well. Local farms all up and down

Highway 90 raise poultry and ship it, via these semis, to large processing plants.

The poultry industry in Kentucky, including eggs, is the number one food and agricultural commodity in the state, and it's the seventh largest broiler producing state in the nation. According to the Kentucky Poultry Federation, this all adds up to over a billion-dollar industry, which is doubly important in a state so long reliant on the now heavily declining production of tobacco. Many tobacco farmers have turned to poultry, and many others raise corn or soybeans that contribute to the poultry industry. Every third row of Kentucky-grown corn goes to feed poultry along with 30% of the soybeans grown in the state.

Kentucky boasts around 850 poultry farms, the majority of which are family owned and operated. But in an increasingly industrialized form of agriculture, even these small farms average five poultry houses a piece. In nature, chickens roam widely in small flocks, but as poultry farming becomes more concentrated, the natural byproducts become hazardous. Chicken manure is extremely heavy in nitrogen, phosphorus and potassium, minerals which can be great for the soil in the naturally small and dispersed amounts, but in the new factory "land-independent" method, thousands of birds are cooped up in confined areas, producing literally tons of waste. As a result, these factories are dirty and odorous, attracting flies and rats and diseases. To combat the diseases, a regimen of antibiotics is given to each bird, residues of which are then deposited in their manure. The resultant litter—the mix of manure, sawdust bedding and often decaying carcasses—also contains heavy metals, cysts and larvae. So, on the diversified farms of old, such litter would be spread on the fields as fertilizer, but today the sheer quantity of the material makes spreading it on fields an environmental hazard. Heavy metals accumulate in the ground, reducing soil quality, while excess nitrogen and phosphorus leach into ground and surface water, poisoning our waterways.

Another semi-truck barrels by and the smell once again induces a choking cough. Last week I learned to hold my hat on my head as the gravel trucks on the 31W passed

by me, and this week I am learning to hold my breath each time a chicken truck passes. But apart from the semis, the road is far less busy than those I walked last week, so my mind and eyes wander from the shoulder and I begin to notice the landscape around me. I watch a hawk soaring in lazy circles high above a hayfield as a man moves rolled bales with his tractor. Orange lilies sprout from an embankment and droop over the guardrail and the shoulders come alive with color. Flowering clovers stipple the grass with red and white blooms, wild daisies fan their petals and the radiant purple of plume thistles rise above them.

***

Near the little town of Beaumont, I step off the road to walk in the flat front yards on the other side of the road ditch, giving me a nice buffer from the chicken trucks. Old men sweep their stoops or sit in lawn chairs on their porches watching me quizzically but not seeming to mind my presence. It seems like a quiet little hamlet, happy and tranquil.

As I cross the driveway of one such home, a German Shepherd tears around the side of the house, barking viciously and bearing its teeth, with the hair on its neck standing up. I stumble backward until it feels like a truck on the road nearly brushes my shirt as it passes, and then I swing out the bottom of my walking stick to keep the dog at bay. It lunges at the stick once, then twice, then clinches it in its teeth, jerking and shaking. I jab the stick toward it, into its mouth, forcing it to release its grasp, then draw it up into a baseball grip, ready to swing down on the top of its head as hard as I can. The dog shrinks back to recover and then, as it prepares to lunge at me again, a man steps around the side of the bedford stone house and yells. The dog turns immediately and runs back to its owner, leaving me looking wild and guilty, standing in his driveway with my stick cocked and ready to beat his dog to death. I turn without a word and walk away as quickly as possible.

Just beyond Beaumont, near the Cumberland County line, the landscape begins to shift on me. Ravines deepen and the road rises up before me. At the base of a steep hill, a minivan headed in the opposite direction pulls over on the shoulder and the dark-haired woman driving asks me if I want a ride. Her high school-aged daughter sits next to her in the passenger seat. After the Bubba incident, I decided that accepting too many rides was contrary to the intent of my journey, so I resolved to reach the Tennessee state line by my own two feet. I politely decline the invitation.

"Where you headed?" the woman asks.

"Burkesville," I tell her, not wanting to go into the final destination.

"That's where we live," her daughter pipes up with a smile. "We're just headed up the road a ways, then we're headed right back that way. You sure you don't want to come with us?" Her mom smiles and waits for my answer. I thank them again for their offer but tell them I'm enjoying myself. For once, it's almost true. Something about the landscape growing mountainous excites me, and I look forward to cresting every hill to see how the world changes on the other side. As the minivan pulls away, I decide there are two types of people in the world: those who think every person walking on the side of the road is an axe murderer, and those who don't seem to even notice that a six-foot-five-inch, stinky, bearded man carrying a large stick might potentially be a threat! Now, I'm not saying I was any sort of threat to that woman or her daughter, but what I *am* saying is that if it were *my* daughter, even *I* wouldn't pick me up. Perhaps it's the rural nature of the area, but folks around here seem friendlier than most I ran across last week.

In the tiny town of Marrowbone, I stop at a little convenience store called Marrowbone Community Market to refill my water and buy a Gatorade. On my way out, a man standing by his car watches me pour the gallon jug of water into my hydration bladder and water bottle, and then he heads toward me as I shoulder my pack to resume walking. Something about his directness makes me think at first that he is some kind of plain-clothed official.

"Out walkin'?" he asks.

"Yes, sir." He's wearing a plain khaki shirt and his cell phone strapped to his belt. He seems very much to want to know more about my situation, but he can't find the words. "Headed to Burkesville," I offer. He asks me how far I've walked and how long it's taken me, and I realize as I answer his questions that he's not an official of any kind, just an oddball.

"Just out a' walkin'," he says at last. I'm unclear if it's a question or a statement, but he doesn't follow up on it. I nod in the affirmative, and we just stand there smiling at each other. Finally, when he says nothing more, I tell him that I've got to get back on the road, and he seems very pleased by this. He smiles wider and gives me a deep nod, as if to say, "By all means." As I walk away, I hear him repeat behind me, "Just out a' walkin'," and when I look back from the shoulder, he's still standing in the parking lot watching me. He waves over his head when he sees me looking back at him.

