

# 'Walking to Work' Extract from *The Backyard Adventurer* (2021)

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## **Abstract**

This paper is an extract from Beau Miles's *The Backyard Adventurer* (2021) published by Brio Books. It is the text of the voiceover for the corresponding film 'Walking 90 Kms to work' available on Youtube - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-Zyud8xh2c> – Miles redefines adventure through his attempts to transform a mundane part of his life into an adventure. The first part of the text details missing travel and adventure when increasingly locked into a regular lifestyle, before deconstructing the necessity of travelling great distances or pushing oneself to extremes in order to experience adventure. In an attempt to demonstrate his argument, Miles decides to walk to work instead of driving. He documents his mindset and experiences when completing his daily 90km commute from a semi-rural lifestyle block to the inner city campus of the university where he works. The simple idea of "walking to work" reveals how distanced we are from the spaces that surround our transport routes; how insulated we have become from the world around us. The text and film provides an intriguing performance of the philosophy that it articulates.

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## **Alwaysick**

When you find yourself bored of cashews, your pen is running low on ink, and the book you've read three times is starting to wear thin, you're likely in the midst of a long expedition in a place where the nuts are cheap. For me, this was Africa, paddling from Inhambane in Mozambique to Cape Town, South Africa. I've done other trips where the cashews were beer, the book is myself, and the expedition has no set destination and no boundaries other than the outline of a continent. Each adventure, like others, are prescription drugs of the vagabond - a wayfaring, beachcombing type that drifts. Sometimes there's a clear objective, but it's often unclear what the objective means, or where it will get you beyond a longitude-latitude bearing of a dreamed up starting point. Home life shackles of habits and routine are shed for a transient role of being on the move, a meagre budget, and for some- which has more recently become me, a loose script encouraging forks in the road. Hello new lands, new waters, unmet humans and inevitable cock-ups. Arms and legs set the cadence, and the desired experience- whatever that may be, simply follows. Chafe tells you how far you've gone, over time.

Then a chunk of dumbass porridge gets caught in your beard and all of a sudden, the very act of adventure and expeditioning becomes as routine as home life. A fork in the road, or a rough landing on an unnamed beach in a foreign county becomes immediately no more or less engaging than having your shoelaces tied by 06:46 in order to make the 06:52 express- putting you at your desk by 08:05 and drinking your 3rd cup of coffee by 08:15. In your mind, like a distant beach at a particular latitude in a particular county, seeing and experiencing the routine of the 06:52 becomes a place of fixation. All roads lead to it. In what may be a moment, your steely sense of adventure shifts. Wants and desires dictate a new, yet familiar set of day to day. Adventure has not changed, but something in you has.

Eating porridge through the unkempt snags of a five-month beard, posted up in the dunes of a beautifully wild beach you'll probably never see again, has ironically become the new norm. Surprises are hard to come by, as if a constantly different day to day is in fact much of the same. Remarkably, your fluid, changeable life, reaches homeostasis. Pilfering your salty, almost untouched first aid supplies, you barter with the locals for a mirror. The reflection is not a zinc smudged, porridge bearded man with a cracked lip, but instead a cleanly shaved face with diluted freckles framed by the clean collar of a shirt. Of course, I didn't see this reflection- mirrors have no place on an expedition, nor did I barter for a mirror with first aid supplies (I had long ago already bartered the first aid supplies for drinking water). No, my reflection was felt. Actually, I smelt it, unmistakably, 5k offshore in South Africa when a strong westerly brought the smell of eucalypts from plantation forest. Sharing the same latitude and reddish soils of home, the scent was a genuine bolt of sentimentality. For the first time in my life I felt homesick. Deeply. More so, crystal clear, I felt a sickness of being away.

Seven weeks later, in company again when Kiwi mate Jarred Sharples who re-joined the expedition, the harbour master in Cape Town wanted to impound us when we paddled into town via the industrial wharf. Weaving between freighters the size of city blocks, horns blew and sirens rang. 'Fair enough, mate', I said to him on the radio, 'Take me in. I'm done'.

You return home and sit long and still in your favourite spot drinking tea, thinking about your former self. Then shower, which I've long thought to be a place of shedding. In the same 900x900mm capsule of timelessness, looking at the same cracked tile, you're amazed that the last four, fourteen- or five-months' worth of days took place in an immersive chunk as if some kind of hypnotic, drugged-up, ridiculously long day. You watch as your experience goes down the plug.

Regular work resumes and you look at that cracked tile repeatedly without seeing it.

Familiarity and ease take over, as do your old frustrations, which never left home, or you, but are somehow different now. Brushing your teeth at a similar time and heading to the level three toilet at work (where you can leave the stall door open and look through the mid canopy limbs of gum trees) replaces weeks of no toothpaste and an everyday-different, often-edgy place to squat.

Your shadow returns one morning when the 6:52am is cancelled and they replace the rail service with buses, in peak hour. You suddenly yearn to have made the godly gesture of the train not running, not having relied on a big city to do it for you.

### **Moving parts**

Train cancellations can be biblical experiences. When wandering away, miffed at the uselessness of being annoyed, I can't help but think there's a better way. I curse myself for not listening more intently when a large and systematic process changed the shape of my day last time. I ask the flouro people for information about the cancellation, and they tell me, like last time, that they're not sure. I'm left wanting more. Suicide attempt, derailment, train driver left his train keys in his wife's car, I don't really care what the reason is, but I detest not knowing. Blockheaded industrial relations get in the way and ill-communication flows down long lines of temporary bollards and ad-hoc signage. Buses roll in, stinking up the place. People are generally, incredibly, patient, and I'll admit, I see more humanity in train cancellation events than any other kind of social phenomena.

I find myself wanting to run away, literally, from the crowds and the limp procedures that stumble into action. Backing my own body to fix the situation- on foot, by bike, kayak, rollerblades, powered by a hand of bananas and thick loaf of bread by retreating to my animalistic capabilities. Jumping in the car doesn't get much of a thought- knowing fully well that roadblocks, highway patrol, traffic lights, and honking others is much the same as taking the bus in the company of 100 armpits.

