

I WENT FOR A DRIVE

by

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## AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.



I couldn't possibly put  
enough quotes around the word

## “ABSTRACT”

The place is a Tower much like the ones in Cambridge I've been so fascinated by, the ones I'm drawn to when I need a break.

What makes this Tower of interest is that it just so happens to be the tallest thing in the western hemisphere. Better yet, it's also located in perhaps the flattest state in the US: North Dakota—second only to Florida. This place, where the tallest structure meets the flattest land, is where I want to go. North Dakota also happens to be the place where you can find the longest stretch of laser-straight road—192 kilometers running between the I-29 south of Fargo and Highway 30, into the city of Streeter, population 170, as of the 2010 census.

I seem to be drawn to these extremes of mundanity—maybe because nothing is ever really mundane if you capture it just right. And so I'm off on a boring trip to take plain photos of mundane objects in bland landscapes. One is a Tower. The other is a Road.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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And most of all, to Beth and Karen, for letting me so openly into your lives, for the coffee and cookies, for the unforgettable conversation, and for keeping in touch. This is for you.

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Pl. 139	2017 11 30 16:33 47°20'31.8"N 97°17'00.2"W.....	247
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Sublimity only remains a defensible category  
so long as the philosopher was young and naive.

— Christopher Hussey  
*The Picturesque*

Roadrunner, roadrunner  
going faster miles an hour  
gonna drive past the Stop 'n' Shop  
with the radio on.

— The Modern Lovers  
*Roadrunner*



← TRANSMISSION RADIUS 90 km

---

0 km

ND HYW-46



▲  
KVLV-TV



198 km



# I WENT FOR A DRIVE



*I'm lying on the hard 'bed' of the MRI machine waiting for instructions over the intercom from the technician in the next room. Let those quotation marks really sink in. I'm to lie here motionless for an hour. It's been thirty minutes and my body is screaming.*

*"Okay, the next scan will last three minutes. We're going to do your orbits, so please close your eyes and try to look straight ahead."*

*Wait. What? I close my eyes and try to look straight ahead. Though my head is clamped in an ergonomically-questionable vise, and the vise is positioned inside a loud plastic donut<sup>(1)</sup>, a clever set of mirrors allows me to look down the length of my body, through the MRI room, and through the window into the technician's office. This is doing wonders for my claustrophobia, a condition I currently don't and never have suffered from. Maybe they could lose the mirror and find a mattress. I suppose the mirror helps me look straight ahead, with my eyes closed... Something is off. Maybe it's just me, but for the sake of this story, try looking at something twenty or so feet away. Now close your eyes for three minutes. Or twenty seconds. Then open your eyes. Are you still looking at the same spot?*

<sup>1</sup> If you've never had an MRI, you may not know just how fantastically loud they can be. Listening to Fuck Buttons (actual band name) is a good approximation.

*Are you like me—eyes wide, cross-eyed, panicked, dashing to focus on that spot once again, hoping no one noticed? Regardless of your own results, I think you can imagine the situation I'm in.*

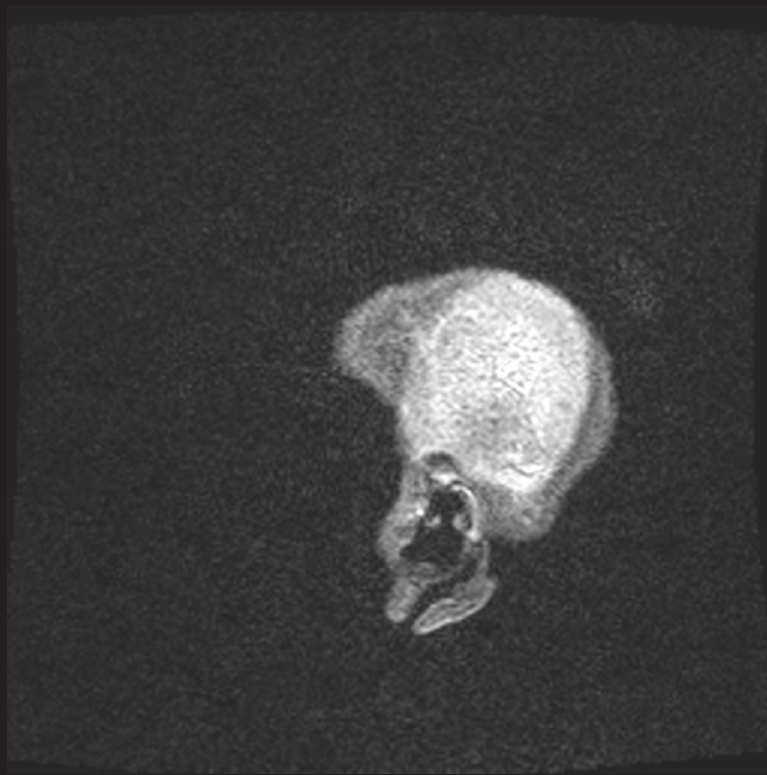
*I fail the first attempt. I close my eyes tight, perhaps a little too eager, and immediately see an explosion of shapes and colors—my eyes track wildly. We try again. This time, finding the view into the room useless, and the bed cutting off circulation to most places in my body<sup>(2)</sup>, I decide to conjure a place in my mind—something for my eyes to focus on in the absence of that disembodied view of my feet.*

*The following happens faster than I think—the place a suggestion at most. The first thing I think of is a horizon. It appears as a light gray plane below a blue sky. There are no clouds. The horizon is curved, though I believe I exaggerate the earth's actual curvature. Almost at the same time, the next thing I think of is a gate, far off in the distance—one of those Japanese Shinto gates, vermilion and ancient, though stripped of all detail. Why a Shinto gate? Well, I was in Japan about a year ago, and Shinto gates are cool. I don't know. With the gate, a road appears—or rather, a pair of lines which converge under the gate, the space between the lines a darker shade of gray.*

*I then start to move. Or the gate moves, it's unclear. The gate comes towards me, and as I cross it, another appears far away, this one approaching faster than the last. And then another appears. Soon, I'm traveling so fast the gates start to merge into a blur. There's nothing to focus on but a point of empty space where the next gate has yet to emerge.*

*Then the machine stops, and I'm back in the room, back on the bed, head in a vise, waiting for instructions.*

2 There's this concept in physics where bodies in equilibrium apply equal and opposite forces on each other, which I like to imagine means the bed is just as uncomfortable with me as I am with it.







## DAY 00

20\_\_ \_\_ \_\_

A few weeks ago, Ryan (Pagliaro) had a good idea. He reminded me of that time I drove across America and kept a blog with updates, thoughts, and photos.<sup>(3)</sup> He asked me if I'd be doing that for my Dakota trip, and I said I hadn't thought of it, but it's a good idea. So partly because it's a good idea, and mostly because my Squarespace subscription auto-renewed without consent, I'm repurposing my curiosity cabinet website<sup>(4)</sup> so I can provide daily updates, thoughts, and photos.<sup>(5)</sup>

That first blog was a failure, resulting in one good post and several tired, cynical posts. The good post was written during our first stay at a seedy motel in Ohio. The cynical posts were written everywhere else. There were some thoughts about being a tourist and hating tourists and only recently have I had that contradiction articulated to me in a footnote to David Foster Wallace's *Consider the Lobster*:

3 That blog is still available at <https://wetookpictures.wordpress.com/>

4 This was our first Master's assignment, a cabinet acting as an intellectual auto-biography. Mine took the form of a filling cabinet accompanied by a digital catalog.

5 These entries were originally published on said website. I did not foresee their inclusion in the final text of this book, let alone their importance. As a result, some of the language and references don't make much sense in this context, but I won't be making major edits.

To be a mass tourist, for me, is to become a pure late-date American: alien, ignorant, greedy for something you cannot ever have, disappointed in a way you can never admit. It is to spoil, by way of sheer ontology, the very unspoiledness you are there to experience. It is to impose yourself on places that in all non-economic ways would be better, realer, without you. It is, in lines and gridlock and transaction after transaction, to confront a dimension of yourself that is as inescapable as it is painful: As a tourist, you become economically significant but existentially loathsome, an insect on a dead thing.<sup>(6)</sup>

So here we are, and here I am, off to spoil some remote stretches of North Dakota. For those of you just now joining me, the trip in questions involves the tallest structure in America, and the longest, straightest road in America. The fact that these extremes happen to be found in arguably the flattest place in America (flattest if you ignore Florida, which I wouldn't be alone in trying my very best to do)<sup>(7)</sup> is all too serendipitous to ignore. I've spent weeks now testing cameras and mounting gear and trying my best to nail this in one go, but the reality is that I don't know what the hell I'm doing, and I'm just hoping something good will come of this.

Which leads me to a thought about what I've been up to all these months, something that occurred to me as I read that article on the Main Lobster Fest. The places I go to—the places I'm drawn to,

6 Wallace, David Foster. "Consider the Lobster." In *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2005), 240

7 It's come to my attention that I was wrong about ND being the second flattest state. It's actually third flattest, behind Illinois, but that kind of ruins my quip about Florida so I'm not changing it. See: Dobson, Jerome E., and Joshua S. Campbell. "The Flatness of U.S. States." *Geographical Review* 104, no. 1 (January 2014): 4. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1931-0846.2014.12001.x>.

the places I document and write about—are basically spoil-proof because I’m the only one who seems to care about them: those five radio towers in Cambridge;<sup>(8)</sup> that 50km drive to nowhere;<sup>(9)</sup> the vast nothing between Toronto and Montreal.<sup>(10)</sup> I’m either trying to spoil the last few unspoiled swaths of land, or I’m trying to find beauty where there isn’t any, because people have ruined it most everywhere else.



The place is a Tower much like the ones in Cambridge I’ve been so fascinated by, the ones I’m drawn to when I need a break.

What makes this Tower of interest is that it just so happens to be the tallest thing in the western hemisphere. Better yet, it’s also located in perhaps the flattest state in the US: North Dakota—second only to Florida. This place, where the tallest structure meets the flattest land, is where I want to go. North Dakota also happens to be the place where you can find the longest stretch of laser-straight road—192 kilometers running between the I-29 south of Fargo and Highway 30, into the city of Streeter, population 170 as of the 2010 census.

I seem to be drawn to these extremes of mundanity—maybe because nothing is ever really mundane if you capture it just right. And so I’m off on a boring trip to take plain photos of mundane objects in bland landscapes. One is a Tower. The other is a Road.<sup>(11)</sup>

8 See page 70.

9 See page 138.

10 See page 274.

11 I wrote this during the lead-up to the actual trip, and like most things I’ve left it unfinished, a series of notes and thoughts loosely assembled. I’ve thought about expanding it with more geological and agricultural information, but honestly that stuff is kind of dry and beside the point. This document, incomplete though it may be, is an accurate picture of what I knew going in, of my prejudices, of my (maybe lofty) ambitions.

I thought it useful to write down a little bit about what I know of North Dakota, which is not much beyond what I gathered from the Coen Brothers' *Fargo*:<sup>(12)</sup> North Dakota is cold. North Dakotans speak with what I assume is a stereotypical Minnesotan accent, or some variant. North Dakota is very flat.

Further inquiry revealed that the population estimate as of 2016 is 757 952, which, spread over an area of 183 108 km<sup>2</sup>, makes it one of the least densely populated states in the country. Here's an interesting list: Nixon, Ford, Reagan, Reagan, Bush, Bush, Dole, Bush, Bush, McCain, Romney, Trump.<sup>(14)</sup> This should give you an idea of the territory I'm off to. Or better yet: according to a religious identification survey conducted in 2006, not only does North Dakota have the highest number of churches per-capita, those churches are used by the population more than any other state. Only 3% of people I'll meet out there identify themselves as having no religion—6% declined to answer, but are probably agnostic.<sup>(15)</sup> I'm in steadfast red territory. I'll try to tone down my liberal veneer of tolerance and open-mindedness. Okay, I'm being facetious, but only because the alternative is fear. Just a few weeks ago, a woman was caught on film yelling at three Somalians wearing Hijabs in a Fargo Walmart. "We're going to kill all of you!" she insisted. And though I have the distinct advantage of being a straight-enough looking white man, I don't exactly scream conservative.<sup>(16)</sup> This is

12 I've yet to watch the television show based on the movie, but I've heard good things. <sup>(13)</sup>

13 I've just watched the first season and it was exquisite.

14 Presidential election results (exclusively republican, if you didn't catch on). United States National Archives, "Historical Election Results." National Archives and Records Administration. (Accessed October 14, 2018) [https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/votes/votes\\_by\\_state.html](https://www.archives.gov/federal-register/electoral-college/votes/votes_by_state.html).

15 Kosmin, Barry A., and Egon Mayer. American Religious Identification Survey. The City University of New York. The Graduate Center. September 13, 2006. Accessed March 14, 2018. [https://web.archive.org/web/20060913091057/http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research\\_briefs/aris/aris\\_index.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20060913091057/http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/aris_index.htm).

16 Is "screaming conservative" an oxymoron?

an issue, I think, especially if I want to talk to people and be able to warm up to them (and they to me). White Americans comprise 88% of the population, with Black or African Americans at a paltry 3%. Being the son of Italian immigrants, that puts me in the 0.5% of North Dakotans who stem from ‘other nationalities’.<sup>(17)</sup> I’m going to stick out, is what I’m getting at.

Thankfully, despite some terrifying gun legislation,<sup>(18)</sup> North Dakota isn’t a particularly gun-crazed state, coming in pretty much right in the middle in terms of gun-per-capita numbers.<sup>(19)</sup> So while I shouldn’t be particularly afraid of getting mindlessly mowed down, I probably shouldn’t wander where I’m not wanted. With the exception of Fargo, I’ll find myself among empty fields and abandoned barns. Who knows if I’ll stumble onto some territorial survivalist’s hideout.

The Tower, designation KVLV, the focus of this trip, is located at geographical coordinates 47°20’32” N, 97°17’21” W . It is a guyed mast,<sup>(20)</sup> a type of tower that isn’t self-supporting, relying instead on tension cables to keep itself upright. This structure has the distinct

17 United States Census Bureau. “Race and Hispanic Origin.” U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: North Dakota. Accessed March 14, 2018. <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/ND>.

18 Earlier this year, “constitutional carry” came into effect. This bill argues that having to obtain a permit to carry a concealed weapon is a violation of second amendment rights—so long as you have ID on you, are a resident of North Dakota, and are otherwise legally permitted to own a firearm, you can carry a concealed weapon. This is on top of needing no such thing as a permit of any kind to own guns, let alone purchase one. Background checks? Gun registry? Nope. I’m left wondering how they know if you’re “legally permitted” without a background check. See: “Constitutional Concealed Carry.” Attorney General. (Accessed May 26, 2018). <https://attorneygeneral.nd.gov/public-safety/constitutional-concealed-carry>.

19 Some recent fact checking on turned up oddly conflicting numbers, the general trend being that in fact North Dakota is pretty high up on the list of guns per household. Regardless, I’ve made it back, regretting only that I didn’t take the rare opportunity to try out one of the many, many gun ranges advertised along the highway.