Many hours later, I reach the outskirts of Burkesville, and I stop in another gas station for a Gatorade, drinking it on the curb outside. The sky is darkening again and threatening a thunderstorm, and as I contemplate what to do about it, a man in a utilities truck pulls around from the pump and stops beside me.

"Man," he says with his arm slung out the window, "I have *got* to hear your story."

"Just walking," I tell him, borrowing the line from my friend in Marrowbone. He shakes his head and says he has passed me on Highway 90 four or five times the last couple of days. I relent and tell him I'm headed to Florida. He asks me if I'm packing a gun, and when I say no, he shakes his head disapprovingly.

"Be careful," he says. "I wouldn't be out there without a pistol, even if just for the copperheads and rattlesnakes."

After our chat, I walk through downtown Burkesville to the Riverfront Lodge, which is, indeed, on the Cumberland River, but my walkout room faces the strip mall

parking lot on the other side. I wash my clothes in guest laundry, take a hot shower and short nap, and when I wake up, it's dark out. The parking lot is wet from the thunder-storm, and I'm happy I missed it.

***

In the morning, I walk over the emerald green water of Cumberland River and into the Cumberland Plateau. The road grades increase and the hills rise higher. From the peaks I can see the smooth knobs of the Cumberland Mountains undulating east. Checkout time in the hotel was 11AM, and I took full advantage of it, so I've already lost half a day walking. I intended to walk the fifteen miles into Snow, but another storm begins to brew just before dusk, and due to my late start, I'm still a few miles from town. So, instead of the luxuries of another hotel room, I'm forced to find a secluded spot just off the road to spend the night.

I wander into a large woodlot off the highway and poke around to see if it's secluded. Behind it is an empty, fallow field. To the east is another floodplain, grown up thick like the last one with tall, straight and spindly elm trees, and beyond the floodplain is a charcoal factory still humming with machinery. This one has a fence along the side all the way to the road, so no hopefully no truckers use it as a restroom. With the wind whipping up from the storm, I decide the floodplain may be a bad idea if it were to rain a lot, but it seems safer than beneath the large limbs of the mature woods to the west. I hang my hammock and tarp in preparation for the downpour and cook dinner beneath it, but the storm blows over. The sky drizzles a light rain for five or ten minutes, and then it clears off as dusk fades to night. I hang my pack and boots from the ridgeline just in case, and then I crawl into my hammock and wait for second shift to end in the factory, but the machinery buzzes and hums late into the night.

In the morning, I'm up with the sun, striking camp again before I can get caught,

but resting in the woods and eating breakfast. A blue jay discovers me, swooping and screeching at me, and then flitting off in the branches of immature elms. Each time he crosses past me again, he stops to chastise me for intruding on his space. Overhead, the shadow of a large bird crosses the trees in the early morning sun, but I can't make out if it's a hawk up early or an owl staying out late. A hollow knocking sound alerts me to a woodpecker, and I find him hanging on the underside of one of the mature trees that was felled during a storm and caught by the other trees at a thirty-degree angle. He pecks a bit, then hops around and pecks some more, hanging effortlessly from the underside of the tree.

Reluctantly, I force myself back to the roadway, and I am immediately passed by another chicken truck, then another, and another. Less than a mile from the charcoal plant, a truck full of broilers slows down as it passes me and turns into a drive. The Keystone Food Processing Plant takes almost twenty minutes to walk past, and semi-trucks come and go as I walk. The plant slaughters thousands of chickens a day and processes them for grocery stores and fast food restaurants across the country. Thankfully the EPA regulates wastewater disposal today, so Keystone doesn't dump their offal into streams like the one Dickey canoed, but that doesn't mean there's no waste. Five to ten gallons of water are used to process one averaged-sized chicken, and plants often produce a million or more gallons of wastewater per day. Keystone stores their wastewater in an enormous pond beside their facility, which must be chemically treated and removed of sludge, the particulate organic matter in the wastewater.

Chapter Six: Fields of the Wood

I am walking on State Road 68, in southeastern Tennessee, toward the North Carolina border and thinking about time. I am late, and every step I take shifts my pack from side to side like a swinging pendulum, my weary legs advancing like the ticking hands of a clock.

My back aches from the weight, my feet hurt from the many miles, and my quads burn from the incessant hills. A few hundred miles ago, my left thigh started tingling up around the hip, and numbness radiated down throughout the day. Now it stays numb all the way to the knee. And when I stand back up after taking a rest, my right hip has a hitch so bad that I hobble like an old man for the next mile or so until I can work it out. (It's called "hiker's hip," and apparently it's common on the Appalachian Trail.) I am thirsty, always very thirsty, and carrying water seems to bring diminishing returns: the added weight makes each step more difficult, and I sweat that much more. Finally, to top it all off, I have been out of cell service for several days, and I am at least a day behind schedule to meet Virginia, who is driving down to the little mountain town of Blairsville, Georgia, tomorrow to see me.

The winding mountain roads are steeply graded and lined by dense forests of oak, maple, hickory and pine. The trees grow straight and tall on rocky inclines that ascend just off the shoulder, disappearing beneath a tangle of mountain laurel, or descend treacherously into a dark morass of moss-covered rock beneath waxy rhododendron.

Cars appear suddenly around curves, so I walk on the left-hand side into oncoming traffic, straddling the white fog line or balancing on the edge of the cracking asphalt, ready to leap off at the first hint of an engine's thrum. Most cars whizz past without so much as slowing down. Some honk or yell or even swerve toward me menacingly at the last second after I've stepped off the pavement and balanced precariously on the incline. Some slow down to gawk and rubberneck. A precious few cross into the other lane to

give me a little space, a buffer between the exhaust fumes and the threatening hum of tires in the ninety-some-degree heat.

***

As I think of Virginia and how long it's been since I've spoken to her and how she slept last night and what she might be doing right now, a late-model blue pickup truck pulls up from behind in the eastbound lane and stops beside me.