At about the same time I started getting antsy about my reliance on a big-city way of thinking- even as a part time urbanite, I began shirking the well-trodden ideology of adventure. Embroiled in the PhD process of being critical of everyone and everything, including yourself, you end up spreading yourself thinly, as if trying to see some kind of self-transparency. Becoming thinner is of course metaphorical, because in reality I was getting considerably fatter; sitting, thinking, writing, not-doing. The thinner and fatter I got, the more I came to rely on the thinking of a few heroes, spreading them thickly across my entire worldview in order to shore up my balding ideas. A feeble balance restored, a season of train cancellations tipped me over the edge again, as did a particular school presentation. What you might call 'Identity fog' rolled in thick and fast, right about the time an emcee for a school assembly introduced me as Beau Miles, Adventurer-pronounced with a hard, capital A. Not outdoor educator, hobby farmer, writer, filmmaker or inventor of the liquorice sandwich. No, I was a bearded outdoor type, skin

full of scars, who gets about in beaten-up woolly jumpers and ties knots in his sleep. Hearing the hard A, kids in the front row stopped playing with their faces and looked vaguely interested, presuming a story would be told about losing a finger to frostbite, or crossing a desert without water or a hat. Lads with messy-on-purpose hair searched me out, finding me in the wings of the stage. I imagine they wondered why I wasn't more tanned. Word for word, the emcee read my bio from an old website, delivering a well-trodden 268-word paragraph to 800 students, a chunk of words I'd written 10 years earlier. It struck me that I'd spent almost two decades as this mystical, self-prescribed figure; an embellished character who runs and paddles, chafes, tells stories and eats roadkill on weekends. At least, that's what it sounded like.

It was strange hearing my words fill the auditorium, voiced by another man. I pictured my younger self pitted against mountain ranges and coastlines testing how far I'd get on a few biscuits and a tube of sunscreen. I sounded clichéd, in search of something or someone, rubbing together sand and dust and salt with body fluids as if some kind of alchemist embalming a thick coating of adventurous spirit. My two great rocks in adult life are being sun smart, and animalistic in flight. Not always wise in my decision making, and never brown, I would cover up, go, and keep going.

### **Hocus, pocus, adventure**

Self-searching journeys of the adventurous kind, like my past expeditions of paddling around the southern coast of Africa and running the Australian Alps, are deeply perceptive, adjustable and personal. My colleagues of adventure education report that adventure is a balancing act of risk vs competence, pitted against one another to meet a required level of engagement. A sense of adventure, peak adventure, or misadventure are said to be felt, death being the tipping point of misadventure, and underwhelming experimentation being the precursor to adventure itself. Yet real risk is largely perceived, subjective and difficult to quantify. That is, real risk is not as objective as people make out. Driving to work, sharing air in train carriages, and tucking in to an all you can eat food buffets resonates with the statistical likelihood that you're more likely to die from the distracted hands of a texting driver, than landing through surf in a sea kayak. Genuine and unlikely risk of harm and death is around us at every turn. Participating in outdoor adventure programs in the U.S for example, is less risky for a student than turning up to their regular school day, and this data from the 90's is before school shootings were a thing. Ancient Greek ideology of aesthetics is to comprehend, see, feel and sense, meaning risk and beauty, as keystone aspects of the adventurer's sensory world, are as flexible as our socially constructed minds can bend.

The point here, on behalf of my academic voice, is that by thinking something is risky, adventurous, potentially misadventurous, beautiful and ugly, it is, regardless of it being true or not. Where we go, what we see, and how we shift and manipulate our understandings of what we're doing is an exemplary power of the human psyche. The trick, of course, is thinking along these lines if for some reason, perhaps having been struck with away sickness, a change is desired.

I'm learning to take notice of this epic power of perception, meaning I've come to the realisation that I can do more in less space, intensely, with fewer tools. Stripping back versions of my day to day, including needs and wants, has me whispering true lies to myself in order to retrain my adventurous vocabulary. I'm cornered into being a better version of my native self; looking, listening and feeling my way over land and water to get somewhere. As socially adapted liars, humans oscillate on a broad scale of how and when we lie. It makes sense to do ourselves a favour and convince our internal voice that home spun adventures can be challenging, insightful, dirty, intense, intimate and all-consuming, even when conducted in seemingly mundane, urban, unnatural, unhygienic, polluted, noisy, everyday places.

### **'Aye to Bee'**

I'm a liquorice man, all the way. Like the Spanish, I'd go to war for the stuff. After a bike crash, I'm equally defensive of something I'm so fond of (me, my flesh), preferring I dig bits of road from my palm rather than allow some tweezer wielding medic needle about in the mess. Yet many prefer to not eat liquorice, or happily hand over their grazed limb to another, repulsed at either, or both. I don't understand non-liquorice people and people who prefer others meddle with their wound, but I'm starting to appreciate you can be either liquorice person or not, or a strange version of both. More so than this, questioning how and why I like liquorice and digging out bits of bark from my hand is a good train of thought to follow. What questioning certain personality traits of yourself does is to boggle yourself with what is truth, knowledge and reality.

Remember when a much bigger person let you win a running race? Never mind the fact that you were the size of the large person's leg at the time, being overwhelmed with and a watertight endorsement from a big person meant you must be the worlds-fastest human, which felt great. Meanwhile, what took place is a big fat lie, much like thinking liquorice is the best food, and self-would management is the only true measure of self-care.