20 It is indeed “guy” wires, and not “guide” wires, as some who read this entry believed, Ryan.

advantage of being incredibly easy and cheap to build. So easy, in fact, that this particular Tower in the middle of nowhere, serving one of the least densely populated regions in America, was the tallest structure in the world for a long time, and since it's completion in 1963, has only recently been surpassed by the Burj Khalifa in 2010.<sup>(21)</sup> It remains to this day the tallest structure in the western hemisphere, peaking at 2063 feet. It needed to be the tallest precisely because it is serving such a low density area—to make it economically feasible to even consider building the thing, it needs to reach as many people as possible, hence the height. This particular Tower has a broadcasting radius of 89.5 kilometers, serving mostly the population of Fargo and Grand Forks. It is owned by Grey Television, a media conglomerate based in Atlanta, Georgia, and it broadcasts the KVLV-TV station on channel 44, an NBC affiliate in Fargo. Riveting stuff, I know.

Here's the thing: this engineering marvel, for years the tallest structure built by man, defying gravity and common sense, transmits one station to a figurative handful of people in one of the loneliest parts of the country. If that isn't enough, there is another tower not five miles away that tops out at a whopping 2060 feet—three feet short of the KVLV-TV mast. Were it not for those three feet, I would completely disregard KVLV and write instead about that other tower. KVLV is essentially unremarkable in every way, except that it's entirely remarkable in one. In fact, the only reason there aren't taller towers by now is because the FCC banned any tv/radio structures taller than 2000 feet due to their unfortunate tendency to collapse when exposed to strong winds, ice storms, or

21 There was a period between 1974 and 1991 where it was surpassed by another radio mast, but that tower has since collapsed and was not replaced. See: Kohlstedt, Kurt. "Unheard Of: The Catastrophic Collapse of the World's Tallest Tower." 99% Invisible. April 18, 16. Accessed March 15, 2018. <https://99percentinvisible.org/article/unheard-catastrophic-collapse-worlds-tallest-tower/>

helicopter blades (that other, shorter tower was taken down by each of those and rebuilt every time).

I don't know how accessible the place is. I've emailed Doug Jensen, chief engineer at KVLV in Fargo, but have yet to hear back from him.<sup>(22)</sup> At most, I can hope to get up close to the tower. In my

22 Doug has since graciously replied:

**Q. Do you know which engineering firm designed or built the structure?**

A. The tower was built by Klein Tower. I believe it was their design as well.

**Q. How accessible is the tower? For example, would I be allowed to drive right up to the base, or would I need to stick to the surrounding roads? Are there any limitations on photography of the tower?**

A. The tower is fenced in but you can get within 20' of the tower. We have no limitations on photography for non commercial purposes.

**Q. Who is in charge of tower maintenance and operations? Is that your team's responsibility, or do you contract it out to a third party?**

A. It is my responsibility. We hire tower repair companies to do the actual work.

**Q. How many people does the tower serve within its radius? Have these numbers gone down now that cable is much more commonplace? I suspect more rural areas still use over-the-air antennas?**

A. The tower directly serves about 350,000 but cable and satellite expand that coverage somewhat. Cable penetration is somewhere between 85-90% however a lot more people are "cutting the cord" these days so we expect that penetration level to drop.

**Q. Does the tower only function as a TV antenna, or are there other signals broadcast from the tower?**

A. We only broadcast TV from that tower.

**Q. Is there any chance (and this is a long shot, I know) that I could get a view inside the base of the tower?**

A. Do you mean a picture or if you can access it personally? I can set you up either way.

**Q. How long have you been chief engineer at KVLV?**

A. I have worked here for 43 years and been chief for 10.

**Q. The neighboring KRDK antenna has collapsed a few times since its construction. Were the two towers built by the same firm? Has this tower had any close calls since its completion?**

A. All three towers, the two that went down and the current tower were built by Stainless. The only close call we had was during the icing event that took the KRDK tower down the last time in 1997. We have never seen that amount of ice on the tower plus we had some very bad high winds at the same time.

**Q. I listened to the NPR segment on which you discussed the tower being surpassed by the Burj Khalifa in 2010. Were you around when the tower was first completed in 1963? Was there any local excitement about having the tallest man-made structure in world?**

wildest dreams, I ride the elevator to the top of the lattice on which sits the 113 foot antenna sits, providing so many Dakotans their free over-the-air programming. At the very worst, I'll be stuck on the road, with my gear, in my car, waiting and watching for those blinking beacons to light up the evening sky. I'm sure I won't be prepared for that sinking feeling as the night grows darker and the flashing lights are all that remain in my field of vision.

On a whim, I typed the following into Google: "longest straight road in America". It came as almost no surprise that the first link points to a website proclaiming the longest, straightest road is in fact North Dakota Highway 46.<sup>(23)</sup> Of course, there is fierce debate about which American road is the straightest, some insisting this road is not as straight as others—notably, another very straight road in Utah. There's no limit to the pedantry of online discussions on any topic.

This particular road stretches almost 200 kilometers between Fargo and the tiny town of Streeter. The argument against HWY-46 being the longest, straightest road involves the four slight curves placed strategically (I assume) to break up the monotony of such an uneventful drive. The longest uninterrupted segment is still almost seventy kilometers—no mean feat of pragmatism.

The medium is words and images (still and moving—or the illusion of motion, at least). Maybe it's my discomfort with drawing, but

A. I was just a kid when the tower was built and I remember it because we went from having 2 TV stations to 3 stations to watch. It was a big deal and was heavily promoted for a long time. Our call sign at that time was KTHI and we had Miss Tall USA promote us. She was Katy – HI. (See page 231 for proof.)

23 "A Very Long, Straight Road, Hickson to Streeter, North Dakota." RoadsideAmerica.com, (Accessed March 15, 2018), <https://www.roadsideamerica.com/story/11799>.



I've always felt more in tune with my camera than my pen. Still, I might sketch a thing or two.<sup>(24)</sup>

I'm interested in four possible view out of my car (out of the innumerable). The one that started all this is the side view, through the passenger window.<sup>(25)</sup> This view must be recorded at a high frame rate, so that it can be slowed down and made sense of—the way your brain sees it. 120 frames per second slowed down to 24 fps produces an image five times slower than real-time, and yet still fast enough when traveling at high-speed on a highway or train track.

The next view is through the wind shield. This one is tricky. I've tried high-fps, standard real-time footage and time-lapse, and I've yet to settle on the right speed. Because the rate of motion depends on your focal length, different lenses want to be slowed down or sped up. Some footage can look like living stills, moving almost imperceptibly, while others are hypnotic when sped up using time-lapse. Sometimes, when conditions are just right, the real-time footage is all you need. I'll come back to this one.

The flip side to this view is shot through the back. This remains untested, though I suspect the same conditions found at the front hold true.

The last view is through the sun roof, looking up at the open sky. This footage must either be sped up or in real time.<sup>(26)</sup>

These are all shot from a moving vehicle. Of course, once I'm out of the vehicle, all order breaks down and I'm free to shoot however I want, though I may impose restrictions on this. Maybe the whole thing is shot from inside my car.<sup>(27)</sup>

24 I did no such thing.

25 See page 274.

26 This view didn't make the cut, which doesn't mean I'm not still interested in it.

27 It wasn't.

### *Cameras Currently in my Possession* <sup>(28)</sup>

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#### \*Gopro Hero 3

120 FPS @ 720p  
60 FPS @ 1080p  
7MP Time-Lapse

#### \*iPhone 6s

120 FPS @ 1080p  
24 FPS @ 4K  
12 MP Stills

#### \*Sony A7RII

120 FPS @ 720p  
60 FPS @ 1080p  
24 FPS @ 4K  
42 MP Stills

#### \*iPhone 5s

120 FPS @ 720p  
60 FPS @ 1080p  
12 MP Stills

#### Canon 7D MKII

60 FPS @ 1080p  
24 FPS @ 1080p  
18 MP Stills

### *Potential Cameras*

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#### \*Sony A9

120 FPS @ 1080p  
60 FPS @ 4kp  
24 MP Stills

#### Canon 5d MKIII

60 FPS @ 720p  
24 FPS @ 1080p  
22 MP Stills

### *Available Lenses*

---

#### Sony

\*Zeiss Contax G2 28mm f2.8  
\*Zeiss Contax G2 45mm f2  
\*Zeiss Sony FE 35mm f2.8  
\*Zeiss Sony FE 55mm f1.8  
\*Zeiss Sony FE 70-200 f2.8  
Zeiss Sony Fe 100-400 f4

#### Canon:

EF-S 17-85mm F4-5.6 (Crop)  
EF 100-400mm f4.5-5.6  
EF 24-70mm f2.5

28 The pieces of equipment I settled on bringing are marked with an asterisk (\*). For those that are into this sort of thing, I did miss my Canon gear, though Sony does have advantages. Still, there's just something responsive and tactile about a proper dSLR that recent mirrorless cameras have yet to nail.

*Timeline* <sup>(29)</sup>

---

Day 01	Leave Toronto, drive twelve hours, sleep somewhere cheap.
Day 02	Leave somewhere cheap, drive twelve hours, arrive in Fargo, sleep.
Day 03	Explore Fargo. Visit KVLV-TV studios if possible. Take it easy. Collect thoughts. Get some sleep.
Day 04	Leave for Tower in morning before sunrise, spend day there exploring/taking pictures. Wait for night-fall and face your fears.
Day 05	Rinse, repeat until you're sick of the place.
Day 08	Drive along the 46 during sun rise, stopping only when you reach Streeter. Dinner there, don't cause too much commotion. Stay overnight.
Day 09	Drive back to Fargo, this time mid-day. Drive back to Streeter, this time at dusk. Stay overnight.
Day 10	Flexible. Judge if there is more work to be done.
Day 13	Drive back over two days.

29 This turned out to be almost exactly how it went down.

How to get there and where to stay. The obvious answer is drive and motel. However, there is one problem: Fargo is really far. The fastest route is a sixteen hour drive. The route I want to take, north, above the lakes, is a twenty-four hour drive. In either case, I would need to split it over two days.

The next problem is the 'when'. I plan to spend a lot of time in the open, and North Dakota is not a warm place in the coming months. Ideally I would leave soon, but there's the issue of preparing the gear. My earliest departure date is mid-November. The trip should last two weeks, with ten days spent in and around my target sites, collecting footage and stories.

#### Money Issues:

Estimated distance to be driven: 5500 km

Gas: \$600

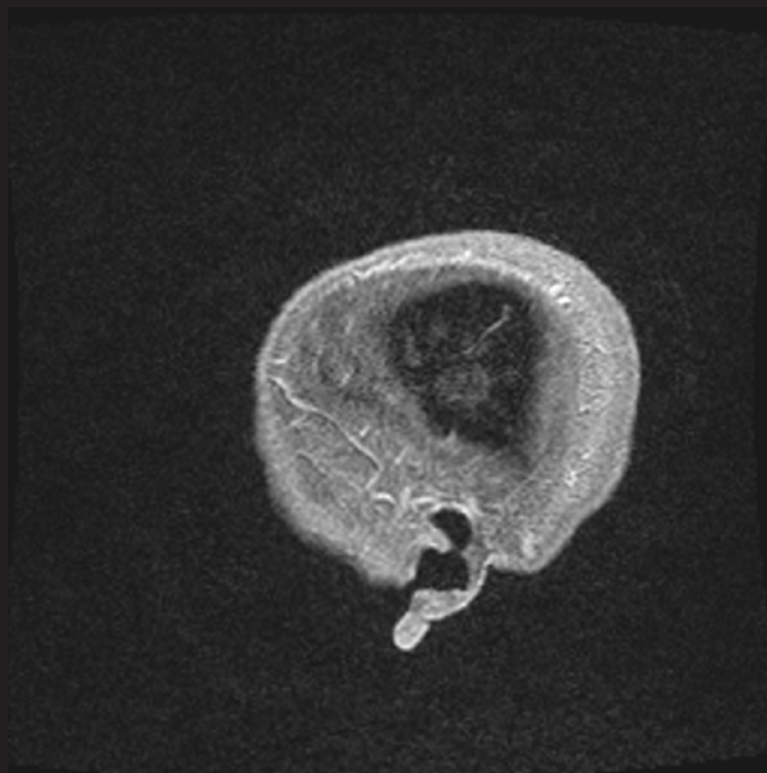
Food: 20/day @ 14 days = \$280

Accommodations: 50/day @ 14 days = \$700

Total estimated cost = \$1580

Can I afford this? Not really.

Reasons to go: Why the hell not?





## DAY 01

2017 11 20

I left Toronto at 6 a.m. and drove twelve hours to Marathon, Ontario, a couple hours shy of Thunder Bay. I've just checked in to my B&B, which was the only place with rooms available; most are closed for the season. I'm honestly exhausted, and nothing of note really comes to mind. I spent about an hour unpacking chargers and card readers, setting up battery packs and transferring photos. I may have gone overboard, using up 200 gigs of data on a frankly inconsequential part of my trip.<sup>(30)</sup> I have another long day tomorrow, which includes a border crossing. I'm going to bed. Here are some photos.

<sup>30</sup> Or at least it seems that way right now—these side-bars have a tendency to sneak their way back into my work.





















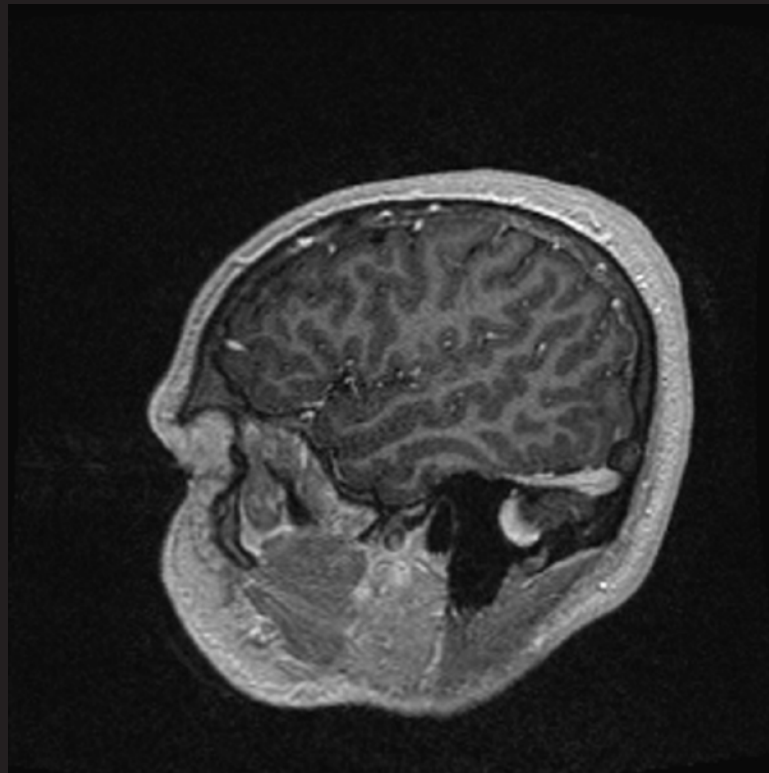














## DAY 02

2017 11 21

So Fargo's an interesting place. Think SmartCenters® crossed with those neighborhoods around airports—the ones with hotels and endless chain link fences and parking lots and a general fuck-pedestrians attitude towards planning. Every street might as well be a highway and the sidewalks are cruel suggestions. All restaurants are chain restaurants and all buildings were designed by marketing departments. I considered for about a second if I should walk to the pub I chose to eat dinner at, given it was only thirteen minutes away by foot. I quickly reconsidered when, looking out the window, I could see the pub off in the distance and realized there was literally nothing of interest along the way. There doesn't seem to be any downtown. The place is all suburb. A Google image search of 'Downtown Fargo' shows a few old brick buildings that I assume developers have only reluctantly kept to maintain some semblance of culture.