"Awful hot to be walking," says a white-haired man with his elbow slung out the window. He's chewing an unlit cigar. "You want a ride?"

"Thanks for offering," I say, "but I'm too sweaty to get in your truck."

I only half mean it. I desperately want the ride. I want to feel the cold air conditioning blowing on my face. I want to watch the asphalt slip by without counting every step while I rub feeling into my numb thigh. But mostly I want to make up as much time as I can. I want to get somewhere with cell service so I can call my wife and tell her I'm behind schedule and where she can pick me up tomorrow evening. I want the ride, but I swore off hitchhiking after the Bubba incident back in Kentucky.

"That's alright," the guy in the blue pickup truck says, waving his hand. "You won't hurt nothing." I study him for a second. He seems like a nice person. He's older, wearing a checked blue flannel, a wisp of white beard about his jawline.

"Are you sure, sir?" I ask. "I am *really* sweaty…. And I stink."

This is true. I've been on the road for almost a month now, so I've mostly lost the ability to smell myself, but I know for a fact that every article of clothing I have on is soaked with sweat. I look down at my wet pants clinging to my shins and watch drops of sweat from my arms darken the pavement.

"Yeah, come on," he says, patting the door panel. "I'm just headed up the road a piece to the store, but at least you can cool off a little."

I run around the other side of the truck, tossing my walking stick in the bed, and jump in the passenger side, slinging my enormous pack into my lap and strapping on my seatbelt. The man introduces himself as Joe, and we shake hands.

"I just passed you going the other way," Joe says, "but I had to turn around and go back." I nod. After a second, he keeps going: "Reason is because I bought two bags of ice at the store, but the fella there, he only charged me for one, and I've never stole nothing in my life."

I laugh out loud at this, and Joe smiles. He's proud of himself for the gesture, and it eases my mind a bit. Anybody that honest has to be a good egg, I think.

He asks me where I'm headed, and I tell him Murphy, North Carolina, which is the next town I know before Blairsville. Joe nods.

He asks me my story, and I decide to give him the gist. I tell him who John Muir was and a little bit about retracing his thousand-mile walk.

***

Muir knew a little something about time, particularly about the properties of the pendulum. While he received almost no schooling during his days on the Wisconsin farm, he was a willing learner and voracious reader, but his strict Calvinist father forbid him stay up even five minutes later than the rest of the family to read.

Once when Muir was sixteen or seventeen years old, as a sort of insincere consolation, his father offered that Muir could wake up as early as he liked, errantly assuming that the boy would sleep soundly until morning after a day of hard work on the farm. But Muir jumped out of bed in the dark the following morning, rushed downstairs, and lit a candle in front of the clock to find that he had gotten up at 1:00 A.M., some five hours early. It was too cold for him to read a book, and he knew his father would object to the use of additional firewood, which had to be sawed and chopped and stacked, so instead of

going back to sleep Muir went down to the frigid basement workshop and began tinkering.

Relying only on the knowledge he'd acquired from books, he started working on a slew of inventions, beginning with a working model of a self-setting saw mill. He managed to wake up at or near one o'clock in the morning for the next several months to continue his work, for which he had to construct most of his own tools. He made a fine-tooth saw, brad awls, punches and compasses, and he felt no ill effects during the daytime from his lack of sleep. His father confronted him about getting up in the middle of the night, but Muir cautiously reminded him of his permission, which his father, by principle, could not rescind. Muir continued his work all winter long, culminating with a clock of sorts. He had learned the time laws of pendulums from a book, but he had never seen the inside of a clock, so he dreamt up his own design. He carried bits and pieces to the fields with him in his pockets during the day, stealing any moment he could to carve on them with his folding knife, and he gathered small moraine boulders to hang as drop weights.

Muir didn't know what to call his clock at first, for timekeeping was merely the method of its many functions. Not only did it track the time and strike on the hour like a clock, but it also told the day of the week and the day of the month, it lit a lamp at the appointed hour and connected to his bedstead to literally dump him out of bed at the time of his choosing. When his father confronted him about the curious machine, he called it an "early-rising machine," and the irony that Muir had dragged himself out of bed in the middle of the night for months on end to build a machine for waking himself up early was not lost on his father, who almost burst out laughing. "...If you were only half as zealous," his father told him, "in the study of religion as you are in contriving and whittling these useless, nonsensical things, it would be infinitely better for you."

***

Of course, I don't tell Joe all of this. Mostly I just tell him about my hike.

"You mean you walked all the way here from *Kentucky*?" he asks in disbelief.

"Yes, sir," I say smiling. It's my turn to be proud of myself.

Joe looks at me in shock. He is one of the few people I have told along the way about the full extent of my journey because I am worried I won't be able to finish. But, since Blairsville is just about the halfway point, I feel like I've made a respectable go of it, whether I make it all the way to Florida or not.

Joe asks me a few more questions about my travels, then he tells me his story. He was born and raised right nearby, but he moved to Connecticut, where he lived and worked most of his life. He moved back when he retired and married his second wife, a good woman, he says. His first wife ran around on him, and I think he's still a little bitter about it. (He offers an unsolicited endorsement of divorces in the Dominican Republic: "Quick and legal.") At this, Joe asks me if I've ever been married, and I tell him that, as a matter of fact, I *am* married.

"*Well*," Joe says, a bit taken aback, "she must be a good one if she lets you fool around like *this*." I agree with him and tell him that she is by far the best one I've ever met.

"Then the Lord has blessed us both," Joe says, referring, I guess, to his *second* wife. I smile and nod, and when I do, Joe gets deathly serious with me. He looks me straight in the eye and goes all brass tacks.

"You know, *God* told me to pick you up," he says.