I have a point. At the heart of my growing mid-30's predicament is exploiting my natural curiosity, and in fact questioning mundane non-curiosities within my everyday travel. Relationships with the moving parts of this A to B world is where I find myself chewing up time as one-on-one think tanks, especially on my way to work as I dip in and out of internal monologue as I half listen to the radio. Perhaps my ego wants to play God and strike myself with lightning, as opposed to being handed a playbook of uncontrollable inaction from metro train managers who are up the line and untouchable? In other words, we can subtly lie to ourselves about all manner of day to day presumptions and propositions simply because we can. In doing so, life affirming actions, adventures, curiosities, expertise and engagements can be cheap, close at hand, and have fewer moving parts. You can do more in less space because you don't have to go as far to find what you're looking for. Questioning everything from taste to colour to the concept of love is up for grabs.

The way I figure it, in much the same way liquorice-loving can be culturally inbuilt, wound management and pain thresholds can be taught, winning races (and life!) might be a big trick played on us by others. Of course, this means the trick is on us, the believers, mapping ourselves against fellow humans. The conundrum of 'who am I' and 'why am I me' is mind-boggling, feeling very much like 'I' is a construct that exists in a room full of mirrors, others, and some invisible biology we'll never see nor understand.

To trump myself, fellow commuters and adventurers, I wonder if I think long and hard enough, I can convince myself that commuting to work is high end adventure, laced with all the ingredients of far flung destinations, mountain tops, wide seas and specialised knowledge? Where every so often I set off to think and act in odd ways to challenge my taste, physical thresholds, and trumped up tenets of success? I wonder if the daft bastard responsible for the cancellation of the 06:32 morning would ever think that a bearded bloke down the line would kick off a form of self-serving protest by walking, paddling, horse-riding and wheel chairing his way to work? Is my early life crisis a cliché, half pissed off, half liberated adventure-to-work experiment? Actually, this is still a bit too simple, strictly speaking, as least in a cause and effect procession of one person's cock-up leading to my born again return to the roadside. Nothing is that simple, nor linear.

You see, I've recently taken to reflexivity, which doesn't put much stock in the idea that one thing effects another thing, and then that thing effects another, and so on. And no, it has nothing to do with cults, scientology, or acupuncture, although I'm sure it could. Rather, to be reflexive- and downright philosophical about things, is to consider that one thing affecting another can only take place if the other things exists, therefor both things (elements, aspects, whatever) are of equal value and effective of each other. In other words, cause and effect goes both ways, not in one direction, nor under the assumption that any 'cause' is hierarchically more potent than any likely effect. This means I'm cooking up a new form of adventuring, and adventuring is changing me, festering away in a mongrel, soupy, one-pot-wonder. It's complicated, and tastes like potatoes, which makes sense given my stock is from the mongrel Irish. And of course, Helen has a lot to do with my renewal, but I'll talk more about her later when we actually start dating. In the simplest of ways, walking to work was a curious, seemingly adventurous, practical and timely thing to do. I was ready to explore home.

### **Walking 90km to work, on purpose**

Like all mornings, I take a leak from the deck. I'm relatively awake, as opposed to my night time efforts where autopilot rolls out a vaguely lucid routine, taking particular aim from a particular spot. Both night-time and daytime leaks require me to rest my toes over the edge of the deck from a board that's slightly raised with the bulge of a knot. Every so often, especially after a boozy night, I go for broke and leak into the citrus pots, usually encountering spray-back. When dogs come to visit, they're particularly weary at the front of the house, which, elementally, is as much pheromones as it is timber. They have it right too, the deck represents bipedal territory, a threshold to the human's home, a distinct and pungent in-

between space where green grass grows. A place of coming and going, departure and arrival. For a dog, much like me, it's a place of consequence.

I'm about to leave the marked territory and walk 90.4km to work. First, I will eat some breakfast, cake my exposed skin in a thick lap of sunscreen, drink a jug of water and a full plunger of strong coffee.

Rules for my commute are imperative. Arbitrary rules, tentatively scripting how the experience will unfold. An able-bodied fit bloke who's made the slightly odd decision to walk to work is actually pretty ordinary, so I must believe that the walk holds potential- for me the walker, and if I intend to tell my story, to you the audience. In order to be engaged, I must feel this sense of challenge and curiosity so that my story- passed on through words, images and film, might be told with a sense of artfulness, authenticity and insight. Naturally, I'd take care of myself during the walk itself (this is hard to unlearn), and keep an eye on the time, but not let it get in the way of tangents and weirdness that always happens when you allow it. Whilst I can't alter my course all that much, my freedom lies in thinking what I like, critical of myself, others and the intimacies of roadside life.

Leaving with only the clothes on my back, hat, shoes, and nothing else, I will find and make my own shelter and source all water and food- either found or purchased using money I find. Of course, my inventory, or lack of one, has layers and choices attached to it. The pants are my favourite; ones that bend well at the knees, and they're soft with a stack of loose pockets to store roadside loot; a long sleeve woollen shirt that has a long zipper for climate control; a big and heavy woollen jacket called Bluey, with deep pockets, big buttons and fat collar that is a bit hipster-come-Dracula. On my head will rest an oilskin hat I found on the side of the road in Alaska. My most treasured, important garments, are hats- they keep the sun off my ginger head in a country that bakes under a fierce bombing of UV. My chinstrap, tied through opposing air holes in the sidewalls of the hat is a lace from my first hiking boots. When the strap slides up and lodges under my nose, I'm convinced I'm smelling my feet from 20 years ago. It's a hot and heavy hat choice, but doesn't suffer from droopy-brim when it rains, and stays fast when a wind, or truck, passes by.

What I wear, which is the only kind of equipment I'll have with me, says as much about my walk/film/idea as the things I will not take. Left behind is a micro tent, goose down sleeping bag, sachets of dehydrated super-calorific food, water bottles, undies, socks, sunnies, sunscreen, eating utensils, head torch, knife, first aid, brew kit, liquorice, toilet paper. I'll take a whiteboard marker to deliver lecture material and a small Sony camera as my diary. Mitch and Brett, trusty filmmaking allies, will film me in guerilla ways as I saunter along. I'm not really one for taking breaks, or stopping, but when I do, it'll be for a reason. I expect to walk 50k on the first day, landing me somewhere near a petrol station to buy a snack or two with the money I find. The second day will be a mountaineer start, which is early enough to count as the day before, in order to make the 1pm lecture.