But maybe I'm just tired. I woke up at 5 a.m. for another twelve hour drive, and this time the conditions were not as forgiving. Snow fell almost the whole way, and despite the freezing temperatures, the asphalt stayed wet, which meant driving behind cars would coat mine in a shitty, misty spray of dirt. I went through four bottles of

wiper fluid trying to keep at least the patches in front of my cameras clean. I gave up trying to clean my driver-side window after a while.

I had a minor panic right before crossing the border, which prompted a call to Donald (McKay) asking for advice. He never answered, instead returning my call about five minutes after I crossed. I was worried they wouldn't believe that I'd drive all the way from Toronto to take pictures of a tall thing and a long thing. Maybe I was projecting. Donald joked about how Americans seem to assume everyone is a possible criminal, which hasn't been my experience personally, but I can see where he got that impression. The border agent looked at me for a few seconds after I told him why I was going to North Dakota. I clarified that I was an architecture student and suddenly he was okay with the whole thing, his face lighting up visibly. It's like we have super powers.

The whole day I had been bored and miserable, a combination of back aches and anxiety and bad weather. Once I crossed the border, things changed. It was about 1 p.m., the skies were clearing up, and there were fewer cars on the road. That's one thing I noticed along the way—my mood is directly related to how many vehicles I share the road with. I feel claustrophobic when I see cars ahead. I try my best to pass them safely, opening up my view to those converging lines. I try to take photos at that point, carefully calculating the risk of driving dead-center on the highway.

In the car I feel like a maestro. I have a four camera set-up. To my left—the most precarious—is an iPhone 6s mounted with suction cups to the driver side window. Next is a GoPro shooting every five seconds out my windshield. Next to that is my Mom's Sony A9 mounted on a sketchy but effective rig to my dashboard, also pointed straight ahead. Finally, there's my Sony A7RII, which I use hand-held, shooting whatever catches my eye. None of this is remotely safe, and at any one time I'm firing shutters and pressing



buttons on three out of four cameras (thankfully the GoPro is set before I leave and requires little maintenance).

Still, the closest call I've had so far was on Day 01, when a family of deer ran across the highway outside Barrie. There was plenty of room between cars, and the highway was quiet. Two pick-up trucks had pulled over to let the deer cross and I slowed to a stop behind them. As I watched them move on, I notice in my rear-view mirror a large semi approaching way too fast. I slammed on the throttle and tried to ride the shoulder, but that wouldn't have made a difference. The truck instead swerved into the oncoming lane, which was thankfully free of cars. Had it not been, well, I honestly don't want to think about it. Starr (Wang) kept insisting that I be careful, that no matter how good of a driver you are, you can't predict what others will do. In this case the roads were clean and flat. We weren't in a blind spot, or below the crest of a hill. I wasn't even aware there was a semi behind me, meaning he was far enough to stop. The [tr]ucker was simply not paying attention.

I'm tired. Tomorrow is my first full day here, and I think I'll just take it easy, buy some groceries, wash my car (which is covered in salt so thick I can't see my blind spots), and explore Fargo. I'll hold off on the Tower for now. This drive may have been unnecessary—exhausting more than fruitful.

•

During my first few real drives—drives longer than six hours—I developed the nasty, dangerous habit of trying to record footage through my windshield. I would balance my camera (at the time, an unwieldy Canon 7D paired with a heavy zoom) atop my steering wheel, lens extending forward to rest above my instrument cluster. I would have to change settings manually when switching between

photo and video mode, which complicated matters as I tried to keep a hand on my steering wheel. This produced mediocre footage while also endangering my life and the lives of those around me.

Enter: The Rig.

I first thought of building a camera mount for my car as I drove those long, lonely roads of northern Ontario. As I replayed the footage gathered by the midpoint of my trip, I couldn't help but feel dissatisfied—every crack registered, every bump translated through my tires, through my car's suspension and frame, through my driver's seat and through my body, through my hands and finally through my lens. And thus began something of a wild goose-chase to improve this footage, to eliminate those cracks and bumps and hick-ups, to produce footage that was perfectly smooth.

I built three rigs over the months, spending way too much time on research and money on parts only to conclude that what I was after was effectively impossible on my student's budget, that it would be difficult even with unlimited resources.

The first rig—the most effective, and the one I would settle on using for the remainder of my work—was conceived as a frame I could improve on later. The goal with Rig 1 was simple: eliminate myself from the equation. I built the frame using aluminum profiles and rivets. I needed the lens as close to the glass as possible (to reduce glare and to focus past any dirt or scratches), so my mounting points were limited. I settled on an industrial suction cup and some threaded leveling pads. I mount the camera using a quick-release plate bought on Amazon. This all came together quickly and for relatively little money (all in, about 50 bucks, the most expensive part being the quick-release plate).

But after testing the rig, I couldn't help but remain disappointed. My camera now essentially tracked my car's movement 1-to-1, so while my arms no longer careened through the air after a large bump or quick turn, they also no longer canceled out the

smaller cracks in the road. From frame to frame, the image jumped around a lot more, though within a much narrower amplitude. Shake became jitter, and jitter is annoying—to me at least.

Thus, the goal for Rig 2 was to eliminate jitter. This, it turns out, is hard. Really hard. And expensive. Really, really expensive. I tried three or four different methods, each with stunningly poor results.

The first—lets say Rig 2.1—was based on the concept of vibration damping. This is commonly used when mounting cameras on cars and drones to eliminate micro-jitter. The concept is simple: you decouple the camera from the mount using flexible steel wire of various gauge depending on the amount of vibration and the weight of your gear. Essentially, the steel wire absorbs most of the vibration before it reaches the camera.

Unfortunately, one aspect I overlooked was that vibration damping is only used when paired with an electronic gimbal (basically a cluster of sensors and motors that cancel out macro movements while the vibration damper takes care of the micro movements) What happens when you eliminate the gimbal from the equation? You amplify the macro movement. So Rig 2.1 was dead-on-arrival, and my limited tests proved this point.

Rig 2.2 used a similar approach, only this time using rubber instead of wire. Same concept, same result. Rig 2.3 was an expensive gimbal I bought out of frustration. I figured at this point I may as well use what professionals use—except I couldn't afford what professionals use, so my gimbal was kind of crap, and given it's generous proportions, I couldn't figure out how to mount the thing to my dashboard.

In the end, that wouldn't have worked either. What I've been trying to do, somewhat misguidedly, is not only eliminate myself, but my car as well. What I'm after is a perfectly smooth dolly shot, and that's impossible without a track. Even if I managed this from

my car, I'm still driving the thing, still prone to human error. What I envisioned are perfectly parallel lines converging on a center point, horizon fixed about a third of the way up the frame. Those three lines are the constants, everything else the variables. And throughout this process, which took up more time than I'm proud to admit, I never really asked myself "why?", not until Maya (Przeblysk) pressed the question.

I didn't have a great answer for her. I mentioned something about the shake detracting from the pure forward motion. I mentioned how the train rails in another video I shot acted essentially as a dolly, producing very smooth images that I wanted to replicate in my car. But then something happened shortly thereafter. I was driving on the 401, heading to Toronto. My mind was on autopilot, not paying much attention to individual cognitive inputs. In the opposing lane, past the concrete barriers, a car is floating in mid air. The windows are shattered, the hood is caved in and it's just there, hovering in slow motion. It starts to tilt forward, starts to come down to earth. Touches pavements. Rolls over. The cars in front of me slam on their breaks and I'm no longer on autopilot. The whole thing lasted two seconds, but it could have been minutes. As I keep traveling east, the westbound lanes come to a halt. Thankfully, I read later that, despite appearances, no one was seriously injured in the crash. I drive in silence the rest of the way. The point is this: the mind and the eye don't see the way a camera sees. Perception is what I'm after, and I realize this as I reflect on the accident—on how my mind interprets and remembers the event. I'm after smoothness because that's how I remember the drives. I don't remember the cracks in the road—I only remember the constant forward motion.













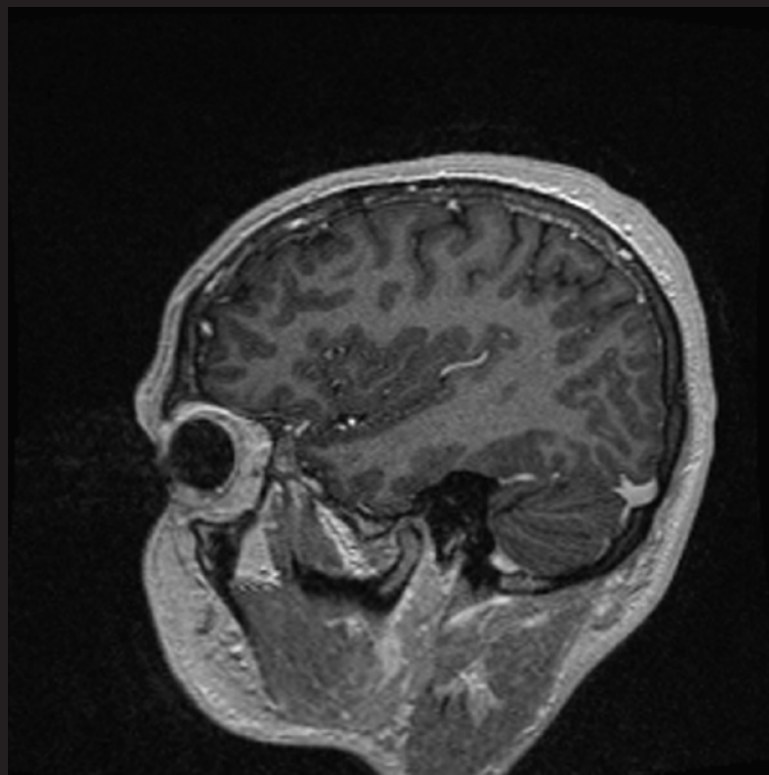
















## DAY 03

2017 11 22

I may have been a little harsh yesterday. My immediate surroundings look like airport lands because I'm by the airport.

I woke up after not setting an alarm, did some yoga for my back (is this what happens when you reach thirty?), showered gloriously, and tried my best to look perfectly North Dakotan, which involved not trimming my beard, donning a cap, losing the glasses, and wearing plaid.

I spent the rest of the morning running some errands and editing pictures. In the afternoon I went for an aimless drive<sup>(31)</sup> around Fargo, determined to confirm yesterday's snap judgment. Well, that didn't happen. Turns out it's actually kind of charming, with many tree-lined residential streets closer to the downtown core, where I spotted some hip-looking restaurants and coffee shops—though likely none within my non-existent budget. I passed by many beautiful churches.<sup>(32)</sup> On my way back I stumbled onto the

31 My (expletive) GoPro decided to focus on my stone-chipped windshield about halfway through today's time lapse, in case you were questioning the pleasant sharpness of said windshield, and the subtle blur of everything else.

32 North Dakota not only has the highest number of churches per capita in the U.S., it also has the highest attendance rate of any state. Kosmin, Barry A., and Egon Mayer. American Reli-

NDSU campus, where the football team was doing drills. The campus flows into agricultural and industrial lands, and as the sun was setting I found myself convinced that this could be a nice place to live—simple and quaint and quiet, with maybe a few too many “JESUS CHRIST IS YOUR LORD AND SAVIOR” billboards.

To the east, along the Red River, Fargo borders the city of Moorhead, Minnesota, and as you go west those airport communities spring up, with big box stores and endless parking lots—where I’ve unknowingly confined myself for the next nine nights. But beyond are fields and water towers and grain silos, and beyond those still is the Tower I’m here for. I’ll be going tomorrow, in the afternoon light, waiting for the sun to set and the beacons to glow.

gious Identification Survey. The City University of New York. The Graduate Center. September 13, 2006. Accessed March 14, 2018. [https://web.archive.org/web/20060913091057/http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research\\_briefs/aris/aris\\_index.htm](https://web.archive.org/web/20060913091057/http://www.gc.cuny.edu/faculty/research_briefs/aris/aris_index.htm).