At this, I freeze. I'm not sure what to say. Time seems to slow down. It's not that I don't necessarily believe him, it's just that when someone tells you God told them something, you're never sure exactly how to take it. Does he mean that he's a Christian, and he interprets the Bible as the Word of God, and therefore he is charged with loving his neighbor and showing charity? Or does he mean that God told him this morning over breakfast—pancakes and coffee maybe—to drive around until he finds a hitchhiker he

can gruesomely murder and chop into little pieces to deposit throughout the North Carolina woods? You never can be sure. God, it seems, speaks to just about everyone who claims to believe in Him—even some who don't—and, if you take their word for it, He says some pretty contradictory things.

But I don't want to be dissuasive to Joe—if he means well, that is. I was raised in the Protestant Church, and my wife and I still attend. I have certain frustrations with institutional religion, and Protestantism specifically, like the absurd adherence to literalism, proliferate climate change denial, an astounding lack of diversity, and unwritten socio-political expectations, but I will never escape its grasp on my life. Even so, I've never felt entirely comfortable talking about religion.

"Well," I tell Joe finally, a bit uneasy, "if that's true, then my mother must have told God to tell *you*." Joe chuckles a little at this, and it seems to satisfy him.

While Virginia has been supportive of my walk, my conservative Christian family, on the other hand, was anything but at first. "That's insane!" my mother declared when I finally told her my plans. "Where will you sleep?" And then without waiting for an answer, she turned ferociously on Virginia, probably intuiting (correctly, I might add) that she was the only person who could keep me from going. "And you're *okay* with this?" my mother demanded. Virginia sighed and shot me a pleading expression.

My father knows me better. He didn't argue, but he exuded a general air of disappointment, which seemed to ask why I couldn't just get a normal job that he could be proud of instead of doing weird things that all their friends at church think are hippy or beatnik—or just plain crazy. And my sister thought I'd lost it. "I watch the news," she said. "I *know* what goes on in the world." She called the night before I left to tell me that I "better not die" so she didn't get stuck dealing with our mother all on her own.

But my family came around eventually. They didn't agree with what I was doing, but they realized I was going to do it no matter what, so they tried to support me in their own ways. My mother asked her women's group at church to pray for me, which at first I

found silly since I didn't have cancer or a sick spouse or a dying child. But after battling the blisters and chafing and rural dogs and thunderstorms, I quickly realized I needed all the help I could get. She claimed a certain Psalm as a prayer for my journey, and she has undoubtedly been praying it over and over as I walk.

"How will you go to church?" my mother asked, once she had resigned herself to my stubborn plan.

"Well," I offered, "John Muir once called the hills and groves God's first temples." It's a statement to which I unconditionally ascribe. He called a stream a sanctuary and a heavenly place. He spoke of the preaching of pine trees and the sermons of rocks and bird songs. He called the mountain peaks "Nature's cathedrals, hewn from the living rock" and "adorned with spires and pinnacles." He found "many a mountain page glorious with the writing of God," and claimed that "Christianity and Mountainanity are streams from the same fountain."

"That's *pantheism*," my mother dismissed without the slightest reflection. And she wasn't entirely wrong.

Like myself, Muir was raised in a Protestant home. His father, Daniel, was something of a religious extremist who moved the family to the United States in zealous pursuit of idealistic reformation as preached by Alexander Campbell. The notions of the Campbellites, though initially aimed at unification, contributed to the establishment of several Anabaptist sects, including the non-institutional independent Christian Church in which I was raised.

But unlike my parents, who were loving and nurturing and, to this day, exemplary in almost every way, Muir's father could be cruel and overly demanding. He was a strict disciplinarian who regularly beat Muir and an ascetic who deprived his family in curious ways, sucking the joy out of life. He refused to let Muir read anything that wasn't the Bible or overtly religious texts and went so far as to forbid him read *The Christian Philosopher* on grounds that, more or less, Christians didn't need philosophy.

As soon as Muir escaped his father's house, he understandably began reconsidering the foundation and value of a faith like his father's. Biographer Stephen Fox claims that it was on his long walk to Florida that Muir made a permanent break with Christianity. I'm not sure I can attest to that belief, as Muir maintained a certain temperate piety during and sometime after this trip. But it's true that at some point during his glorious Sabbath, before he reintegrated with civilization in San Francisco after his time in Yosemite, Muir's beliefs certainly drifted away from orthodox Christianity.

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Satisfied with having fulfilled his evangelical obligation, Joe and I ride the rest of the way to the store in a comfortable silence, and I realize along the way that mountain folks have a different definition of what "right up the road" means. They have a different expectation of time and distance. Joe drives ten or twelve miles—over a half a day's walk—before he pulls into a two-story building at a Y in the road.

The sign above the door reads "RAPERS." No apostrophe. No subtitle or explanatory addendum. Just "RAPERS."

"Put your bag there on the bench," Joe says. "Nobody will touch it. Come on in and I'll buy you a cold drink."

I look at the store again. There are no gas pumps, but there's a Mayfield Milk banner, some shopping carts to the side, and a neon Open sign in the window by the double doors.

"Look alive, Tom!" Joe hollers to someone inside as he swings open the door. "I brought you one!" He means a customer, I think, but I'm still a little unnerved. Joe marches on up to the counter, and I follow tentatively. Inside the rows are dense and disorderly. It's a variety store with a little bit of everything in disheveled stacks, from convenience store snacks to fishing weights and lures.

"Listen here, Tom" he says to the man sitting behind the cluttered counter, and then turning to me: "Go on, tell him what you're up to."

I recap what I told Joe, and Tom listens graciously to my quick story, smiling and nodding. Joe tells him how he picked me up near NC-294 on his way back to the store, then he asks if Tom knows why he came back. The two get a big laugh out of the extra bag of ice.

"Well," Joe says, motioning to me as he pulls out his wallet to settle his bill, "I told this one I'd buy him a drink. Go get you something."

I walk around the crowded variety store until I find the refrigerators, then I yell back and ask Joe if he wants anything. He shakes his head and continues his conversation. I pick out a Gatorade from a refrigerator, but it's barely cooler than room temperature.