I suspect I'll encounter hi-viz people, to which I'll counter by also wearing hi-viz, or at least hope to, as there always

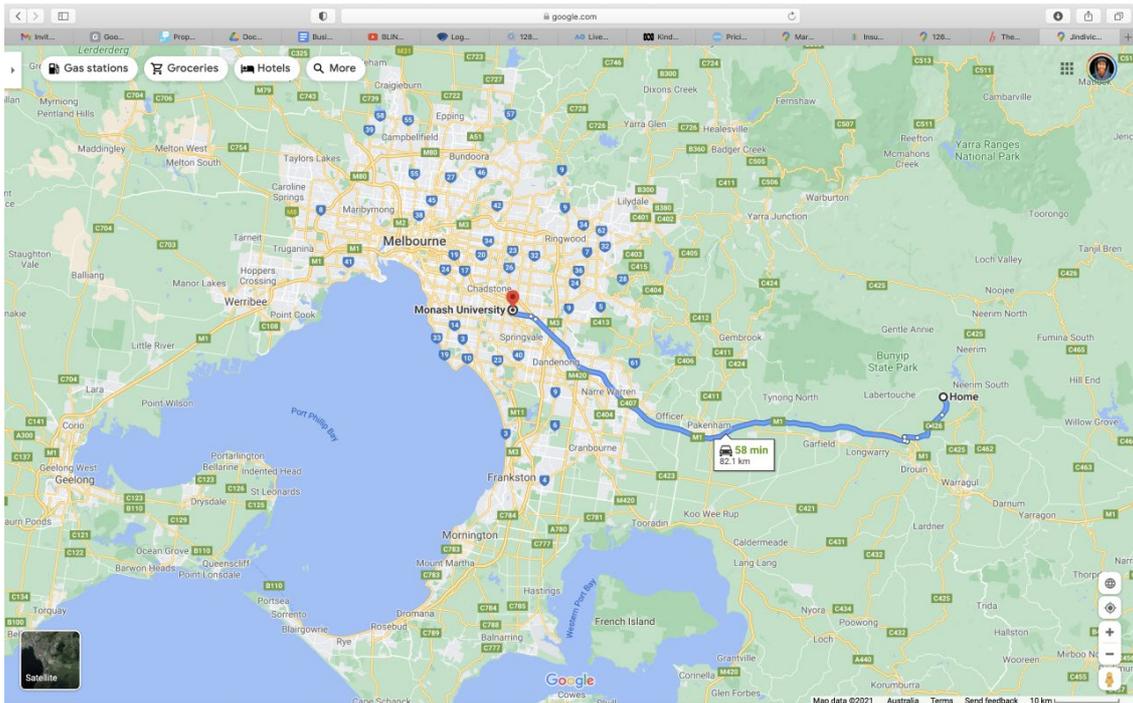
tends to be vests and flags littering roadsides- windswept from the back of ute's and trucker boxes. Regularly, my ute-commute from the farm to the university takes about 70 minutes, and the same when I walk-train-walk from Helen's city apartment. Walking alone, I allowed 30 hours.

### 'Stats'

My walking route is a hybrid mix of what I what I usually drive to work, and at a certain point, how a driver in 1985 would have driven to the same spot. The first 75k is same-same, walker/driver Beau heading down a country road and turning right onto a multi lane highway that heads to Melbourne. I then turn left onto the old highway at my childhood edge of Melbourne, a town now thoroughly part of a mega suburbia, leading me 15.4 km directly to the front gates of Monash. Amazingly, I make two turns for the entire journey. My regular driving route continues on the colossal new highway of 8 lanes, and more on the way. Such mega roads don't go anywhere directly, but you'd never know given how wide and smooth they are, undisturbed by geography or people, you get to where you're going twice as fast. The new highway is also illegal to bipeds given shoulder-less bridges, tunnels, and staggering usage that never really drains of traffic.

I guesstimate that a walker walks' 9% more distance than a car cars'. I'm saying nine instead of ten given I'm making it up and ten sounds too perfect, and nothing- even meat and potatoes walking, is ever that neat. As I'll spend 2900% percent more time walking as opposed to driving to work, what is a hard and unwavering line of intent for wheels is a zippered line of suggestion for the walker. Life afoot is to enact the privilege of the wayfarer, distracted because we can afford to be- smells and sights and sounds that take us slightly, always, off course.

A car travelling at 100k an hour, for example, takes a remarkably direct line given unhuman speed doesn't allow drivers to take incidental right angles to avoid a cardboard box, or non-human life. When a car kills something, drifts close to a corpse, or dismembers an animal they have done so with the slightest of deviation. By comparison, I make obtuse angles when I find myself atop half a fox, sheep entrails or a cat. Hand mashed over face I often stop, shuffling around the past life to satisfy bloody curiosities, gathering up distance in my feet. I'm also gripped by gold fever, obsessively deviating towards the glint of bottle tops in the hope of them being the one- and two-dollar coins of the Australian currency, given money hunting for this walk is much like foraging for blackberries, which I'll also do.



**Fig. 1:** Screenshot of my walk to work route.  
Source: Google Maps.

As I wear a watch with three arms and 12 numbers, ticking along to energy kinetically sapped from my moving body, which I love the thought of, and I'm leaving the phone at home, I won't have a satellite mapping my distance or route. I'm not much into something so far away telling me about my presence, especially when I have a closer to home intergalactic measuring device that does much the same thing.