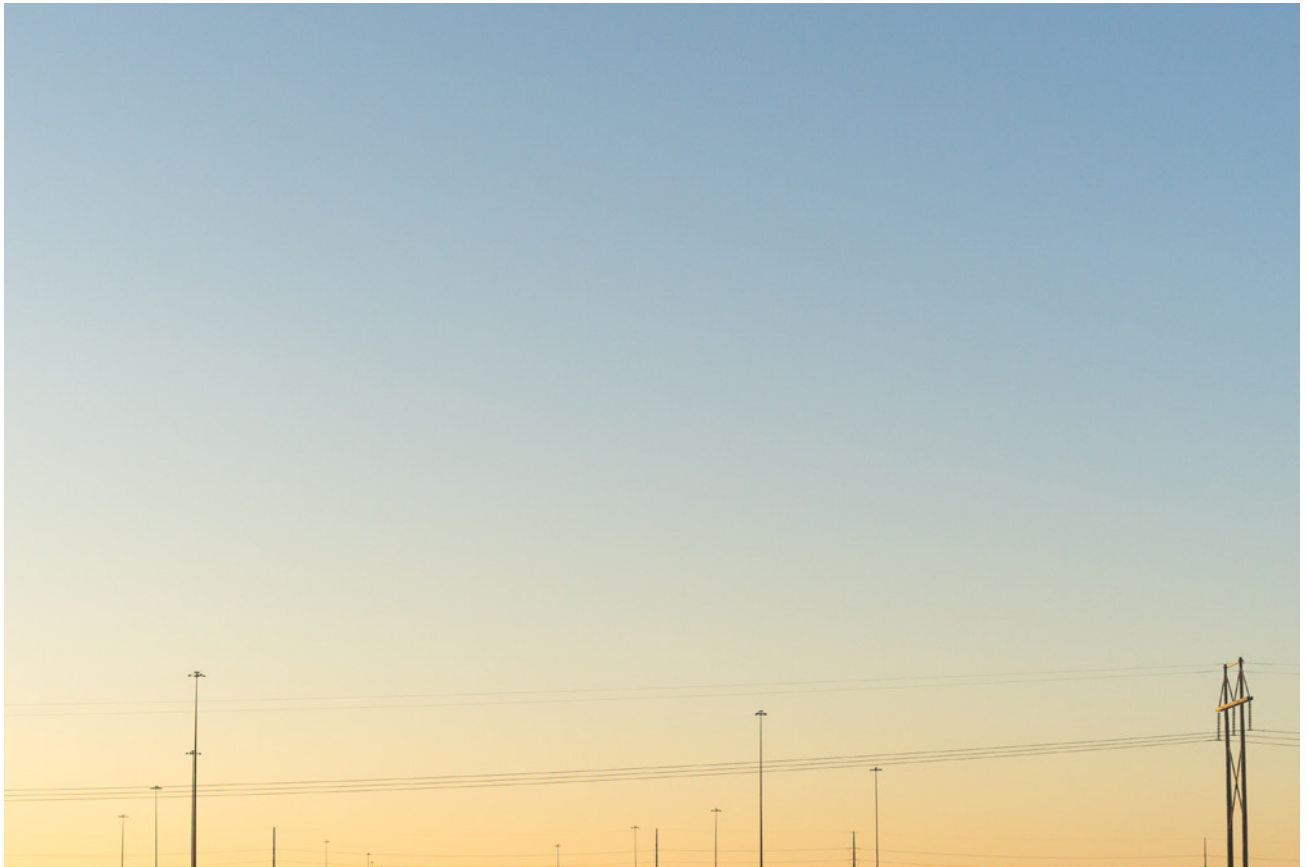




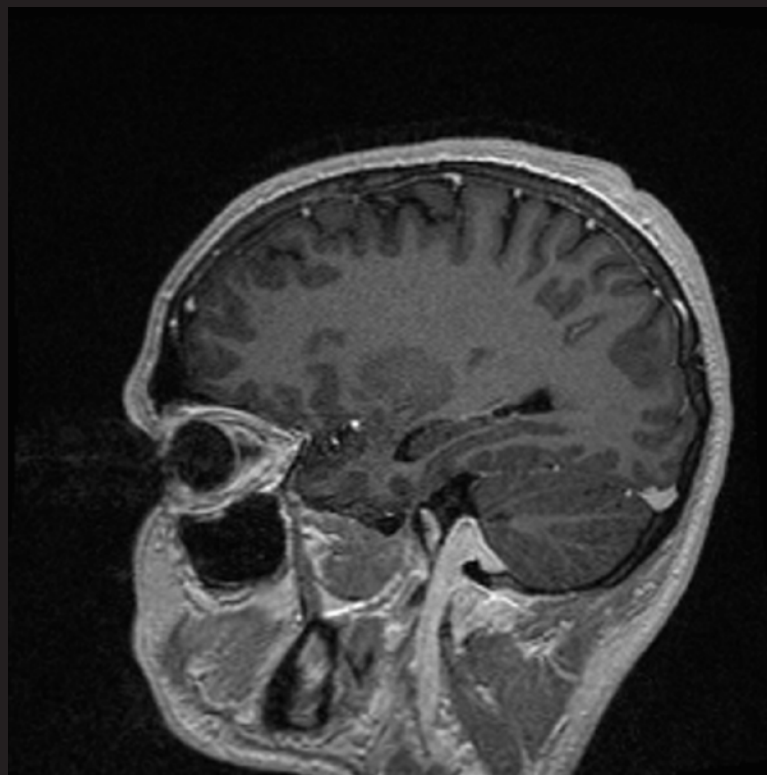














## DAY 04

2017 11 23

“Oh my God.”

The words spilled out as I slowed to a stop by the Tower. I stupidly thought to myself that maybe the scale of it would be lost in the fields, that without a proper gauge it would look like any other radio mast.

I left my room late today, spending the morning on my laptop going through footage I had collected until now. It would take me an hour to reach the Tower, heading north and then west from Fargo. I thought I spotted it about halfway there, but that was just your standard height mast. After a while, scanning the horizon, I think I see it, the faintest vertical line, just barely there. My GPS says I'm still thirty kilometers away, and it's already the tallest thing around. Keep in mind that from ground level, the horizon dips after five kilometers. Thankfully it's a beautiful, warm, clear day. The landscape outside Fargo is fields and factories, golden in the afternoon light.

I turn west onto ND HWY 200, and there's no mistaking it. The mast swings into view in front of me as I take the exit ramp. I drive by farm houses, barns, grain silos—familiar landmarks by now. I'm still fifteen minutes away, the Tower growing imperceptibly, though

enough that I can now make out the guy wires. It seems like no matter how close I get, it doesn't move, doesn't get any closer. Eventually, I turn on to a single lane gravel road. To my right is a strange amalgam of sheds, shacks and silos. There's a house in the fields north of the mast and I can't help but wonder about the people who live here. I decide to drop a letter in their mailbox with my contact info. I want to ask them about the Tower which most likely sits on their land, and about their bizarre property, which I'd love to photograph (this place looks like something out of Texas Chainsaw Massacre). Ahead is the Tower and by now the top has vanished from the low field of vision my car allots me. I slow down as I pull up to another single lane road which leads directly to the base of the mast.

I panic. I keep driving, past the road, past the Tower.



There's this place in Cambridge—my favorite place—where five radio towers broadcast their anonymous signals.<sup>(33)</sup> I stumbled on them by accident during one of my aimless drives. I should mention that few people have been let in on what I'm about to share.

I'm a very phobic person.<sup>(34)</sup> That may not come as much of a surprise to those who know me. One of my phobias is anything that sends or receives signals on a large scale. Antennas, satellite dish arrays, radio telescopes, cell towers, these all instills in me this

33 Certainly fascinating are number stations, which are short-wave signals which simply broadcast tones and voices enunciating a series of seemingly random numbers. There are dozens of these stations, which you can pick up around the world. These are, most likely, used by government organizations to communicate with agents in foreign nations.

34 Other phobias I suffer from, in no particular order: spiders, or any insect with long legs, certain plants or flowers, particularly those which move around a lot (think dandelions or sunflowers), mushrooms, fungi or any signs of rot and decay, underwater mechanical equipment (pool drains I've gotten used to, the underside of boats not so much), unexpected darkness, large black voids.



powerful sense of dread. It's worse at night, when their pulsing lights only hint at their presence, their shape hidden in the dark. Night was when I first saw the Five Towers. It was winter. I was driving through some farm land, taking a break from one of the worst deadlines I've ever had to deal with.<sup>(35)</sup> I was feeling tired and a little high-strung from running mainly on coffee and protein bars when they drifted into view, far off in the distance, an array of twelve hovering red lights. Immediately, I panicked. Usually I deal with this fear on the highway, where the lights are off to the side, present but non-threatening. Here, as I kept driving, following the winding roads, the lights swung in and out of view, growing larger, until I hit a crossroads. My usual path through the hills was to the left. I had never noticed the towers during the daytime. The road to the right ran right up to them. In no way was I trying to face my fear, but I turned right. I drove slowly down the road, the tower lights aggressively bright. The Five Towers landed in a large empty field on the right side of the road. As I drove on, I slowed down, unable to summon the courage to drive right past them. Soon the lights spanned my windshield, then my whole field of vision. When it came to the point where I couldn't see the full array without craning my neck, I pulled over.



I'm not sure what happened exactly. By now I thought I had gotten over my fear of these things, but the overwhelming sense of dread was undeniable. The thing is alien. The guy wires buckle under their own weight, noticeably sagging as they fly upwards. The lattice work of the Tower is dense and massive, unlike the other masts I've seen. The degree to which I crane my neck to see the top is unreasonable from this distance, which I'd guess is a least 500 meters.

35 If you're wondering: Philip Beesley, 3A Design Studio.

Doug Jensen, chief engineer at KVLV, informed me via email that the Tower is fairly accessible except for a small fenced off portion at the base. Now that I was here I wasn't sure I could even leave my car. I do a u-turn and park at the foot of that path, beyond the furthest guy wires, facing the Tower. I turn the engine off and notice how absolutely quiet it is. Today is American Thanksgiving, so whoever lived at that farmhouse was either comatose by now, or visiting family elsewhere. I'm completely alone.

Fuck it. I get out of the car, camera in hand. I had switched to my 35 mm lens and quickly realize that, even 500 meters away, even on my knees, down in a ditch on the side of the road, basically as low as I could get, I couldn't capture the whole thing. I get up and switch to a 28 mm manual focus.

The Tower is back-lit from here, but the sky is perfect, a few wispy clouds adding a bit of drama. I spend some time here, by those first three massive wires. Eventually I muster up enough courage to walk towards the mast, taking photos along the way. Despite the warm, sunny weather, I'm freezing. The wind out here is relentless—not enough to throw you off balance, but just enough to pierce every layer of clothing.

As I walk, I get the same impression as when I drove towards it: I'm not getting any closer. Had I misjudged the distance? The Tower plays tricks on your perception, seeming shorter, sometimes taller. You look ahead and it seems like it's right there, a few hundred feet away. You look up, and suddenly you lose your bearings, the guy wires flying above your head to some point far behind you. I kept placing the CN tower beside it, knowing that it falls short by about 200 feet. That didn't help make sense of it. Walking through Toronto, you get glimpses of the CN tower between buildings, framed in a proper setting. Standing below it, you can't even see the top. Here, not only is the whole thing on display, it might as well be in my head for how implausible it seems.

But despite the constant wind, I hear sounds. Standing by my car, by the solid concrete foundation those wires tie back to, I can hear creaking, snapping. I had approached the small fenced-off area around that foundation, hoping to get a close-up shot of those connections, but quickly reconsidered, imagining the unbelievable tension in those wires, recalling the story Doug told me about the Tower's sister mast just 8 km away collapsing during an ice storm. As I walk towards the Tower, every so often I'll hear that sound again and snap my head back, expecting to see a loose wire flying towards me.

Later, at the base of the Tower, by the control room, I'm reminded why I was afraid of these things in the first place. A low, constant hum is clearly audible above the wind. Electricity. Voltage. Signals. Transmissions. Warning. Danger. It feels like I'll be fried if I take one wrong step. But then I see a sign above the single door, above the cracked lintel, hand painted:

KVLV 11  
FARGO – GRAND FORKS  
701-237-5211  
2063' TOWER  
BUILT 1963

And suddenly I'm reminded this used to be a tourist destination. That at a time, probably long ago, anyone driving through North Dakota would probably stop to see the tallest thing in the world, the same way you would stop to see the largest ball of twine.<sup>(36)</sup> And I suppose that—despite remaining, on-and-off throughout the years, the tallest man-made structure until 2010—part of why the Tower has faded from discussion is because of its disposability.<sup>(37)</sup>

36 I mean, some people would.

37 Over-the-air transmission is an antiquated technology and cable is quickly being adopted even in rural communities.

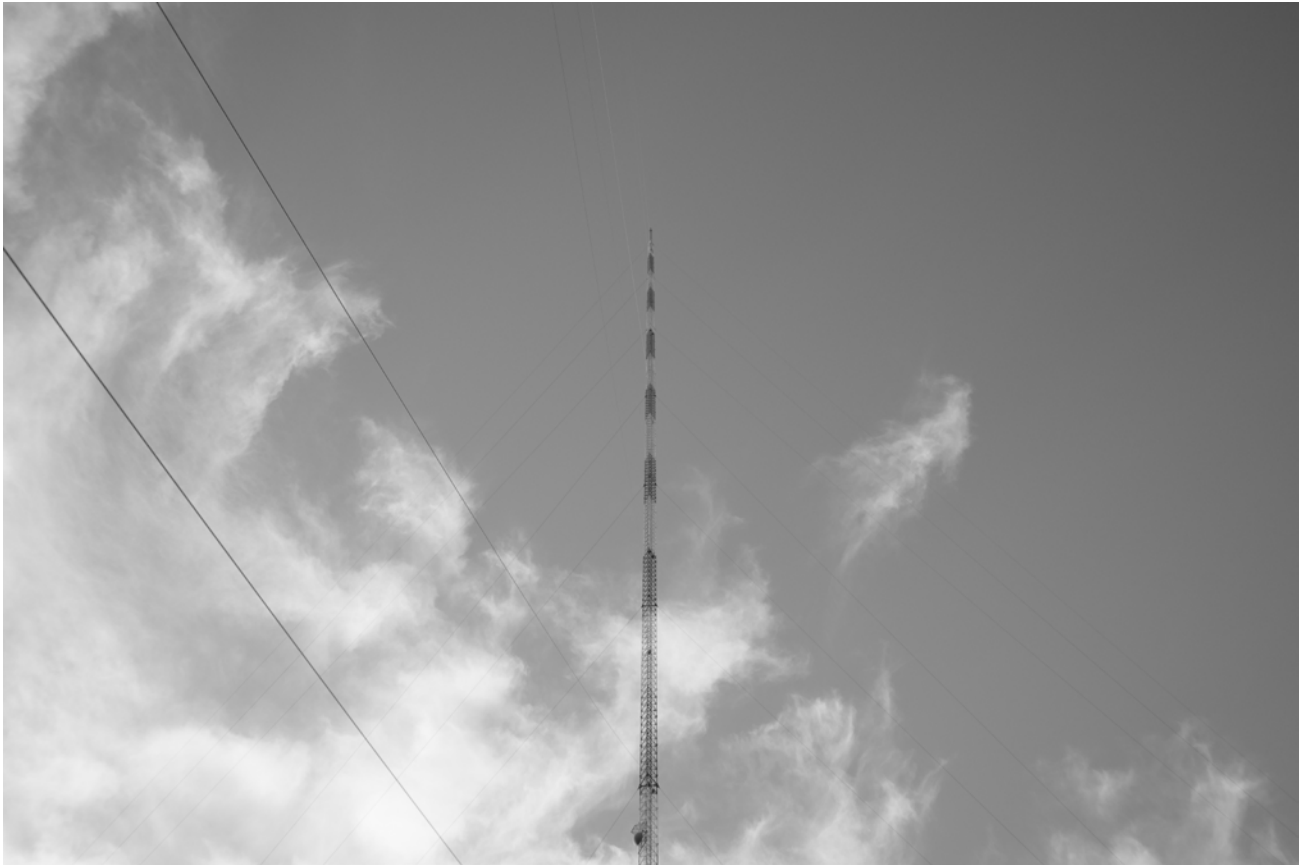
But standing there, at the base, I was no longer nervous, instead feeling a kind of sadness. I looked over to the farm house and wondered if the people living there now had been kids when the Tower was built. Doug had mentioned that he remembered the day the Tower was completed, not because of any engineering feat, but because his number of TV channels jumped from two to three. Those farm house people would remember it differently, I'm sure. Their parents were more likely annoyed at the surge of tourists and local looky-loos clogging up their single lane dirt roads and probably knocking on their door at all hours to use the toilet. The kids, however, might have found it awe-inspiring. Whether that household owned a TV set or not, there it was, the tallest structure on earth, right there in their back yard. I imagine the kids (in my mind a boy of about ten and a girl a few years younger) lying on their backs right where I was standing, looking up at the mast at dusk, waiting for those flashing red beacons to light up the evening sky. Eventually the novelty would wear off, they would grow up and join their parents in finding the Tower a nuisance and an eye sore more than anything. But for now I tried to join those kids in that sense of wonder, and I asked myself why I was alone in that field, on that day, why so few people made the trip out here anymore to see what is still the tallest structure on this continent. My plan was to wait for the sun to set, but as it fell towards the horizon, I decided to head back and process the experience instead, leaving it at that for now. I'll head back tomorrow, same time of day.