"You know what you need?" Tom says, back at the counter. "You need some good, clean mountain well water." He stands up and walks behind a three-quarter wall to a personal refrigerator and returns with a few Styrofoam cups in one hand and a jug of water tucked under his other arm, which I notice for the first time is malformed, ending abruptly below the elbow with a small, abnormal and contorted hand. He sets the cups down, holding one steady with his good hand, and pops open the jug, clutching it with his other arm against his abdomen and pouring it by leaning forward a little.

He pours three cups of water, and we all take one. Unlike the Gatorade, the water is ice cold. I gulp it down at once, and he pours me another cup and then another. He tells us that the water came from the well behind his house and that he prefers it to spring water, which can be more easily contaminated.

After the water, Joe tries to buy my drink, but I won't let him. Tom, too, says the drink is on the house, but I insist on paying, and he asks me where I'm headed while he rings up the Gatorade. I tell him Murphy, then Blairsville. Then I backtrack to tell him that Muir went through Murphy but my wife is meeting me in Blairsville tomorrow, and

I'm behind schedule.

"I tell you what," he says, "I get off work at six o'clock. If you haven't made it to Highway 19 by then, I'll take you the rest of the way there."

I thank him for the gesture, assuming that's exactly what it is—merely a gesture—and I tell him how his cold well water hit the spot. I shake Joe's hand, thank him again for the ride, then head out the door, dreading my return to the road.

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Hoisting up my pack from the bench where I left it, I hobble across the grass median at the Y and head southeast on 294. I check my phone as I walk. Still no cell service. It occurs to me to go back to the store and ask Tom to use his phone, but I decide to just hoof it and try to make up some miles. The grades have leveled out a bit, and houses line the road, so cars drive slower and more cautiously, allowing my mind to drift as I walk.

Muir's escape from his father's house came in the form of time, specifically a clock. He continued to contrive and whittle his inventions, and he entered some of his mechanical contraptions, including a few of his clocks, in the Wisconsin State Fair. One of the clocks Muir entered consisted of some eight sets of gears, each hand sawn or whittled and fitted with homemade tools. The design was intended to appease his father. It was shaped like the scythe of Father Time hanging from an oak snag, and the pendulum was a cluster of arrows, symbolizing the flight of time. A smaller scythe hung from the gears and swung in a slicing motion as the clock ticked. As a further memento mori, he inscribed upon it "All Flesh is Grass." It was a reminder of the fleeting nature of life and the impending, ever-present possibility of death.

But Muir saw the fair as more than a place to showcase his novelties. With no financial help from his father, Muir packed up his inventions and bought a ticket on the train to Madison with the intent of beginning a new life for himself. He held hope that

the fair would help him land a job in the city. The clock and other inventions impressed the board at the state fair enough to win him prizemoney of some ten or fifteen dollars, and he met a few inventors as well as the acquaintances that would eventually lead him to the University of Wisconsin. After the fair, an inventor offered Muir room and board and a contract to manufacture one of his thermometers, but the deal fell through. He then took an unpaid assistantship with another inventor, but the man was often absent and the invention floundered.

One day Muir came across a student at the university whom he had met at the fair, and the encounter encouraged Muir to apply. His father, apparently sorry for refusing to give Muir any money when he left the farm, offered him $50, enough for half a year at school, and Muir began his studies in earnest. While at the university, Muir continued crafting his various inventions, and they often betrayed an increasing obsession with time, efficiency and productivity. His next clock was a study desk that, like its predecessor, lit a lamp and dumped him out of bed in the morning, but this one also regimented his studies by pulling a book from a stack, opening it to the proper place, and then snapping it closed and pulling out another after the scheduled duration. "...All of these machines were designed to reduce a man to a machine," wrote Michael Cohen. "Behind them was a need to hoard time which Muir had developed during his days of heavy labor on the farm." Muir had escaped his father's house but not the overwhelming influence of his severity.

When he left school and followed his brother to Canada, he took his work ethic and sense of industry with him. He built the addition to his host's mill and began producing rake and broom handles at a prodigious rate. Again, his model was efficiency. He streamlined procedures to maximize productivity. It was a race against time, and Muir poured himself into it, working long hours, attempting to keep up his studies of botany and natural sciences in the evenings, and sleeping only four or five hours a night.

But it was also in Canada that Muir made a habit of taking long botanizing walks

through the surrounding wilderness. These rambles in nature starkly contrasted the productivity and efficiency of his days at the mill. He was learning, as Whitman wrote, to loaf and invite his soul. And his soul was discovering in plants and in the natural world another scripture, one which predated the Bible and which his father had never preached. Asked to teach a Sunday school class in a nearby congregation, Muir gave his students lectures instead on botany as a means of understanding the Creation. And on a particularly revelatory ramble, Muir came upon the orchid *Calypso borealis* in a nearly impassable swampland, and he was stunned by its presence. "It seemed the most spiritual of all the flower people I had ever met," he later wrote. "I sat down beside it and fairly cried for joy." Encounters such as these were becoming starkly dichotomous and beginning to tempt him away from his incessant labors.

When the mill burned down, Muir made his way back to the states and, rather than return to school, he took another factory job. Indianapolis, however, lacked the surrounding wilderness that had rejuvenated Muir in Canada, and he began to feel trapped by his own talents. He didn't like the city or his lodgings or the rough men that he worked with. "...I suppose that I am doomed to live in some of these noisy commercial centers," he wrote to his sister, and his turmoil in the letter is palpable. "...Unless things change soon, I shall turn my whole mind into that channel."

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I only make it a few miles from that unfortunately-named store before I begin wilting in the late afternoon heat. Either the day has gotten hotter or my body got a little too used to the air conditioning in Joe's truck and Tom's store. I begin looking around for a decent place to dip off of the road and into the shade of the woods for a snack and a water break.

Past a smattering of houses, I come to a cleared drive off the main road. There

is a white stucco entrance arching over the drive with gold letters and tri-colored flags hanging flaccid from their poles in the still air. At the road, concrete tiles on a landscaped incline spell out “Fields of the Wood.” A long, straight drive leads through the entrance, past empty parking lots into a holler between two denuded hills. It looks somewhat surreal, like an abandoned amusement park or an off-season summer camp, a complete anomaly on this winding backroad.