Knowing that my stride on flat ground, walking with a medium level of motivation, meaning I've got somewhere to go, but I'm not running late, averages out at 85cm per step, I will take 117,64 steps, give or take a few. Of course, this is another beausism statistic, but it's likely pretty close, and does say two things. First, I'm talking about a genuine step/pace that gains a staggeringly consistent chunk of forwardness. That is, my 117,000 thousand steps are sending me 100,000m forward, not three laps around a supermarket and an evening lap of the block with a dog. I once wore a pedometer during a lacklustre workday and clocked up 11,200 steps doing very little; leak from deck (12m); make breakfast (50m); check the rain gauge (100m); put on pants (8m); walk to car (50m); then to office (300m); take two dozen trips to the tearoom, photocopier and bathroom (let's say 1000m), back to car (300m); supermarket for bananas (150m); check rain gauge, then letterbox (250m); make dinner (25m); pace about the place wishing I'd gone for a run (100m); brush teeth (8m) leak from deck (12m). This comes in at 2361m, which at a mildly motivated pace of 85cm per stride, should have me at 2777.6 paces. I've come to mistrust pedometers for any great measure of forwardness, and instead think of them as going up and down, a lot. For me it must have been all that bouncing on a swiss ball and driving on a road with potholes in a ute that needs new springs.

The distance of the 'foot', needless to say, is a good reminder to how humans travel distance over time. I think a lot about paces and steps and the length of my stride because I'm a runner who counts without knowing, much like I hum to some songs and not others based on a secret algorithm I don't really understand. And, I was taught. My great mate Ponch, halfway up a hill somewhere in the deep bush of Australia instructed a bunch of students to easily, and deliberately, as if we weren't counting at all, count as we walked. It was double think, counting while trying not to count, which of course meant counting. Over the course of a few days, doing this in chunks, and referencing our figures against known quantities of landscape (distance, elevation, type of terrain), we started to understand what our bodies were doing through numbers.

I was taught the invaluable lesson of gauging how my particular set of legs travelled across various surfaces of the earth, over time. I have repeated this Metrophone way of thinking with my students for years. The guide must know where they are in the world at all times. No vagaries, not really, should enter their navigational world when you're charged with the care of others. You might not always know where you are, but you must never be lost. Like so many tacit forms of knowledge, acute and embodied navigation is felt, such as knowing how many paces you take in a minute, then an hour. At first you use a watch to learn this, and then you eventually know how far you've come based on perhaps the position of the sun, if chafe has set in on a particular spot, or if you feel like a banana, or not. By knowing your pace and shifting your pace-scale over different terrains, you can gauge with eerie accuracy how far your legs take you across shifting shadows of the day.

Like many runners, and in fact any human who pays attention to how long it takes their arm and leg wielding body to sweat themselves across the skin of the earth, I

have an intimate relationship to distance. In-touch at ground level means I often get turned about when getting off a plane, especially on long haul flights that cross the equator. When I land the sun is on the wrong side of the sky, and the air tells my skin it's the wrong season. I lose my sense of proportion, shadows going the wrong way and streams heading uphill. The world in opposites makes me feel a little drunk, and stupid, an indecisive version of myself. I eventually combobulate, but I can't rush it. I simply need to wobble around for a while bumping into things, handing the map to Helen.

The mile however has made it to DNA level, forever knowing what 1609m feels like through my feet, although technically, I think of the mile as 1.6km so have to think a little harder about the timeframe of a fraction. It comes in at about 1200 paces of medium paced run, or 2200 medium paced walking strides, altering this algorithm the faster or slower I go, the mile is like heartbeats that secretly dictate the music we like. I presume footfalls are counted and cross-check with time without knowing it, much like enjoying one song over another based-on a pulsating muscle in our chest.

### **'Leave, dammit'**

Striding out across the lawn was genuinely exciting. First moves are always exciting. You tend to be full; energy, time, optimism, belly at capacity. If you've timed it right and the coffee was strong enough, only the bladder and bowel go along empty.

Like arms when paddling, I forgot about the key drivers of the initiative- my legs, by the time I passed the two concrete pillars either side of my driveway. We tend to be guided by our eyes when our body rolls out something ordinary like walking. I don't think about my legs enough, and how lucky I am to have a strong pair that take me wherever I care to go. As with the two pillars beneath me, I hadn't given the gate posts a lot of thought either, not since standing the heavy buggers upright years ago.

Passing through the great chunks of concrete at a walk, and not in the driver's seat of a car, aboard my tractor, or running, was unusual. I found myself still thinking about the posts 15 meters up the road, as if they were still within my aura, which they were. Slow to leave the property, I was thinking like a slowly pulled band aid, intensifying and lengthening what was usually so quick. I'd purchased the farmer-made concrete posts at a clearing sale a few years ago, busting my gut to get them into my trailer. Foot by foot thick, six feet tall, with gently sloping pyramids on each top, they were in fact pretty pompous. I thought this when passing them, tapping one on the way through as walkers do, signing off. Another slowism crept in fifty meters past the gates when I noticed a collection of a dozen or so beer cans, scattered within a two-metre radius of a road marker. I paused for a moment to scrutinize the crime scene, where I pictured a bastard on his way home from work, tossing repeatedly and habitually his empties out the window. I say 'he' because I've never thought of litterers as women. I just can't fathom the thought that a female would throw stuff from a moving car, which urks me, because it goes against the grain of feminism. That is, women can be as good and as bad as men, although I'm not sure I believe this. If I was to think of mid-20th century

innovations of war I struggle to think that any sane woman would ever create, then drop an Atomic bomb. It seems to go against every motherly instinct I've ever witnessed. By the same token, it worries me to think this, excluding big-evils to be made by men, but it's a compelling thought. The pile of cans reminds me of dead-end country roads that service half a dozen farms. lined with old Gums, dead end-dirt roads are the only kind of road I'll happily run out-and-back on given the company and shade of the trees. Otherwise, I run loops. I'm dumfounded when I see rubbish on the sides of such roads. Drains paralleling wheel ruts collect neat alleyways of flotsam makes no sense to me given the majority of road users are people who live on the road, occupying one of the farms. in what seems incidental rubbish on a dead-end road seems like a perfect tragedy of the commons.