As I transferred photos from this evening, I took a closer look at that sign above the door, noticed that the paint was fading, but that certainly it was not the original paint from 1963, that someone must touch-up the paint every so often, and that meant someone at KPLY still thought the Tower was a point of pride, that it was a monument worth preserving and commemorating—at least until an ice storm takes it down.



























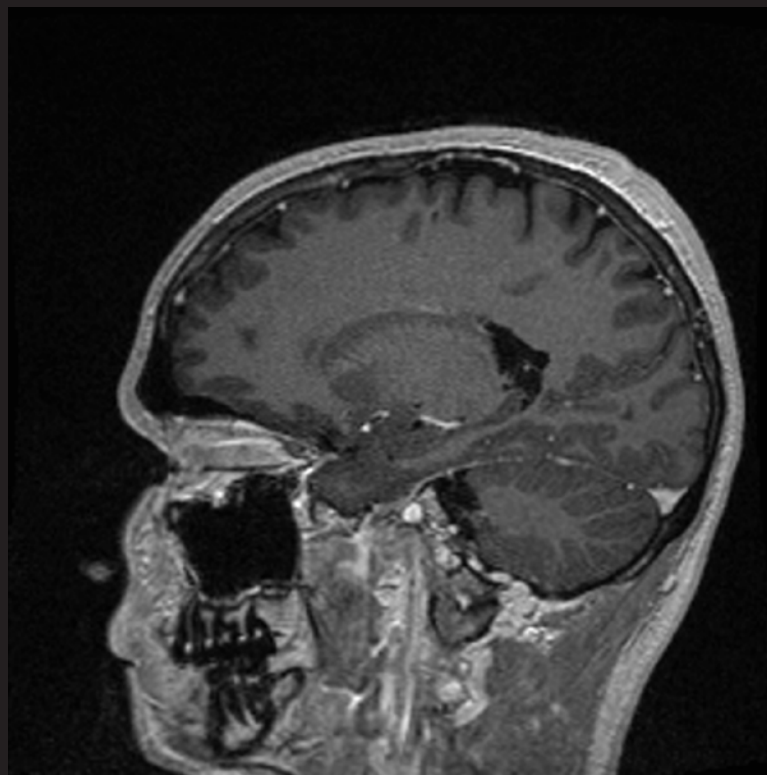














## DAY 05

2017 11 24

A peculiar thing happened at the base of the Tower today. As you approach from the road, the control room is the closest object to you—the Tower landing behind and to the left of the cinder block structure. Yesterday, still somewhat apprehensive, I stayed in front of that boxy little building, the base of the Tower hidden. Today, with the sun quickly setting, I was determined to take photos looking straight up from the base (or as close as I could get to the fence). But as I got closer, that calm I felt yesterday was stripped from me. The wind was much stronger today, and though it was five degrees warmer, I was so, so much colder. The hum I heard by the Tower was stronger still, the wind failing to drown it out, which is when I realized the sound wasn't the Tower itself, but the wind playing the Tower like an instrument. The best way I could describe it is like a jet flying far overhead. You look up trying to spot it but there's nothing there. You try to pinpoint where it's coming from but it's everywhere.

With that in mind, I slowly rounded the building. It's unusually accessible, the only fenced off portions found at the very base of the Tower and each guy-wire tie back point. In the past, when I've visited these kinds of masts, the whole plot of land was fenced off with signs warning of high voltage transmissions. I didn't expect

to get this close, so when I did, when I turned that last corner, the rear corner opposite where the Tower landed, with the base fully on display, I believe my exact words were “oh fuck nononononono,” and I quickly backed away—literally walking backwards, waving my hands like a character in a sitcom refusing to do something unreasonable.

I’ll try to get into why these things are so terrifying to me at some point, though I don’t think anyone would disagree when I say they’re at least a little eerie.

Defeated, I walked back to my car. I’m still not used to the height of it. It lies constantly outside my peripheral vision. As I look up, all reference points disappear. Today was sunny and cloudless, which made matters worse. About halfway up the Tower, my mind tends to think I’m nearly there, and my eyes scramble to focus on a top that’s still beyond reach. At my car, back by the furthest guy-wire, it’s more manageable. That’s where I stay, waiting for the sun to set.

Eventually I grew bored and started checking my phone. Piper (Bernbaum) emailed me with some kind words and relevant references. I reread yesterday’s entry and found myself once again contemplating the inherent contradiction in tourism—and laughing at myself for lamenting the Tower’s fading attraction. Did I really want people around? Some family in a minivan from Nebraska? Some amateur photographer wearing cargo pants and a utility vest? I start thinking about what makes me different from them and I draw a blank. I’m basically trying to claim ownership of this place, but I’m only a voyeur. If there were people here, I’d be mad at them, and they at me, for ‘spoiling’ it. I’m spoiling it right now but no one knows it. There’s that strange mentality when faced with a monument, when your instinct is to ‘capture’ it, to take that photo



you see on all the postcards and in National Geographic.<sup>(38)</sup> It's the same photo as everyone else's but it's also your own<sup>(39)</sup>—and of course, the ultimate prize is when you achieve that impossible feat of excluding other tourists from said photo, running up to your boyfriend shouting “Look! I got a photo of the lighthouse with NO ONE ELSE IN IT” (for the record, Starr, I'm guilty of the same).<sup>(40)</sup>

But before I know it, the sun has set and the beacons shine. This is where my fear started—at night, on the highway, seeing these ominous glowing orbs hover in the sky. It's a slow transition from day to night, especially with these huge, open skies, but one thing I didn't count on is just how absolutely dark it would get. I spent most of my time in my car looking up at the Tower, counting the lights as I spotted them (for the record, twenty-eight horrifying red beacons—twenty-one of which are static and weak, seven of which are pulsing and strong), taking photos with two cameras—one with a telephoto lens, the other with a wide angle. About an hour after the sun sets I suddenly realize that despite the faint glow beyond the horizon, the ground around me was pitch black. At that point

38 Those are some dated references—let's say Instagram or Snapchat.

39 Susan Sontag writes about the very same thing, about how photography and tourism go hand in hand. It's a compulsion more than a hobby, a way of denying and distancing yourself from what you're experiencing. It's a crutch, one I've relied on almost constantly since my parents insisted I use their video camera to record our family trips. I obliged, watching events unfold through a viewfinder, using up tape after tape, and upon our return placing them neatly in a drawer where they remain to this day. My mom still gets on my case about digitizing them.

40 Adobe (those crooks) even developed software that uses dozens of photos taken from the same perspective to form a composite image that excludes non-static elements, which, mostly, are other people. I use this same technique to produce blurry impressions of my drives by stacking hundreds of stills taken using my time-lapse camera. The non-static elements here are everything except the road and the horizon. Depending on the time interval between each image ( $\Delta t$ ), each drive is more or less averaged out to produce what I like to call 'Swatches'. Reducing  $\Delta t$  reveals more information, but I like to cancel it all out until all that's left is sky, road, and horizon. See 'Appendix B', page 333.

I know I'll never be able to approach the Tower at night, partly because of my fear of the thing, but mostly because I'd need a floodlight to even get close. The only light sources discernible from my car were above the door to the control room, and from that strange farm house to the north.

About that house: I did write a note, and was planning on dropping it off on my way out, but as I drove in the night, my high beams cutting through only enough darkness to safely see the road, I noticed the lights were on and a car had pulled up, its rear running lights painting the yard red.<sup>(41)</sup> It felt wrong to sneak up and drop a note when people were around, and I didn't think my presence would be welcome in the dark. I'd try again another time.

Tomorrow I think I'll take a break from the Tower and explore that long lonely road between Fargo and Streeter.