No matter what it is, the forested property, just outside the ornate entry, is unfenced, and I decide to avail myself of the shade, clamoring under the low limbs of a maple and up the hill a few feet, just out of sight of the road. As I nibble on a dried granola bar and guzzle what’s left of the Gatorade, several cars pull into the semi-circle drive and loop around, slowing by the entrance to peer into the holler, apparently as curious as I am by the strange attraction. Some cars drive straight on through the entrance and return a few minutes later.

Eventually, my thirst sated, I doze off in the forest litter, napping in the shade. I am awakened by a couple in a red convertible, their radio playing loudly. They pull into the drive and loop around the circle, peering beyond the entrance. Then they pull back onto the road and loop around again, this time turning into the entrance and disappearing. A few moments later, they pull back out onto the road, crank their radio again and drive away. I can no longer contain my curiosity, so I abandon my pack in the woods and walk up the long drive.

It turns out, Fields of the Wood is a sort of biblical theme park. Just past the entrance, long rows of parking spaces with designated lots for bus parking lie empty. A single car sits outside a building toward the end of the holler, which I assume is a welcome center or gift shop of some kind. On the grassy, clear-cut slope of the northeast hillside, five-foot-tall concrete letters like those at the entrance spell out the world’s largest Ten Commandments in two columns, five commandments on each side, stretching a couple of hundred yards up to the very top of the hill. Straight up the holler, along the drive, there

is a blue-water baptismal pool and a rock and concrete replica of Golgotha Hill and the Garden Tomb, simulacrums of the places where Jesus was crucified and buried.

I decide to climb the cracking concrete steps opposite the drive from Ten Commandment Mountain to get a better look at the park. Signage demarcates it as Prayer Mountain with twenty-nine biblical teachings inscribed on marble tablets and evenly spaced along the 321 concrete steps. About two-thirds of the way up the hill, a wooden sign hangs from a snag on a charred and blackened tree stump about ten feet tall. A weathered wooden sign beside it decries "The Witness Tree" in a medieval Blackletter font. "The Church's banner was displayed on this tree September 7, 1941," the sign reads. And then, without the slightest hint of irony, it continues: "Later a miracle took place when lightning flashed down the tree in a broad swath, skipped across the place where the flag was placed and continued its course to the ground." The miracle, I guess, like the word of God, is all in the interpretation.

As I look out at the world's biggest Ten Commandments stretching up the opposite hillside, I am skeptical of the miracle that this sign claims took place here (and I certainly would've interpreted the incident differently had I placed the flag), but I can't help feeling that a bolt of lightning—apart from the common tropes of an angry God—is as miraculous as anything on this planet: that condensation in the air could form a towering column of cumulonimbus—"fleeting sky mountains," as Muir once called them, "as substantial and significant as the more lasting upheavals of granite beneath them"; that ice could form, suspended within those clouds without falling to the ground; that unseen fields could form, pulsing through the earth and sky and clouds, swirling and separating; that charges could attract with such a burning desperation; and that from ice and water a flash of electric fire bursts forth, running in exactly the opposite direction than it appears to the naked eye.

Just as miraculous, of course, is this ancient chain of mountains I have been walking over the past couple of weeks, among the oldest in the world. Muir may have

spent far more time praising the rough and ragged rock peaks of the Sierras than he ever did these softly rolling mountains, but the Appalachians' lack of those grand, spectacular vistas is due to their age. These mountains are among the oldest in the world, having eroded from elevations as high as the Rockies, and they are now home to some of the most diverse forests on the planet. Eighty different species of trees comprise the eastern broadleaf forests of central Appalachia. And as miraculous as The Witness Tree were all those other trees that covered these hills before Fields of the Wood cut them down. Just as miraculous are the birds and insects and the wildlife that call these hills home. More miraculous than anything mankind might ever build is everything we've already been given, inherited upon birth.

If Muir ventured away from orthodox Christianity on his trip, he never second guessed the existence of a Creator, which Muir found living and breathing and expressing Himself in ever new and magnificent ways through the flora and fauna Muir daily discovered. This, I believe, was the basis for Muir's religious shift. He began to recognize the inherent value of every single being on this planet, as valuable to the whole as to any other being. And that notion contradicted the dominant and burgeoning industrial-capitalist notion that everything else on the planet was merely a resource, existing solely to serve mankind, a notion that was backed by the longstanding interpretation of God's command to take dominion over the land in Genesis. Most men believed that cows existed for milk and steaks, hogs for bacon, chickens for eggs, trees for lumber, and they were often baffled by the existence of organisms they considered useless, like mosquitos. But Muir was beginning to see the possibility that a thing may exist for its own purposes—which were as inherently valuable as man's—and for the purpose of the whole ecosystem.

In 1967 Lynn White Jr. published an article in which he placed a significant portion of burden of the impending ecological crisis our country was then facing—now more than ever—on Protestantism. The article was a watershed moment in environmentalism and ecotheology, inviting decades of argumentation and finger-pointing. White contends

that Western Protestant Christianity fostered an environment that married, for the first time, scientific inquiry with technological development, laying the groundwork for the string of technological revolutions that, unimpeded by the Judeo-Christian notions of dominion over the land, led to our environmental crisis.

In his essay, White attempts to return to the very inception of the West's divergence from the rest of the world. The moment he pinpoints is the emergence of a specific new form of plow in northern Europe around the seventh century. "Early plows, drawn by two oxen, did not normally turn the sod," he explains, "but merely scratched it. Thus, cross-plowing was needed and fields tended to be squarish." However, a new form of plow that began to emerge cut the line of the furrow, sliced under the sod, and turned it all over in one pass. "It attacked the land with such violence that cross-plowing was not needed," White explained, "and fields tended to be shaped in long strips." But the increased drag of this new plow required eight oxen to pull it, more than any peasant could afford. "Thus," White said, "distribution of land was based no longer on the needs of a family but, rather, on the capacity of a power machine to till the earth. Man's relation to the soil was profoundly changed."