Concrete posts and bad people occupy my thoughts for the next few minutes, warming me up. My legs meanwhile, forgotten again, truck on towards the tiny hamlet of Jindivick, over the hill and up the rise. Front posts to Jindivick is 2.2k. Jindivick to work is 88.2k.

Stepping out smooth strides on an unnaturally flat and linear surface, I travelled at an average of 5km an hour. As Rebecca Solnit so wonderfully wrote, 'mind and feet operate at the same pace', rhythmically, going somewhere. I narrated silently my one-act play, not realising the bubble I was in until a car honked or I left the highway for long enough to hear anything but the oppressive sound of traffic. It genuinely felt a little edgy, leaving with so little.

There were several farmers on tractors during the initial country roads, people filling their cars with petrol at service stations, and I noticed a woman tending her garden in the suburbs when I sit to eat a discarded orange. Yet the walking, social, sporting, out-of-doors and active human, was almost completely missing. Not even a pair of French cycle tourists passed by in either direction.

Danger, at times, is very real. When the roadside shoulder vanishes at bridges means I was three-feet away from high-speed traffic. Water was circumspect from all creeks, streams and drains, of which I constantly cross and were rarely named, whilst the always-present sun highlighted the fact that I walked in a world with no canopy, no shade for my fair skin. The modern road is stripped of vegetation each side, ready to take another swathe of lanes. Unlike many forms of wilderness, there was very little food on offer. I had presumed from thousands of miles of running that I'd simply stumble upon half eaten takeaway and bruised bananas, but I found almost nothing. Heading away from the roadside any great distance was fruitless also. Stark, often-treeless paddocks stretched either side of me offering only cock-foot and rye grasses, boxed away in countless barbwire fences. Discarded cola drinks containing their final moments of fizz were my principle form of calories and hydration. Having weighted up the likelihood of drinking down someone's trace elements of Hep C, I figured the carbonic acid in fizzy drinks would have long killed off any funk. Drinkable water, the most basic of human needs, was unavailable from natural means. The world of creek's, swamps and rivers were shifted, damned, sick, dry, or simply inaccessible. It was not lost on me that one of the busiest human thoroughfare zones in my country lacked the most basic element of sustaining human needs.

I felt immediately the effect of pace. Rarely do I walk on the roads I drive. I noticed the cracked edges of road several kilometres from my house, deep into dairy country- a result of milk trucks grinding up the road at 10-15 times faster than I was traveling. Never had I looked so closely at the glacial like qualities of bitumen, whittling away from the edges. Having run every road within 20km of home, many times, humping along at two or three times faster than a walk means that my underfoot knowledge of the world is slightly out of focus. A runner looks ahead, and a driver off into the distance. A walker looks everywhere, able to focus on the world at any length. To run is an act of mid-sight blur. I thought of this sight/focus vs insight/knowledge scale while walking, and it made sense why the baby crawls, taking in the surface of the world intimately, looking and tasting everything within range of their stumpy little arms in order to eventually look at the broad. The older we get, the longer our limbs grown and the faster our means of transport means we see wider, but not necessarily more..

Weird and wonderful, at times disturbing, items of roadside rubbish were everywhere. I collected and spent the entire Australian currency in coins, rummaged through a box of Arnold Schwarzenegger movies on VHS, and wondered who owned, momentarily, each piece of rubbish I picked up. When returning the rubbish to the roadside I felt as if I had violated my moral code, as if I was now throwing it away, having momentarily taken ownership. Bolts, bricks, milled timber, roofing tiles and drill bits set me off thinking about the world's material ages; stone to bronze to iron, before the overwhelming prince of darkness emerged in endless forms of plastic. Synthetic concoctions never before mixed by nature strewn along our pathways with irreverence was like a beautifully noxious, un-seasonal flower. The outfall was staggering, a full spectrum of packaging eddied into culverts and shaken into size order- the larger and blunt items layered on top. Shoes, mostly women's of a mostly medium size were common. A shiny object would attract my attention at times, as would a bold, unnatural colour. Pure shapes of a circle, triangle and square, or overtly lineal or straight items would divert my eye from the chaotic curves of the Australian bush. Picking through an assortment of porn, wallets, and ill humanity (asbestos, animal parts and suspiciously lumpy bags that I presumed to be chopped up humans) mapped the tale of one right turn and one left turn over two days, and how I, like the rubbish I found, am part of this complex mega highway.

### Roadside sleep

During my dark night, strapped within a king-size duvet, layered in carpet insulation, housing wrap, and several towels, I slept in short but intense bursts. Soft rain felt oddly comforting when it passed by just after midnight. Small rivulets ran down the sides of my swag and collected beneath me in folds, as if tucking me in. Picking my place to sleep was not a fickle decision. Having hitchhiked laps of Ireland and Alaska on a micro budget in years gone by, whereby every penny goes towards food only, I was well versed at sleeping in obviously unseen places. That is, sleeping in places that no one would think a person would sleep, and thus garnering no interest from other sleepers, police, locals, publicans, posties or anyone else who tends to see what others do not. Knowing the

route I'd walk to work in advance, I'd picked out a few spots that provided me with blatant cover from occasional, chance bipeds. Or, just as expected, a male driver pulling over to take a leak. If wild animals sniff me out, I'm likely doing something right, far enough from a beaten path while smelling earthy and raw. I have long thought about the sanctity of underwhelming, secretive, left alone places that are lucky enough to have a few key ingredients that make them of little interest to humans. First, such places have sketchy access; no path, no road, and are often blocked by the barbs of nature or wire. True enough, poor access can in fact make a place even more appealing to adventurous sorts, or dirtbags, especially when barriers hold back treasures like animals to hunt, chainsaws to steal and high places with wide view to lose your virginity. People sniff these places out to make loud noises and profit in some way, thinking that no one else in the world knows of their presence, which is often true, especially in Australia where many of our spaces are staggeringly vast, left to the few who care to visit on good terms.