41 I couldn't help but think of that scene from Goodfellas where they dig up a rotting corpse.





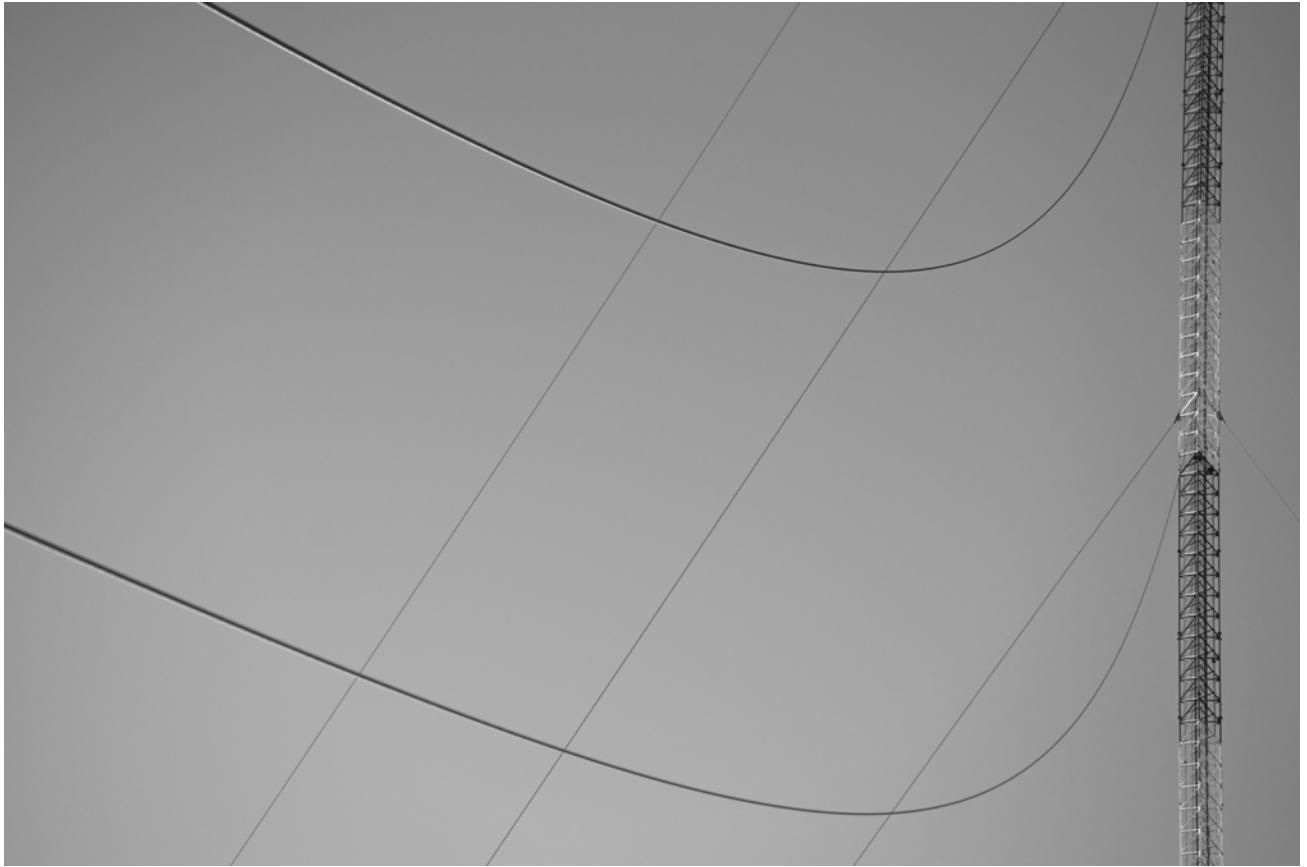




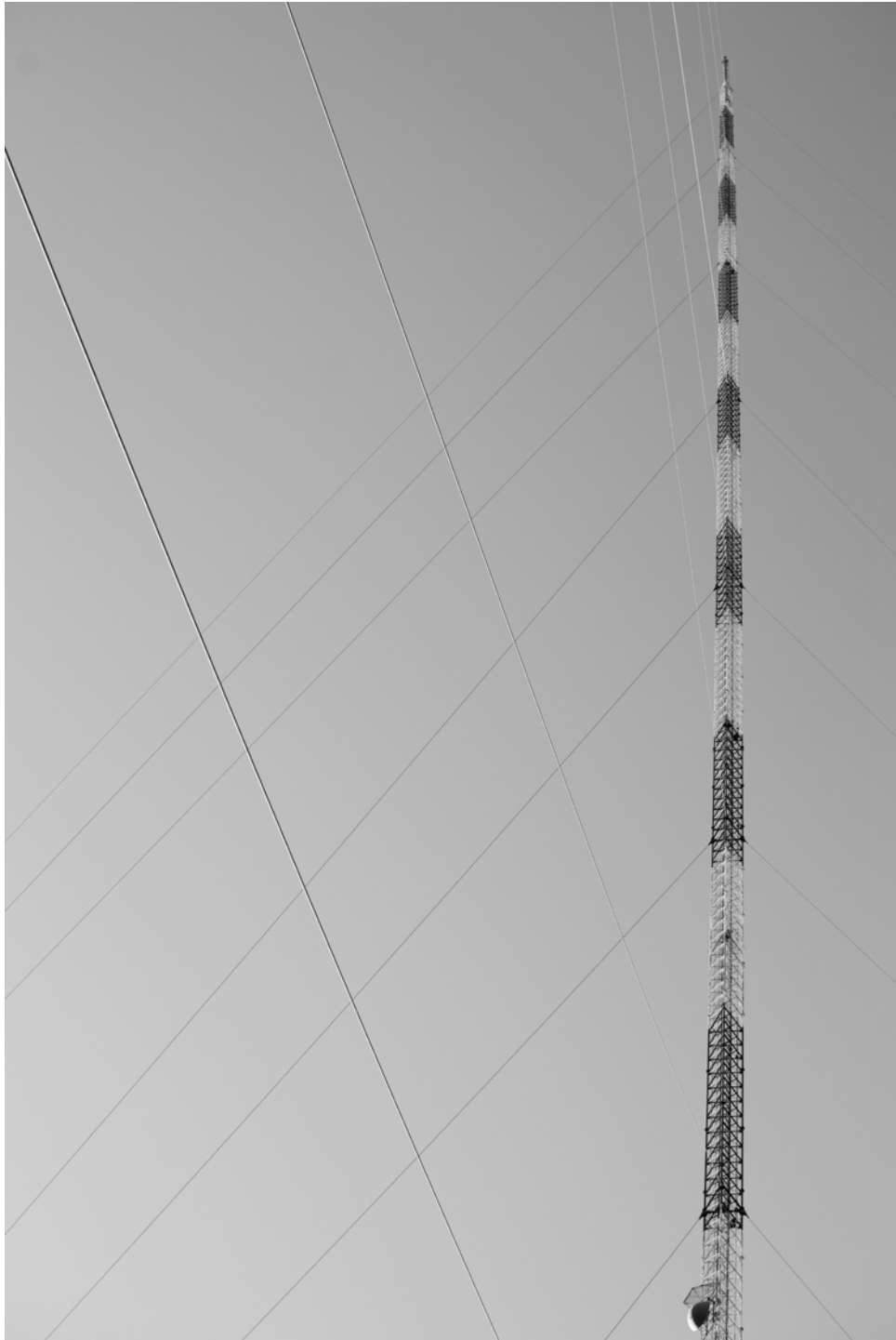


















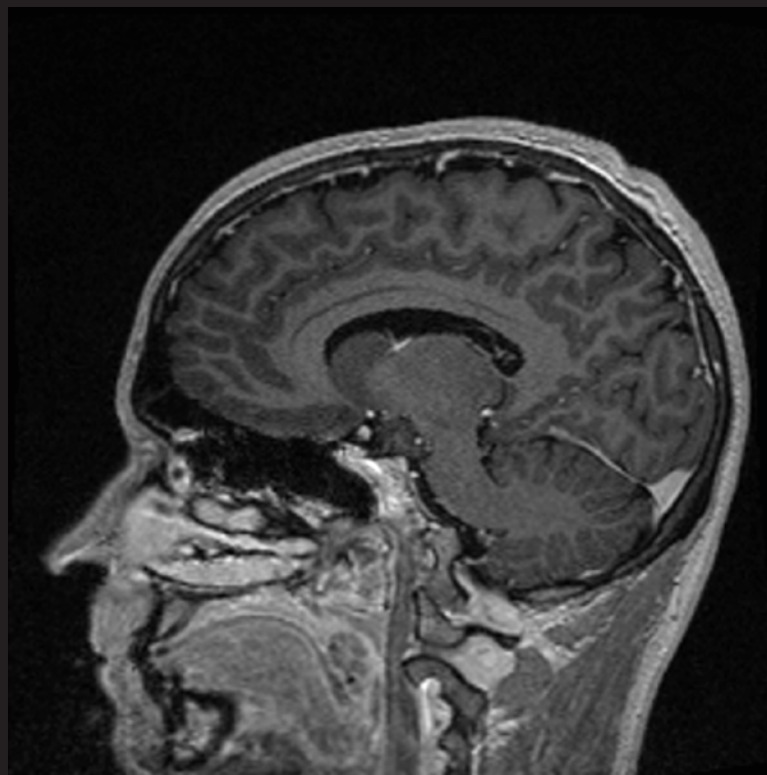














## DAY 06

2017 11 25

Crap, I drove too fast. It should have taken about four hours total—two hours each way—so by my calculation, if I started at 1:30 p.m. (which I did), I'd catch some nice afternoon light, dusk, sunset, magic hour, darkness, and be done by 5:30. I somehow shaved thirty minutes off my time, so I never got to capture the dark, but this is why I'm here for another four days—to account for any potential mistakes and/or missed opportunities.

Thoughts that entered my mind, in no particular order, as I drove in a not-quite-as-straight-as-I-hoped line:

This road is not quite as straight as I hoped. About seven minutes in, the road curved through one of those towns you wonder why they even bothered to name. These are familiar to anyone who has driven through rural America.<sup>(42)</sup> It's your usual cluster of silos, barns, the singular gas station-slash-convenience-store, a handful of modest houses, and the whole thing is over before you realize you were supposed to drastically slow down to fifty km/h—at which point you understand why they purposefully bent the road, though the hint was lost on you. This happens about three more times

42 And perhaps Canada, though my experience in Ontario hasn't quite been the same.

through three more towns (my favorite is a town called Gackle, in no small part because the town is called Gackle), and only once did the road curve because of a geological formation. This road could have easily taken top place as straightest, longest road in America were it not for those safety-conscious stooges in the planning department. As I've mentioned previously, the actual top position is hotly debated, with some claiming that US-80 in Utah has a longer stretch of uninterrupted road—though not by much. Regardless, this will do for now.

I had my usual four camera set-up, but this time I'd try something different. I'd try to be disciplined, structured in how often and how long I press record. It's incredibly easy to try to capture it all, but the problem is that I have to sort through this mind-numbingly boring footage when I'm done—so I decided to only hit record on my front and side cameras for thirty seconds every fifteen minutes. Shooting at 120 frames-per-second,<sup>(43)</sup> this would result in a potential forty minutes of footage to sort through, should I choose to actually play it back at 24 fps (for a 5x reduction in speed).

I'm not disciplined. I gave up on this almost immediately. There's just too much to capture to leave it up to chance. Whatever. Future-Me will deal with this.<sup>(44)</sup>

After the first town, the road doesn't curve for at least another thirty or forty minutes. During this time, between snapping a few photos and pressing record on my cameras, I let my mind wander. I play back a conversation I had with the front desk lady earlier this morning. I needed to convert some CAD to USD, and it being a Saturday, I ask her where I'd have the best shot at exchanging currency.

43 From now on I'll be using 'fps'.

44 Future-Me reporting in. I did not.

Her immediate reaction was to ask me what I'm converting, which I thought was peculiar. I tell her Canadian Dollars to U.S. Dollars. She accepts that answer—I feel like I just passed some kind of test—and says she'll check. She stares straight at me and says, "Hey Siri."

I reply was a very Canadian, "Sorry?"

"Hey Siri, First International Bank and Trust opening hours."

Oh.

"I'm sorry, I didn't get that." (That's Siri speaking)

"Hey Siri, call First International Bank and Trust."

This goes on for a while. I had never seen someone use Siri with such determination, let alone to look up something you could have Googled in a second. I stand there patiently, amused more than annoyed. After giving me the info I needed, she asks me if I'm from Canada, to which I reply, "yeah, from Toronto", to which (and I swear I'm not simply playing up the common American stereotype) she replies was the blankest of stares. I clarify with, "Ontario". Nothing. After a moment's thought, she tells me that she's been there once. Pleasantly surprised, I ask her what brought her to Toronto?

"Oh, no, just Canada," like it was all the same really. "I went with my Christian Study Group when I was, ohhh, I don't know, I had my kid when I was sixteen, soooo, yeah, I must have been about twelve."

And I stand there feeling so superior, having all of my preconceived notions of this town and state and country confirmed in one interaction. She had facial piercings and her hair was an indescribable color between pink and green. She could have been eighteen or thirty—who knows.

"Did you get the Canada Rate?"

"Huh?"

"The Canada Rate."

"There's a Canada Rate?"

“Oh yeah, here let me check.”

She looks something up on the computer.

“I didn’t get the Canada Rate, did I?”

“No, look here, you’re paying...”

She spent the next ten minutes explaining the different rates they offer and what I could do and who I could speak to get a refund and I’m thinking to myself that this girl is going out of her way to save me something like twenty dollars and all I could do is quietly judge her.

I’m such an ass. I can’t help but think that my initial lack of empathy and judgmental attitude is exactly how this country has grown so divided. And this is verging on the political, so I’ll end it by saying that I feel bad, and that if by some miracle Schantel<sup>(45)</sup> finds this, that I want to say I’m sorry.

North Dakota is not as flat as I would have thought.

Despite the almost constant freezing temperatures, there’s no snow to speak of. Which in my mind would have been disappointing, but in reality the late fall colors are perfect under the constant clear skies. The harvested fields (mostly wheat and corn I think, but I’m no expert) shine gold, almost blinding. The skies are huge and there are few trees. My whole impression of the place is saturated orange and blue.

As I return to the start of the drive, sun setting behind me, I notice a field fire, and wonder how the hell that’s even possible with freezing temperatures, and that there must be no humidity to speak of.

45 That’s her name. I didn’t fall asleep on my keyboard.



The road ends anticlimactically, bypassing Streeter entirely by dipping south and becoming ND HWY-30. Not wanting to interrupt this first pass at it, I do a u-turn and head back, planning to explore Streeter on my second visit, which I decide will take place over a whole day, stopping along the way as I see fit.

I miss the Tower. There's something beautiful and calming and meditatively boring about staying in one place and letting your environment change, as opposed to hurtling yourself forward in a machine that will, statistically speaking, probably kill me.<sup>(46)</sup>

Which is why I like to produce the following images, taking stills from my time lapse and compressing time into one frame.<sup>(47)</sup> The first one is the whole drive, all 3.5 hours, in one still. Each still is about 250 images out of 6000 (only because I run out of RAM if I use more), spaced out evenly.

But I think it gets a little more interesting when you start breaking down the time intervals. The next four are each half of the drive, facing west then east, and the last set is broken down into rough ten to fifteen minute chunks—this is about as granular as I get.

If you haven't noticed, my GoPro still insists on focusing on my windshield. I have a plan though. Costco sells the new GoPro, and I just so happen to have my Costco card on me, and they just so happen to accept returns on products bought internationally, and their return policy is very, very accommodating.<sup>(48)</sup>

46 This strikes me, upon a re-read months later, as a peculiar thought given all I've written about my love of driving. Must have been in a state.

47 I have moved these images to 'Appendix B', page 344, as their inclusion in this main portion was distracting, and they work better as a set. Please excuse the resulting awkwardness.

48 I've since corrected this using photoshop, so the reference doesn't make much sense anymore. Still, I'm leaving this as-is, as my frustration with the GoPro comes up several times in this story.







































## DAY 07

2017 11 26

And on the seventh day, he rested.

I went to bed last night and found myself unable to sleep. I think I'm overworking myself, and so I took the day off—or nearly. I did get that GoPro from Costco, spending 350 hopefully-refundable, very-American dollars. I carefully unpacked it and took it for a test run—no more tack sharp windshield. I honestly don't know when my old GoPro crapped out, because eight months ago it focused just fine. With that taken care of, I spent the rest of the day cooking proper meals and getting some exercise and doing very little actual thinking about my work, which felt nice.

Tomorrow I'm going to get up early, before sunrise, and start a day long journey documenting that road again. This time I'll stop as often as I want—I may even step out of my car, though with all that equipment I'm a little wary of leaving things unattended for long.

The last thing I want to mention is that, though these entries have been fun to produce, they're also time-sinks. The point was to get eyes on work that I would have otherwise kept to myself, but that's not why I'm here. I have three, maybe four days left before I start the long drive back, and I need to make them count. I'll still be writing daily, but I think I'm going to have to reduce the amount of images I post, as the sorting and editing is slow and painful on this laptop, and the uploading just a complete crapshoot.



I've run out of time, as usual. The goal was to tell a story in a sort of David-Foster-Wallace-style run-on sentence about a particular fifty kilometer drive. This stream of consciousness narrative would have fit nicely with what I assumed would be a series of discrete places, dates, events, and memories, roughly located and timestamped, in whatever order I recalled. But as I said, I ran out of time.

What follows is then a series of notes, in no particular order. But first, some context. Whenever I feel anxious or frustrated, I go for a drive. I've been going on the same drive, more or less, for the last six years. The route has rarely changed. I always look for long country roads. The fewer cars the better. I often listen to music. Sometimes, I listen to the sound of my tires on pavement or gravel, kicking up dirt, rocks and mud. Sometimes, I wait for the weather to turn, or the sun to set. Sometimes the drive lasts twenty minutes, other times up to an hour. This drive lasts forty-five minutes.

There's the foot bridge that passes over the Grand River, under which I contracted some kind of bacterial infection which sent me regurgitating to the emergency room. I was in the river not exactly by choice, but something like it. I was stringing rope from shoreline to shoreline—school project. The next day, I couldn't stop vomiting. Of course, it may also have been food poisoning from the pig roast I attended the day prior, but given that no one else got sick, I'm inclined to blame the river.

There's the apartment below mine that, I'm quite sure, houses drug dealers. On many occasions I've come home to cop cars conspicuously parked in the empty lot across my building—the lot empty because my neighbors burned down their garage shed and never replaced it, preferring instead to leave the charred remains of the concrete slab exposed. The people downstairs yell and fight a

lot, often in the street, often about money. Strangers come knocking at strange hours. The dogs are losing their minds. Walking back alone at night, I heard for the first time the cry of a coyote, which, if you don't know, can best be described as a wailing demon baby. I ran.

There's the long, long, really long farm building (perhaps a green house) that sits in the landscape perfectly perpendicular to the road, which I have on more than one occasion used as precedence for a project. It's clad in clean, sun-bleached wood panels, with metal cross-bracing. It stands out amongst the standard rotting barns, broken fences, trash heaps and concrete silos.

There's another bridge high above the Grand River, where I've never stopped despite wanting to every time I've crossed it. Driving by, catching only a glimpse through the side windows, you can see the river for miles in each direction, and it's unbelievably beautiful.

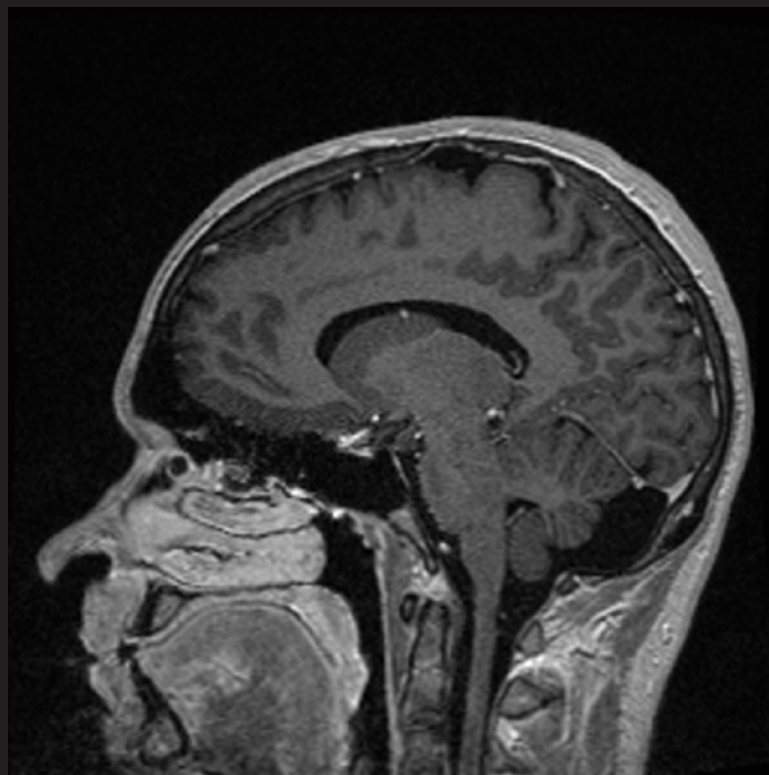
There are the Five Towers, the creatively-named cluster of five radio towers which sit between farm land high up on the hills around Cambridge. At night, three of the towers are lit up with red, flashing beacons, signaling their ominous presence.

On my favorite roads there's nothing—maybe a few boring and beautiful grain silos. Maybe a farm house. No cars. No people. On dark nights I sometimes turn my high-beams off and let the darkness creep in a little more. In this bubble I watch the road glide by. I watch the trees and shrubs fade in and fade out. I watch the telephone wires reflect the lights of distant cars. I watch the pulsing of signal tower beacons. Sometimes when the weather is bad, this bubble closes in further. It's these moments I seek out most, but often the drive alone is enough. Maybe I should see a therapist.