Such an attack on the landscape, White believes, could only have arisen from the Judeo-Christian tradition. "What people do about their ecology," he wrote, "depends on what they think about themselves in relation to things around them." Whereas paganism, for example, imbued every natural element with its own spirit, a spirit that had to be placated by man, Christianity on the other hand believes in a universe that has been created for man and a God that has subjected His creation *to* man. "By destroying pagan animism," White wrote, "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects." Or, as Wendell Berry put it, "...perhaps the great disaster of human history is one that happened to or within religion: that is, the conceptual division between the holy and the world, the excerpting of the Creator from the creation."

In a later article, White summed up the crux of his argument thusly: “Men commit their lives to what they consider good. Because Western Christianity developed strong moral approval of technological innovation, more men of talent in the West put more resources, energy and imagination into the advancement of technology than was the case among Greek Christians or indeed any other society, including the Chinese.”

Of course, it is impossible to blame the twists and turns of history on any single urge or to distill culture to a single overarching impetus, but the thesis struck a nerve. In that essay and a follow-up one written in response to the overwhelming criticism he received, White defended his claims with a series of historical analogies that illustrated the church sanction of technological development. Two in particular stood out to me. Among his evidence of the West’s insulated technological development, he posits “that monumental achievement in the history of automation: the weight driven mechanical clock, which appeared in two forms in the early 14th century.” These early mechanical clocks, of course, were the precedents for Muir’s inventions, early contraptions harnessing the regularity of the pendulum. White also describes a fifteenth-century iconography of the Virtues, painted by artists in northern France, wherein the character of Temperance wears a mechanical clock on her head. “The message could scarcely be more emphatic,” he wrote, “technological advance is superlatively virtuous.” Early mechanical clocks were often built by monks, and the church adopted them for their liturgical purposes, like ringing bells for calls to prayer. Their central placement in a town led to the institution of the clock tower, which, combined with the developing Protestant work ethic, led to the complete reinvention of Western society’s time consciousness as it evolves around labor. Time is money, as we now say.

As a Scotch Calvinist riding the wave of the Industrial Revolution, Muir was as much a product of this cultural assertion as of his father’s severity. Yet he was a humanist, strictly charged, he believed, with using his talents to better the world. So time, as much as he tried to harness it with his mechanical contraptions, became his ultimate enemy, and

every day he lived in his vocational quandary he felt time slipping away. The swinging scythe of his clock from the State Fair must have haunted him, cutting away seconds of his life at a time.

"...Unless things change soon," Muir had written to his sister, "I shall turn my whole mind into that channel." But things did change. The accident at the mill left him temporarily blinded, and the long dark days that followed forced him to reconsider the direction his life had thus far taken. On his subsequent thousand-mile walk, he first began voicing that pioneering environmental ethic that every creature on earth was good and valuable in and of itself. This ethic opposed the dominant Judeo-Christian interpretation of the Bible, an anthropocentric view which taught that the world, as well as man, was fallen and therefore must be conquered and controlled.

White ended his essay with a hopeful suggestion: maybe we need a new patron saint of ecology. Since the combination of science and technology gave mankind the power to rule over the world to the extent which we have, he doubted that ecological backlash could be avoided by simply applying more science and technology to our problems. But since the dominant breed of Christianity fostered this sense of superiority and contempt for creation, perhaps the solution lies within Christianity. "Possibly," White said, "we should ponder the greatest radical in Christian history since Christ: St. Francis of Assisi." White's descriptions of St. Francis reminds me of no one so much as John Muir, our patron saint of wilderness. Francis preached to the birds, urging them to praise God, and Muir spoke of sermons in stones, storms, trees and flowers.

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At length, I look at my watch and realize how much time I've lost. It's already well after five o'clock, and I am still some forty miles from Blairsville. I climb back down Prayer Mountain and around the arched entry to retrieve my pack in the woods, strapping it on

and forcing myself back out on the road and into the oncoming traffic.

I make it a couple of miles more when I come to one of those rundown backroads mechanic shops. Double garage doors hang from a cinderblock building, a bare plywood lean-to slumps against one side, crumpled metal and old tires are strewn about the broad gravel lot. I watch warily as I pass, wielding my walking stick and half expecting a vicious dog to lunge out from behind the building. Instead a green pickup truck from behind whips across the lane in front of me and slams on its brakes in the gravel. Rather than pulling up to the shop, it stops by the shoulder, and the driver's door opens. I instinctively bristle for trouble.

"I told you I'd pick you up if you hadn't made it," a man's voice says. Tom hops out of the cab, and I laugh out loud in relief. He pops the bed cover of his truck, and I toss in my pack and stick. In the cab, he has to move several three-ring binders filled with sheet music hymns for his church.

"You only made it 4.3 miles since you left the store," he tells me. He seems concerned with my progress, but I tell him I stopped for a long break. He tells me he'll take me as far as the convenience store at Highway 19, and I express my appreciation. His house with the well is right up the road from there. We talk for a while about his life and his family. The store belongs to his father who is in ill health, so Tom had to take over. He spends his time working in the store or with his church. He tells me about his grandkids and his daughters, each of whom sounds impressively accomplished. One of his daughters, he says, has her PhD in Psychology and works with animal scientists, studying monkey brains to try and understand their impulses.

"I couldn't get her interested in church," he says drolly, "so she went and studied monkeys." He's half joking, but I detect a serious philosophical separation there. Perhaps, like Muir's father, Tom feels his daughter is wasting her time—if not her soul—in scientific study. If one accepts White's thesis of Protestantism's early hand in fostering the Western marriage of science and technology, it's impossible to ignore the irony in that

movement's modern wholesale adoption of the latter while it willingly ignores or refutes the former.