An inviting place to sleep needs to get right to the point. You don't want to spend half the night looking for the perfect nook up dark cul-de-sac or forgotten creek. I aim for right under the nose of many, parallel to a path that leads somewhere, but far enough away to have full ownership of my sounds. Nesting should be carried out with minimal light, but without fear of being caught out if you fart in your sleep.

Go to a place that no one really owns- such as the wide variety of scrappy government lands that insulate roads, powerlines, drains, etc. Lay where you can see unlikely human approaches, but where they can't see you, meaning you're in a place of darkness and they're in a place of light. If someone does suspect a body lying in the murk and makes their way towards you, you've seen them long before they think they've seen you, retreating via a back route. Sleeping in such spots is often half-sleep, upward ear and eye half open to the world of unknowns as if you're a new mother coming to terms with the coos and cries of a shiny new infant.

I refined this simple set of rules while hitchhiking around Ireland, staying in a wonderful array of railway sidings, stairwells, roundabouts, and graveyards. After three weeks of odd sleeping places, my last week in Ireland was spent in a different lock-up each night at tiny, house-like, police stations. Sharing a pint one evening with a friendly gentleman, waxing on about cows and rock fences and lack of an ozone later in Australia, we got around to talking about my travels. Clearly, I was a blow in. When I pointed to my large back-pack in the doorway, the man – without turning to look at the bag, knew all about the flotsam hanging off the sides (camera kit), colour and brand. I suspected the bloke was a detective. He asked where I was staying, to which I responded 'somewhere out of sight', knowing fulling well it was the hulking shadows of unused train carriages I'd seen on the edge of town. 'I see', he says, before taking a long and breathless sip of his Guinness. 'Tell ya what, lad, I'm te loca coppa in town and can putcha up in ta clink if ya like?' 'Great', I say, happy that I'd picked my man, going onto sleep the night on the hard bench of a warm police cell. I repeated the act for another week as I got passed on from one plain clothed cop to the next.

Bedding by the roadside, halfway between home and work, was within a thick stand of gorse, a horrific introduced weed with torturous spikes, imported to keep stock within the confines of a paddock. It tends to grown in veins, much like a maze is planted, with slinky alleyways and tight bends that lead to a poked eye and swearing. Laying down my roadside-made swag, a crude but excellent roll of carpet underlay and housing insulation cut into shape using a shattered edge of a bottle as my knife, I lay down my roadside made swag in a gorse hallway with barbed wire fence angling off at the head of me. Purgatory is a perfect place to sleep. Godly green light spews from a giant advertising beacon of a BP service station, yet it's inky black at ground level providing me out looker eyes. I feel safe. Eyes half close at about 10pm and half open again at 3:40am. Time to go.

### Fringe dwelling

Eight and a half hours later, arriving at the lecture-come-workshop, the always moving, continually onward experience took on a feeling of loss- stopping dead after so much forward motion. I rarely, for example, looked back. One doesn't tend to look behind them with the prospect of a destination and a long white line to follow. The indulgent capacity to stop and think beyond the moment exists mostly in the aftermath, and even then, you often have to make a mental note to do so. Having returned to a bed, food and company, my first instinct was a brief feeling of guilt for being idle. Inevitably, and rationally, this turned into appreciating that even at walking pace, and even in such a short space of time, the intricate, fragmentary and immersive nature of my commute would take time to decipher. Although I tried.

My lecture was full of immediacy. Sun cracked lip, blistered feet, I stank to high heaven. Heat radiated from my heel from a raised blister the size and thickness of a bottle top. I was beyond hobbling, owning the feel-good-pain, like a curious toothache that feels better when you bite down. Stories I told were as close to me as any storytelling I've ever done. It was as if my showerless state, soiled clothing and blooming freckles meant I looked like my words. I represented a mirror of the road, which was precisely the point, delivering a lecture about adventure from within the journey itself.

For the record, I was 45 minutes early, and would have been earlier if I had not sat beneath a pre-colony gumtree on the edge of Melbourne. Knowing that I'd walked all but 8k of the distance, and could slow down, or rest, the grand old tree with the perfect angle of growth-pushed away in the prevailing westerly wind, was too good to pass up. The great trunk felt heavy under my spine. I knew of course that I felt heavy against it, but as an older, somehow still standing tree among a cultivated landscape of sports fields, my resting spot represented a small piece of human atonement. And it felt good, really good, to take a short break in such company. I no longer expect to see trees with a long story to tell so close to a big road, especially nested in the suburbs. I reflected on the intimate transect I was currently embodying, farm to city, revealing a cross section of human actions over-time. Eras, led by particular ways of thinking is everywhere, and loud. Like my own habit of not looking where I've come from- especially when running and paddling, the cross-sectional

insight of my commute revealed a species getting fuller, faster, busier and bolder. But a species, I fear, that looks ahead with twice as much interest than behind. I've come to learn a lot more about myself, my family, and the world by being nose-y of history, but popular culture and ego seems to set ourselves out in front with an endless supply of carrots.

Leaning against that old gum, wanting to stay, but fancying I wash my face before the lecture, I got to my now sore feet, and trotted on. Seeing a raven pick through the wrappers of an overflowing bin, spreading the contents in an artful smattering, my overriding thought was that humans sure were busy and industrious and capable, but I'm not sure such talents translated to being good.

My entire walking experience was an expose of sensory, human intervention, from noise to smell to vision. By the time I left the cowshit farmlands my unexpected impression was fakery of green and velvet beauty. My clear-felled home range kept pretty and alive by ancient dirt and high rainfall. At first glance, which is a view I've held for most of my life, farmlands are pretty and natural and nice, but they are far from natural, and a skewed version of pretty based on being a country kid that knew no better.. The highway was more obviously shaped; hard edged, sharp and loud. Every kilometre towards the city was another notch of in-your-face human activity and pressure. Every car, house, culvert full of rubbish, and blown out explosion of tyre rubber represented humans in a rush. Thin strips of land sandwiching black strips of road, owned by no one and everyone collects up accidental and on-purpose items of passing. People that don't know how to tie knots have flappy tarps spewing out flotsam so that only half a load remains when they arrive at their destination, which I often think is on purpose.