That's as far as I've gotten, but I want to take a minute to point out the places that I don't drive by.

I don't drive by the school of architecture. I don't drive by the strip-mall-laden suburban nightmare of Hespeler Road. I don't drive by Toaster's Diner, the best kept secret in Cambridge. I never make it to Paris—in fact I avoid Paris. I never cross the 401.

I've never much deviated from my set route, once it was established, almost subconsciously. Over time, the drive found its way into muscle memory. I couldn't name even a third of the roads I take. One road I know only by the cluster of trees that lines it, another by the strange way it curves off the main road. The first time I looked at my route was for this project. Hovering over Cambridge, I retraced my drive on Google maps. I looked for that cluster of trees. I looked for the shape of that road. I did this only to figure out exactly how long the drive was. Turns out to be fifty kilometers. In the last seven days I've gone on seven drives. Over the last six years, I must have driven twenty-five hundred kilometers. 187 hours. Almost eight full days of my life spent aimlessly driving, stepping away from work, trying not to lose my mind, and in doing so becoming something of an expert on this small patch of Canadian pastoral landscape.







## DAY 08

2017 11 27

I've never been so fascinated and frustrated by a place the way I've been with North Dakota.

I woke up at 5 a.m., determined to hit the road before sunrise—Google informed me that would happen at 7:45—when the streets and country roads would be quiet. As usual, that didn't happen. My best friend in grades seven through nine lived on a farm, where I actually worked for a few summers, driving a tractor (unlicensed) and bagging corn (this was not one of those industrial farms with revenue in the millions affording them automation). Had I recalled this experience before heading out, I'd have realized how dumb it was to try to wake up before farmers.

The point is that the roads were not quiet, and this was a problem. My plan for the day was to drive the 46, but take my time with it, stopping to explore and photograph. Having cars behind you makes it difficult to stop whenever you want, especially on the 46's nearly non-existent shoulder. As I spot something interesting, I had about two seconds to judge whether it was worth decelerating from 115 km/h (really just about the speed limit on these highways, and from the amount of pick-ups tailgating me, merely a suggestion). Before I knew it, I had reached the end, having stopped only

twice (once, at a random corn field just before sun-rise, the next, well after, by a reservoir where hundreds of white birds too far off to properly identify were resting on their trip south—and where, I should note, a woman in a truck very visibly slowed down to either make sure I wasn't doing anything suspicious, or to make sure I wasn't in trouble, my car parked with the hazards on, a courtesy I realized was unneeded, drawing too much attention).

On my way back, I decide this particular drive was a failure, and that instead of stopping to photograph, I'd set-up my iPhone to record the whole two hour trip back in slow-motion for a roughly ten hour crawl through mostly empty fields. And of course, that didn't quite work out either. My mount fell off fifteen minutes in—shot ruined.

I'm starting to resent this place.



























Back in Fargo, I transfer some footage, eat a meal (homemade burritos), shower. It's noon and I'm at a loss for what to do. I had planned the whole day around the 46, and it was a bust. I check my email.

Hi Marco,

My transmitter engineer will be on site at Blanchard on Thursday this week. If that works, I can arrange for you to meet him. I may be able to meet with you during the week in Fargo, you will have to let me know when you plan on being here. We are extremely busy here with projects and I don't know how much time I will have.

Doug

Doug Jenson came through! I had emailed him last Friday, from the Tower, asking if I could get a peek inside the control room somehow. It was a long shot, and it paid off. I was supposed to leave Fargo on Thursday, unless I felt like I needed another day here to wrap things up. I quickly called the front desk and extended my stay. After a few brief exchanges, Doug and I agree that I would just speak to the engineer, a man named Lyle Nelson—declining to meet me in person, politely explaining that it's a busy week and he's strapped for time.

I decide to head back to the Tower, still needing to drop that note off at the mysterious farm house.<sup>(49)</sup>

49 Mildly-amusing anecdote: the many silos on their land had the name Butler on them, and so logically, I started to think of that place as Butler Farms, at least until I started driving the 46, where I saw many more silos with the name Butler and realized it was a brand name. The actual farm name is "elm en Farm ". I missed some letters.

Once there, I pull up to the house, my car between their driveway and mailbox. I wonder for a moment if what I'm about to do is legal, set that thought aside, look around, make sure I'm not being watched, open my car door, run to the mailbox, open the mailbox, notice the stack of letters unclaimed, set my note neatly atop the unclaimed letters, close the box, jump back in the car, slam my door, and drive off like mad.

The weather today was right around freezing, but with only a light wind it was the most pleasant day so far. I drove up to the very base of the Tower, my car a kind of safety blanket I thought necessary for today's goal: I'd round that corner and face the Tower head on. And I did. And I wondered, as I often do, what the hell was wrong with me. It's just a tower. It lands so bluntly, so matter-of-factly, that I'm honestly kind of disappointed. The three main columns are deadpan bolted to a concrete pad, like a cheap guardrail. Other masts, which I've only seen from a distance, had such a complex looking web of wires and steel at the base that I expected something more daunting and engineered. Those other masts also, usually, terminate in a single pinned connection, which I'm guessing allows them to sway in the wind.

Still, I never got very close. The wind died down today, but that sound was still there, and behind it, something I hadn't quite made out before (because of the wind): the unmistakable sound of current flowing through wire. That worried me on a kind of primal level, so I stay back, able to watch the thing but not approach.<sup>(50)</sup>

50 On the website, I uploaded a sound clip demonstrating the noise I heard. If you're curious, simply Google '60hz Hum'.











Something I've failed to report on is this Tower's sister, always visible in the background. I didn't quite know where she fit in to this story, being the second tallest structure in America and fifth in the world. The sun was setting, and though I had the comfort of my car right at the very base, I was still in no mood to be around when the beacons started flashing. I decide to drive the eight kilometers to that other tower.

Though just shy of KVLV's imposing height by three feet, I can't help but find her so much less imposing. My mind knows that three feet over 2063 is a drop in the ocean, 0.15% shorter, objectively imperceptible even if side by side. Maybe it's that the tower was rebuilt twice, once after an ice storm, another after a military helicopter flew into the guy-wires, killing all four on board. It's not as old. It's built using better, lighter steel. The cables are less numerous and the angles less severe, and thus the visual mass of the whole thing is not as heavy. The structure is left raw, galvanized instead of the fading white and red paint of KVLV. The beacons are not the usual pulsing crimson, but intense white strobes. It should be as impressive, but it isn't, because I made up my mind weeks ago that it never could be. I never get very close to it, instead choosing to drive the roads adjacent, getting out once to take a few photos at the entrance. She's not worth my time.

I drive back to Fargo using country roads instead of the interstate. On the way back I nearly hit three dogs who ran out from a field to play with my car. I slam on my breaks, stopping just shy of a chocolate lab who I suspect would have been fine, seemingly knowing to avoid my tires, instead jumping up and down by my passenger window. The other two, a brown mutt and a yellow lab, fight by the side of the road. They're all collared. I roll down my window

and asked them politely to move. I keep driving through nameless-yet-named towns (Blanchard, Hunter, Arthur, Amenia, Casselton, Mapleton),<sup>(51)</sup> arriving in Fargo well after sunset, feeling nostalgic already.

51 One of those relevant references Piper sent me was a piece of writing by Marc Augé about non-places. A non-place is a place devoid of history, relationships or any concern with identity. Highways are prototypical non-places, as are airports, hospitals, waiting rooms and gas stations. I wonder about this now, about these towns whose individual parts seem to be made up uniquely of non-places, and whether writing about them and photographing them elevates them in some way. Augé writes about highways and interstates, which by their very nature avoid any kind of place, even reducing those places to words on a sign, commenting on them and critiquing them. These old highways, the 46 and the one I'm taking now as I drive back to Fargo, are relics replaced by the interstate system. They don't bypass their towns, instead cut right through them. The towns critique themselves, names painted on buildings and factories, their populations advertised despite their decline—a slow ticker inevitably counting down.















Despite everything I've been taught to hate about it, as well as the things I'm sure I hate,<sup>(52)</sup> the place is growing on me. It's growing on me because the people are friendly as hell, mostly non-judgmental, mostly curious. I've had nothing but pleasant interactions. The architecture is atrocious, but fairly well built, care taken in the assembly. I drove through the most suburb-y of suburban developments you can imagine—treeless lawns broken up by wide driveways to accommodate the ever growing girth of American pick-up trucks<sup>(53)</sup> leading up to the just-as-wide double garage doors that dominate the front facade of the split-level homes, missing only white picket fences and rose bushes to complete the Lynchian dystopia. And yet I was charmed. Almost every driveway had a basket ball hoop over the garage door, and every now and then I spotted a plastic tricycle. It's like they don't realize how stereotypically suburban it all is, and at that thought I realize how jaded I've become, recalling my interaction with Schantel from a few days ago. I don't like to preach, but architects (designers, artists, etc) can be so damn self-righteous. My first thought, driving through this small corner of Fargo that may as well be every corner of Fargo, was "how can I improve this?" when maybe it doesn't need to be improved, maybe these people are happy with their absurd trucks and bland-but-functional houses.

52 There's the days-long story about a search for a sponge that I'll spare you... Okay, the gist is this: it took me three days and five trips to find a sponge. I finally found it at a supermarket five minutes from my hotel, though on my way back I got lost, driving a kilometer in the wrong direction because everything looks the same—I had to Google my way back.

53 Seriously, fifty percent of those cars must be empty space—there's no way the engine block is that big.

And I'm suddenly thinking once again about my thesis and how I've avoid the question asked in our second semester:

How does your thesis plug into a real and urgent question about the world we live in?

Does it really have to? We're architects. We build buildings.<sup>(54)</sup> And while I don't mean to diminish our profession, we like to think our work affects people more than it actually does... I've typed out four possible elaborations on that thought I'm not comfortable sharing, all four literal windows into my darkest, most cynical thoughts, and man, this is getting too heavy. Instead, here's a picture of a stop sign.

Tomorrow I'll go for a night drive on the 46, surrounded by hopefully-sleeping farmers.<sup>(55)</sup>

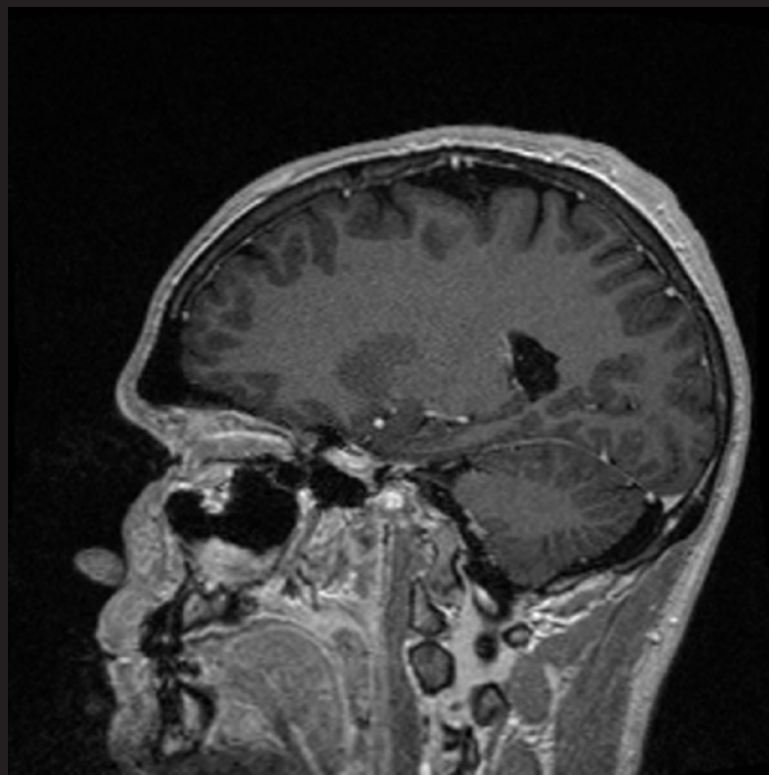
54 The irony of saying "architects build buildings" within the context of my current thesis work is not lost on me.

55 This entry took just as long as the others. I guess I feel like I have a responsibility to you or something.











## DAY 09

2017 11 28

It's 12:30 p.m., and about an hour ago I was wrapping up yesterday's entry (I've fallen behind again). I was going to prepare lunch before heading out when I noticed a missed call from a 701 area code. Having left my note yesterday, I was hoping it would be from whoever lives at that farm. I play the message and my phone dies five seconds in. It was from a person named Beth, who indeed received my note. I frantically get my jacket and boots on to retrieve the charger I left in the car overnight, immediately realizing as the door closed that I had locked myself out of my room. I get the charger, get a new key at reception, plug my phone in, and wait that insufferable amount of time for the phone to restart. I grab my recorder and listen to the message below.<sup>(56)</sup>

The first thing I notice is that, despite all odds, she nails my family name. Play it again—I did, several times, that 'k' sound music to my ears. Unbelievable.

56 One of those awkward transitions from web to print. I've decided to not produce a link to the voice recordings, as those recorded were not aware of it at the time.

I grab a note pad and write down some of the info I was given: ‘Beth’, ‘Little Yellow Farm’, ‘Bateman’.<sup>(57)</sup>

I call her back immediately with no plan of action other than to speak to her. I’ve uploaded that call in its entirety, failing to mention that she was being recorded, this time certain in the illegality of my actions.<sup>(58)</sup> I’m posting it mainly because I thought a written transcript would fail to convey just how absurdly friendly and accommodating she was. If this website goes public beyond the small group I’ve shared it with, I’ll remove the recording. As for any ethical clearance concerns for thesis work, Donald can help me navigate those later.<sup>(59)</sup>

Some notes and takeaways for those who can’t be bothered (understandably) to listen to all ten minutes:

I’m so damn awkward.

She’s so damn nice.

The lands around the Tower don’t belong to her family. They belong to some consortium. Apparently they were sold off more than fifty years ago. I had asked because so far I limited myself to roads and ditches when capturing the Tower and wanted to wander into the fields, unsure of whether that was frowned upon—North

57 My first thought was Patrick Bateman, of *American Psycho*, and the Bates Motel, from *Psycho*, neither of which are encouraging given the secluded nature of the farm, which I had previously likened to Leatherface’s lair in *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*—this new info tying a neat ribbon around my twisted associations.

58 Again, this being a book, the audio is obviously unavailable. Good thing.

59 I was pretty cavalier about ethical concerns before the trip, something I regret immensely. To call this work a piece of journalism would be an insult to the profession, but I definitely found myself navigating some ethically gray areas that would have benefited from some journalistic rigor.

Dakota having little-to-no gun legislation preventing any nut case from owning a firearm, I preferred not getting shot for trespassing).

Her mother married into the lands only after the Tower was built, though she was in the area around that time in '63.<sup>(60)</sup> I awkwardly ask Beth if she had been born then. She laughs at my fumbling question, and answers that no, she was born a couple years later.