Yet economic interests have long been inextricably tied to the message preached by Christianity, or at least those interests have long tainted the interpretation of that message. While on his long walk, some hundred-or-so miles north of here, just south of Jamestown, Tennessee, Muir stayed at the home of a blacksmith who admonished him when he found out that Muir was unemployed and simply botanizing his way through the South. Offense at the idea of wasted opportunity for labor by the able-bodied is a particularly Puritanical phenomenon. Perhaps it made sense in the context of the socialist community described in the gospels, but then in that arrangement even those who wildly succeeded in their work were turning over all of their profits for the good of the whole, and that's certainly not something we often witness in our capitalist economy.

"You look like a strong-minded man," the blacksmith said, "and surely you are able to do something better than wander over the country and look at weeds and blossoms."

Muir adeptly appealed to religion in reply: "You are a believer in the Bible, are you not?" he asked. "...Do you not remember that Christ told his disciples to 'consider the lilies how they grow,' and compared their beauty with Solomon in all his glory? Now, whose advice am I to take, yours or Christ's?"

The blacksmith was impressed with Muir's argument. "He repeated again and again that I must be a very strong-minded man," Muir wrote, "and admitted that no doubt I was fully justified in picking up blossoms."

Wendell Berry addressed the White thesis in a couple of his popular essays. While he disliked environmentalists' wholesale dismissal of religion, he agreed that Christianity lacks stewardship for the created world. "It is hardly too much to say," Berry wrote, "that most Christian organizations are as happily indifferent to the ecological, cultural, and religious implications of industrial economics as are most industrial organizations."

His words seem just as relevant today. “The certified Christian,” he wrote, “seems just as likely as anyone else to join the military-industrial conspiracy to murder Creation.” Like White, Berry himself is a religious man, but his interpretation of the Bible seeks harmony with the Creation in the same way that Muir was able find a Sunday School moral in a botanical lesson, in the same way that St. Francis found it worthwhile to preach a sermon to birds.

Tom pulls into the parking lot of a convenience store and puts his truck in park. Murphy, North Carolina, is straight down the road I’d been walking, he says, another five or six miles, but Blairsville, Georgia, is south about fifteen miles. I decide to veer off of Muir’s path once again and head straight toward Blairsville. Tom pops the bed topper on his truck for me to get my pack and stick, and I shake his hand and thank him for the ride.

I go into the gas station for another Gatorade, and on my way out my phone dings with several days’ worth of messages, so I sit on an orange road barrel in front of a closed flea market down the street and call my wife for the first time in days. I tell her about my experiences and the kindness of Joe and Tom. I tell her the road I’m on and how far I am from Blairsville and how eager I am to see her.

Energized by our conversation, I walk several more miles in the evening and pitch my hammock in a stand of pine, on a steep hill next to an empty patch of bare earth, where a sign advertises fill dirt. I lay on my back watching the stars through the swaying needles and think about Muir. In a passage from *My First Summer in the Sierra*, he celebrated, “Another glorious Sierra day in which one seems to be dissolved and absorbed and sent pulsing onward we know not where. Life seems neither long nor short, and we take no more heed to save time or make haste than do the trees and stars. This is true freedom, a good practical sort of immortality.”

That practical immortality is in direct affront to the orthodox biblical afterlife. It’s the eternal present. “To hold infinity in the palm of your hand,” as Blake put it, “and eternity in an hour.” And this eternal present is anathema to the memento mori symbolism

behind Muir's scythe clock, which was inhibiting, constraining, regulating like his time under his father's subjugation; and it is anathema to the Campbellite doctrine of forsaking this life for the next. Rather, Muir was taking a very literal interpretation of Christ's words in Luke 17:21: "The Kingdom of God is in your midst," or rather "within you," as the King James renders it, and as Tolstoy professed. In Nature, Muir found heaven on earth, and perhaps I was naive to think I might discover a little bit of it myself by following in his footsteps.

Much has been written about the development of Muir's religious views. Stephen Fox said Muir made a permanent break with Christianity on his long walk while the Presbyterian minister Richard Cartwright Austin calls him a prophet, claiming that Nature served as Muir's Christ, the mediator that brought him to God. Michael Cohen wrote a Buddhist interpretation of Muir's works, and George Sessions called him the "Taoist of the West." Many Protestants denounce him as a pantheist, yet the Episcopal Church added him to their list of holy women and men, celebrating him as a sort of saint. Everyone, it seems, sees in his writing a reflection of their own views. Like the apostle Paul, he became all things to all people so that by any means possible he could preach to them his gospel of wilderness. "I care to live," he wrote at one point, "only to entice people to look at Nature's loveliness." He often faltered in his rhapsodic descriptions of wilderness and admitted he could do it no justice, but that one simply had to see for oneself. In the end, he enticed me to see for myself.

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EDUCATION

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing
University of Kentucky, 2015-2017

Bachelor of Fine Arts in Photography with Secondary Major in English
University of Kentucky, 2001-2006

EXPERIENCE

Marketing Director, April 2010 - August 2015
Merridian Home Furnishings (sic), Louisville, Kentucky

Account Coordinator, July 2007 - April 2010
APS Communications, Lexington, Kentucky

PUBLICATIONS

Gilpin, Chad. "The Art of a Dirty Cow." *Feel It With Your Eyes: Writing Inspired by the University of Kentucky Art Museum.* Factory 500 Press: Lexington, Kentucky. 2016.

Gilpin, Chad. "The Provocation of Massah." *The New Southerner* (Winter 2012): 89.

INVOLVEMENTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

- Senior Editor, *Limestone: Art. Prose. Poetry.*, 2017
- Co-Editor, *Limestone: Art. Prose. Poetry.*, 2016
- Editor and Designer, *Feel It With Your Eyes: Writing Inspired by the University of Kentucky Art Museum*. Factory 500 Press: Lexington, Kentucky. 2016.
- Art Director, *Limestone: Art. Prose. Poetry.,* 2015
- Co-Author, National Geographic Young Explorer Grant, 2009
- National Collegiate Boxing Champion, Light Heavyweight, 2005
- Two-time Collegiate Boxing All-American, 2004-2005
- Dean's List, 2003-2004