Highway noise is constant and oppressive, yet irrelevant when I wasn't thinking about it. Every so often the tinnitus moan of rubber and combustion was shattered with a car horn, often accompanied by a hooting jeer and fist pump from an open car window. I would swear loudly at the driver for having scared the shit out of me, telling myself I'd be happy to fight if they pulled over and half wishing they would I understood road rage from a completely new angle- not biker or fellow motorist, but a biped in categorized non-human space. When mindful of the noise, I shoved a small chunk of carpet underlay into each ear, as if blocking out road noise would encourage my inside noises come to the surface, which they did. Two soundtracks rolled out; a limitless and unsaid voiceover ticking over to the chug of my organs; heart/pulse, lungs/breathing; and the sound my clothes and feet repeating themselves. It turns out my own combustion was as noisy as the road.

A small sense of calm ensued until I came upon a penis. Stopping dead, wary of the object, I noticed immediately how interesting the moment was. The scene took on a fantastic sense of the Avant-garde. Hued morning sun poked through distant trees, providing clean wedges of light within a muted highway world of black and grey. I stood within a thin wedge of the new day, as if subtly illuminating man and object for a photo shoot: 'Man in red scarf holds penis aside peak-hour highway in first light of day'. I imagine Francophiles, enthralled by artfulness and oddity would buy a photo of that moment. Timing was

everything. Half an hour earlier I'd stopped long enough in the swale of an emergency pullover bay to notice the roadside light go out. As the light flickered, a raft of moths dissipated, no longer in lust for artificial Sun, dissipating in the diluted world of a cloudy day.

Bird spotters, wound up in their own silence and trance, see, and not just hear, trees fall in the woods, much like truckers and posties see stammering, or instant, street lights go out. Witnessing either as a walker is rare because you get caught up in your own sounds, often looking at feet, or ground where feet will land. When I saw the moths disband I wondered if I was a little off, reminding me of seeing a gigantic Gray Whale off the tip of Africa in rough seas, which was like an up-close mountain range coming and going in a moment, leaving me questioning what I thought I saw.

Seeing the real and fake suns compete for the collective pattern of a winged insect is an immensely interesting experience, as is seeing a phallic body-part that for a split second could have been real. Seeing a whale at sea is a little different, predictably shocking if it actually happened. By the side of a highway, artful, poetic blends of human-animal natures in the one scene is beautiful when you have time to see it, then think about it, which onward and simplistic focus allows. It turns out the famous piece of anatomy was a giant novelty straw, made I presume for a bride-to-be. No doubt a flock of close friends took photos on their phones when the impractical straw was in use, sending twerks and tweets via social media to people who didn't get an invite to the gig. I image the person on the other end of the straw had a pretty good time, but couldn't bear to take the rite-of-passage item home with them, winding down the window instead.

Pseudo swaggie among eight lanes of combustion offered an authenticated view of a world to compare close to the surface terms that I often think about, teach, or despise. After 24 hours by the roadside, I'd stumbled upon a profound sense of wilderness, converging beauty, nature, and a disappointed human reflection. Having stood in the depths of declared wilderness 'uninterrupted by human intervention', I compare the wild-nature scene to regular home life, and this commute, in much the same way. That is to say, I've come to compare versions of wilderness to cultivated forms of domesticity, which by most people's thinking, are at different ends of the spectrum.

Every scene we experience filters through as a comparison to something, somewhere or someone. I tend to do so with a strong sense of optimism, as I fear I'd slip into some form of depression if I didn't. Walking along a highway, for example, could be a horrible experience unless a street light, moths and one-persons bad choice didn't offer me moments of beauty, wildness, and insight.

Granted, I was hungry, which means I was looking for moments like this. With an overabundance of intent, I scrutinized the scene as a distraction, as if reaching out, making art. Doing so means I think less about my grumbling stomach. As the sun broke free of objects on the horizon, no longer splitting up light into hallways and spikes, one of the world's most rapidly expanding urban corridors gave me a sense of solitude no less powerful than a vast desert. Wilderness of some kind, the strangeness of this dichotomous, hard landscape engaged intimacies of a very different nature. It felt impossible to listen effortlessly, as tends to be the case in classical, natural wilderness. Not a single sign or sound of animal movement existed by the highway, although roadkill was everywhere, strewn and separated by speed. Instead, the occasional dog, not unlike the occasional dog owner, barked at me aggressively from the back of a ute. I yelled back at one stage and at the top of my lungs, insulted at the invasion of my bubble. A dog's bark was not long drowned out by the speed of its owner and the swoosh of rubber from another dozen cars. Yet remarkably, a sense of the wild remains in small left-alone chunks. Swamps and backwaters not worth draining or destroying hold on, saved perhaps as a future easement or human thoroughfare. These small and rare spots are where ancient ways still persist, a touch of biodiversity and chaos, which is ironically a place of order.

Malcolm Turnbull, one of our many prime ministers in the last 10 years, was about 12 hours away from being voted out of his seat the same day a photo spread of me walking 90km to work made the national papers. More people looked over my story than inquiring about poor Malcolm. 'Man walks 90km to work', was the most read article that day across the major news agency in Australia. Part chuffed, part surprised, it made me aware of how attractive odd non-news stories are to the scan, click and curios public. Guaranteed each day is a host of expected news in much the same form; gristly deaths, curious deaths, wars, environmental catastrophes, sports teams booming and busting, a storm, sun, good looking people doing good and bad things. A bloke walking a long way to work tends to get attention because it's not every day a bloke walks that far to somewhere so ordinary. By default of being just a little different, my walk stuck out.

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