

Surrender to the ride's pain. Graft your breath to the pain. Indissoluble from every endurance sport, synonymous with the very word *endurance*, is one fundamental command — breathe pain. Make the pain your breath. Stretch your lungs with pain. Betty, an occasional practitioner of yoga, once gave Andrew a yogic prescription for “nowness.” “Your body is the past; your mind is the future. Your breath unites them in the present.”

Now, every aching moment of now, his bike trip is a debate of pain. Any desire must now win approval from the legs. To want is to sweat.

Any desire is a weight. A small bag of fine white powder. The well-folded map. A contraband novel, that decadent slab of unnourishing, non-warming mass, squats with its corrupt weight in the front right pannier. A second novel would've been dead weight, fire fuel long ago. Worse, Betty's twenty-seven European postcards may not be able to stow away much longer from the priorities of cycling. Each towering hill asks three questions of everything he carries: Water? Food? Warmth? Only the worst hills make him doubt his jar of Nutella.

And what's this? Irregularity, the ultimate vegetarian affront. After days in the saddle, he resents the gluey oatmeal's cling to the inside of the compact pot-cum-bowl. Easily thirty millilitres unused. Mountain Equipment Co-op's got to offer a little camper's rubber spatula. Wouldn't take much space. Just a few grams. Make it a fin on the back of a fork or knife.

The more he eats, the less he hauls. Magic gut: just add endless climbing and five grams of oatmeal will disappear. Dehydrated soups, vedge chili, peanut butter he transferred to a zip-lock bag. If only he could get decent cheese. And wine. Betty's right; France, it should've been. *Rouge ou blanc chaque jour*. We could have travelled together and stayed together. Maybe.

Behind him in Halifax is an MA he started in part to maintain ownership of the Kingston house that hangs, distantly, in front of

him. His father's house. His mother's ex-house. The house his father did not want him to keep. The Andrew-and-Betty house. Study in Halifax to keep a house in Kingston. Betty did notice the twelve hundred kilometres separating house and MA. "Grad school," she said more than once, "snooze button on the alarm clock of life."

Now he hauls one bag on top of another. Jersey pockets, saddlebags, panniers. Bag, bag, bag. Oatmeal in the pannier's top inner pocket, knife in a long jersey pocket, emergency blanket in the bag beneath his saddle. Hydration sack lashed to the rear. Packing and unpacking each night, he's begun to think in three dimensions. The snug grenade of the stove rides behind his right foot. At back left, the mess kit brawls for all space. Clothing — fluid, co-operative, sometimes another wrapped defence against rain — is spread all round, tarped here, wound there. Four condoms, those coins of freedom, entrance tokens to the land of just in case, shuffle around the waterproof matches in a pocket. The things he carries.

Thanks to condoms, he isn't carrying home any surprises to Betty. That is, if he ever sees her again. The Kingston house he's biking to may no longer really be a home, and Betty may not even fly back from her European Grand Tour. They've been apart eight months now, as much his fault as hers, if not more, and yet he still hopes hers hasn't been a Grand Tour of hooded European cock. Dropping E on Ibiza or sunning topless on the Canary Islands, strangers handing her drinks. Please have used a condom.

Sexually transmitted diseases are a contemporary version of the ancient Greek gods, although they cackle and scheme atop a shorter Mount Olympus. Sure-footed Chlamydia wanders on her rocky shore. Lame Gonorrhoea stirs in his dark cave. Herpes on winged sandals doth fly. At least it isn't flying to Kingston.

Habitually, Andrew still thinks of the twice-contested Kingston house as their home, his and Betty's, not his and Stan's — certainly not his parents' — even though that house became too constraining for Betty and too heavy for him. The things he carries.

Think of the knife. Clipping in after breakfast, wobbling up to highway speed, he flicks the chrome pig's tail of the corkscrew open and shut, open and shut as he rides, wondering who thought to thread a removable eyeglasses screwdriver here into its centre. Who stared

up the empty helix and saw millimetres of unused space? Two nights ago, when he sawed most of the handle off his toothbrush to shed a few grams, he wanted to know who invented dental floss. Who saw that contested space and thought of how to reach it?

Barking flies through the air like a fist. Given time, man on bike will outrun a dog. Given how?

Two o'clock, gaining, as tall as a pony. Black and tan fur streaming back from bared teeth, from chomping bark. Down, down, down on the pedals, Andrew is up, standing, pumping, all but leaping from the cage of the frame. Time must become maximum distance. He must spin out his road more quickly than the dog devours his lawn.

Acceleration is easier on four legs. Sans panniers, transported to the Prairie, Andrew could crank up to fifty-five, fifty-seven kilometres an hour on the flats. But not quickly. And never four-belly pregnant, panniers swollen with gear. Legs, legs up and down past side dog, ditch-in-one-leap dog, just-ahead-of-gravel dog.

The human skeleton is bipedal, allowing us to walk upright, freeing our hands and prompting us to see the world more than we smell it. A bicycle de-evolves the body, collapsing the straight angle of torso and thighs into the acutely angled hips of a quadruped. The multiple vertices of a bicycle frame fold your hips and force you to mime your hunting-gathering ancestors. On a bike, you pedal out of the biped.

Saved by a rare stretch of flat Maritime road, he has time enough to regard the dog as another stamp in his passport, another border in car country. Between cities, Halifax cast off behind him and Truro hanging in the distance, he has biked beyond confined dogs. In rural Nova Scotia, few people expect (or tolerate) a pedestrian, let alone a half-breed, someone on a vehicle not in one, someone earning his own speed. In the country, many dogs are left unchained, too slow for cars but fast enough for anyone who steps onto their property. Several touring sites recommend a canister of pepper spray strung off the handlebars or a length of wooden dowel lashed to the top tube.

Without the first barks he'd have been nabbed, teeth into a bare, stubbly calf. *Canis familiaris*. No wolf, no predator, would bark then charge. *Here I am. Danger on your right.* Dogs bark for people, not themselves. We wanted them to scare from a distance. We wanted loud terror, and we got it.