I ask Beth about any fanfare surrounding the Tower's construction, and she replies with probably the most important take-away from my time here:

“How do I say it... folks around here are a little more practical-minded. It's not like, 'oh we got the biggest...' It's more like, 'Oh, this is going to help. Put it up.'”

And with that I question my obsession with the Tower. Suddenly those kids I thought about on that first day below the Tower vanish. What the hell am I doing here?

She goes on to describe a man she met who told her that, in the late sixties or early seventies, high-school kids used to climb to the top and base jump off the Tower (she clarifies that this was before it was even called base jumping, and though I sound awed on the recording, I find the whole thing hard to believe. But I supposed part of what attracted me to the Tower and part of why I'm speaking to her in the first place is to uncover these myths.)

Beth offers to ask her mother, who lives with her at the house, if she remembers anything around the time of the Tower's construction, but the mother is still asleep (she admits later that they're both late risers). Amazingly, she then invites me over to speak to the mother

<sup>60</sup> This turned out to be false, though I'm getting ahead of myself.

myself. Or if it's more convenient, she could meet me in Fargo during their weekly grocery trips. Man, these people.

The last thing I ask of her is to clarify the name of the farm, as Little Yellow Farm didn't quite match the partial I.D. I got off barn. She was actually just describing the farm, not stating the name, which is Elm Bend Farm (named after Elm River, over which you drive when turning on to their road).

I thank her and we end the call. I expect to hear back from her with a date and time. I'm still smiling from the whole exchange. Friendly people, the Batemans.



It's technically tomorrow and I'm writing this after waking to a phone call from my Mom. I went to bed late last night after riding the 46 for nearly five hours, returning to my motel with an empty tank and too many photos around 1:30 a.m. She texted me a brief "All Good?" last night at 8 p.m. and I forgot to reply. She called to tell me she watched a movie named Population Zero, about a theoretical 'Perfect Crime' committed by a North Dakotan in Yellowstone National Park. I mumble something like, "yeah huh no I'm fine yeah don't worry yeah ok bye" and lie half-asleep in bed for a minute. Damn it, I can't help it. I get up and start Googling.

Apparently, there's something called the Vicinage Clause (as in vicinity) in the Sixth Amendment to the United States Constitution.<sup>(61)</sup> Basically, a jury pool must be selected from within the State

61 United States National Archives, "The Bill of Rights: A Transcription." National Archives and Records Administration. (Accessed May 23, 2018). <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/bill-of-rights-transcript>.

and District in which a crime was committed. This means that, like in the case of certain corners in Yellowstone National Park, with official populations of zero, the crime could, theoretically, not go to trial—not even for murder.<sup>(62)</sup>

This makes me feel something like comfort when I recall that Streeter is home to 166 potential jury candidates. I could have used that sense of security last night, when, as I drove through those dark fields and empty towns, I couldn't help but feel my presence was unwanted. And maybe that's part of the appeal. A lot of what I've been doing here makes me uncomfortable. This whole thesis makes me uncomfortable. To quickly address the issue without getting bogged down in it: sure, I could have drawn some maps or designed a building and been done by now. Not sure why I didn't, but I do know that I'm having way more fun out here, on the road, with my car and my camera.

Last night, I kept my set-up minimal, and the drive started to feel like those drives around Cambridge that I would take to clear my head. Maybe it was the dark. Maybe it was the seclusion. Though the roads were surprisingly busy at 8 p.m., they were quickly deserted by 9.<sup>(63)</sup> Twice, during that busy hour, cars pulled up next to mine to make sure I was fine, that I didn't need help. These people are friendly to a fault. I stood there, camera in hand, insisting that I was fine, stopping just short of having to explain my whole reason for being there; they just couldn't believe that I'd stop on this road simply to take pictures.

Still, despite having not a single negative thing to say about any of my encounters with the locals, I felt uneasy. I drove through the following towns, recording their names as I arrived:

62 That's not strictly true. Though the loophole is valid, it would certainly not be enforced. Seems like exceptions can be made in the name of common sense.

63 The crops having been harvested and the earth tilled, I'm drawing a blank as to what these people are up to from 5 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Kindred (pop. 755), Enderlin (pop. 868), Gackle (pop. 291), Streeter (pop. 166). In each, off the 46, you will find a church and a gas station. You'll find a sign pointing to the main street, which is rarely the 46. Driving down those streets, you'll find a brightly lit USPS office (closed), a town hall you'd be hard-pressed to identify as such without the sign (closed), a few local businesses (closed), a senior community center (these are all dying towns with declining populations, also closed), and a bar (open, except in Streeter, though I did get there late). If you want to find the bars quickly, look for the few remaining cars parked on Main—they'll be as close to the bar as possible. I considered going in to grab a coffee—despite preparatory afternoon nap, I was more tired than expected—but I saw locals drinking beer and watching sports and thought I'd draw too much attention to myself, so I didn't.<sup>(64)</sup>

In two of the towns, I noticed a gathering of pick-up trucks at the church. In both towns, I could have sworn I was being followed by one of the trucks—maybe just curious, but maybe suspicious, my German car and foreign plate unmistakable in the sodium glow. I would, in those instances, drive back to the highway, not wanting to confront anyone.

I took a lot of photos, using my tripod and telephoto lens to get as close as I could without drawing suspicion. Sometimes I'd use my high-beams to light something up, other times I'd let moonlight do the work. The photos fell into three categories, as there are really

64 At this time it's worth bringing up the fact that none of my photos contain people. Marie-Paule (Macdonald) was the first to point it out, though it was no surprise to me. I like to think I'm a friendly, approachable person, but I'm not exactly the most gregarious. There's a reason why I chose to document these parts of North Dakota: they're lonely. My answer to Marie-Paule's question of why people were conspicuously absent basically amounted to, "There really aren't that many people to photograph along this road," or at least, not from my car.



only three things to photograph out here: industrial/farm buildings, dark houses, store fronts.<sup>(65)</sup>

As the hours passed, the roads grew more lonely, but I never felt alone. Maybe that's by design. Along the road, your headlights pick up reflective orange signs warning against trespassing. Those country road staples (the barns and silos) are always lit-up, as though someone was out there working. There's always at least one car far-off ahead or behind, their high-beams blinking in and out sporadically as you ride the rolling hills. Dotted along the horizon are floodlights, even at midnight. You think you're alone, that everyone is asleep, that you're the only watcher in the dark, but you can't be sure you're not being watched yourself.

When I got back to the hotel, my unease about those towns was eerily vindicated when, swinging by the front desk to move the bi-weekly cleaning time, Schantel asked me how I was liking North Dakota. I responded positively, saying I was pleasantly surprised, that I was most struck by how friendly everyone was. She frowns and says, ominously, "Not everyone here is friendly," and leaves it at that.

The plan for tomorrow (today? The 29th...) is to drive the 46 one last time, recording the whole drive out my side window—one continuous shot. This will be my last excursion on the 46.

65 One practical matter to address: I can't upload photos from my mom's camera. Though I've been mostly using it for video, I have been taking a lot of photos with it too. Unfortunately, Adobe (those crooks) have stopped offering updates to Lightroom CS6 and their RAW format compatibility list, insisting I pay for their subscription based version if I want to upload pictures taken with the A9. It's a shady-at-best tactic. The RAW update could easily be pushed to their older software. They just hate that I paid \$150 for Lightroom CS6 once, and refuse to pay \$10 a month for the rest of my life for Lightroom CC. I know how to deal with this, and if the wif here were any better, I'd have already done so.



















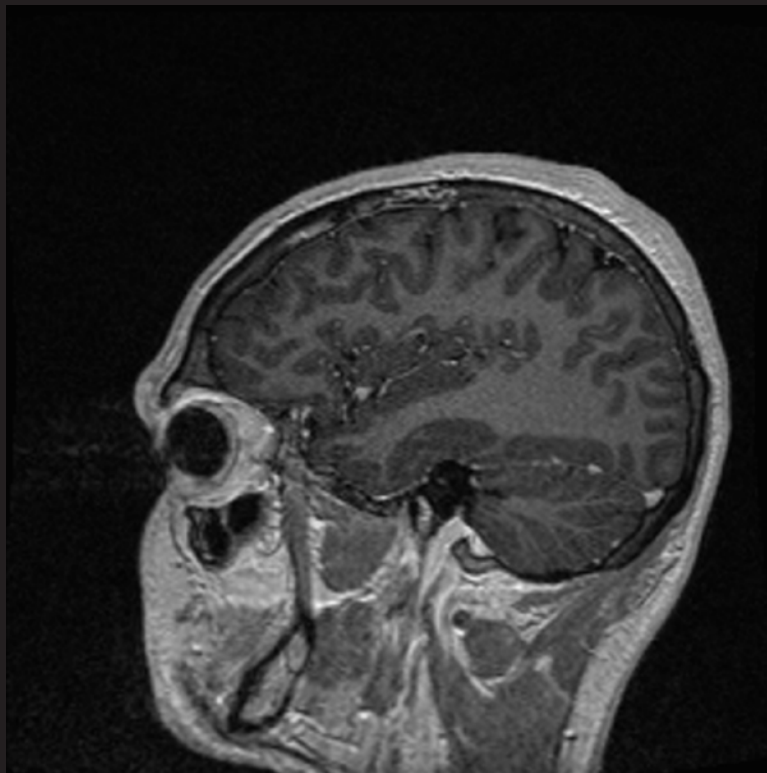
















## DAY 10

2017 11 29

I'm going to keep this one short.

Today was my last day on the 46 and I decided to record the whole bloody thing, both ways, north and south. I've generally found my iPhone footage to be passable at best, so I MacGyvered my dash rig to work on my driver side window using paper towels and another mount. It kind of sort of worked.

I realize now that I haven't posted a picture of my usual set-up. The wires run between each camera and either my cigarette lighter or a portable battery pack, keeping everything nicely juiced up and ready to record. If you're wondering how I haven't been pulled over yet, so am I (see plate 116).

The weather was blustery, to put it mildly. I lost my cap (part of the uniform) almost immediately after leaving the hotel, barely able to stand up straight. As I drove, gusts of wind would blow dry husks across the road. I saw literal tumbleweed, having forgotten those exist outside cartoons. The wind made sure I kept both hands on my steering wheel, especially when passing oncoming trucks. A calm would fall when driving by lanes of trees I now realized were planted for this very reason, and that calm would go when those

trees were parted by roads. Dust from dead fields filled the air and I couldn't have asked for a better farewell.

I'll think about what this all means another day. For now, all I know is I enjoyed the drive.

I was going to end this entry on a worried note, having yet to receive a call back from Beth about her mom. But of course, as I make dinner, on the phone with Starr,<sup>(65)</sup> I get the call. Hands full and food burning, I couldn't react quickly enough to record our conversation. Basically, we arrange to meet sometime tomorrow at the house. She tells me everything her mother knows about the Tower was given to her second hand by her late husband, Mr. Brown, who owned the farm she now lives in. Beth also tells me she's dug up a flyer from 1964 announcing the completion of the Tower, which she'll show me at the farm. Lastly, as if that wasn't enough, she tells me she's been trying to get in touch with a man who used to change those dreaded light bulbs on the Tower, but that she's been unsuccessful. I express my unending gratitude for all she's done, for going out of her way, and she response with a simple, "Oh, research is fun. I got the time."

It is fun, isn't it?

I'm meeting Lyle at 10 a.m., and Beth sometime after. I'll be spending the whole day at the Tower, taking it all in one last time.

65 During that conversation with Starr, she mentions how her coworker returned from Austin, Texas, talking about their Moonlight Towers (massive, ominous beacons popular in the 1800's as a way to effectively light up whole neighborhoods). Right up my alley. I'll have to look into those.



















## DAY 11

2017 11 30

It would be my last day in North Dakota and I was going all out. At 10 a.m. I was supposed to meet Lyle Nelson, transmission engineer for KVLV. Afterwards, I would meet Beth's mom at Elm Bend Farm for a few stories about the Tower. To cap it all off, I would spend the rest of the day making sure I got all the footage I needed. That was the plan, anyway.

### *The Tower Base*

This part is relatively straightforward. I supposed the biggest surprise here is how emotional I got leaving the city, going north one last time. It felt like I had unfinished business somehow, like I hadn't quite gotten what I came here for, only fragments. It was morning, roughly 9 a.m. when I left, and I hadn't seen the fields in quite this light—they were stunning. As I approached the Tower, I looped back so I could park and get some shots from a distance, this being the first time the Tower was not back-lit.

Doug told me to ring a bell on the base of the Tower after 10 a.m. It's 10:15. There's no car parked at the base. There's no bell. I stand there, taking a few photos, ready to email Doug to see if there

was some misunderstanding, when I hear a clank from inside the building. I knock on the metal door and hear the reassuring voice of a man saying, “Come on in!”. I push the door open, and there’s Lyle Nelson, small frame and only a few short gray hairs on his head, leaning over a huge diesel generator. The room is a mess of parts—wires and scrap metal and tools strewn about in neat and almost-but-not-entirely organized piles. We shake hands, make our introductions, and get right to it. This time I ask for permission to record, though I’ll just relay the highlights of my hour long tour.

Lyle has worked for KVLV for forty-one years now, starting as an apprentice and soon after handling the servicing of the actual Tower. He describes how the Tower works: The KVLV programming is beamed to the Tower from their Fargo studio using microwave transmitters fastened to its side (those dish-like instruments you’ve probably seen in the photos by now). The signal is then converted, amplified, and sent up to the digital antenna at the very top using three inch nitrogen-pressurized wires. Interesting note about the antenna: what you see at the very top is actually the old, decommissioned analogue transmitter. In 2005, the FCC required all broadcast signals to be converted to digital, and so the whole system was upgraded. The new antenna is mounted right beside the old one, and it’s much narrower, barely visible in the photos, but on this last day, as I drove in, it reflected the morning sun perfectly.

He brings me upstairs to see the solid state amplifier which replaced the fully-analogue tube amp in one corner. The room looks like it’s been used by the same person for forty years, and it has. There are circuit boards and busted electronics everywhere, tool cabinets and old monitors. Lyle pulls out an incredibly useful fact-sheet about the Tower, which I’ve reproduced here:

## FEET ABOVE GROUND DESCRIPTION

2063' Top of Lightning Rod  
2058' Top Beacon Level  
1951' Top of Tower  
1946' Guy Level 9  
1916' Sidelight level 7/Top Elevator Landing  
1895' CH-44 Antenna Center of Radiation  
1850' CH-28 Antenna Center of Radiation  
1766' Beacon Level 6  
1743' Guy Level 8  
1616' Sidelight Level 6  
1496' Guy Level 7  
1473' Beacon Level 5  
1323' Sidelight Level 5  
1256' Guy Level 6  
1173' Beacon Level 4  
1031' Sidelight Level 4  
1023' Guy Level 5  
881' Beacon Level 3  
806' Guy Level 4  
731' Sidelight Level 3 (LED Sidelights)/Radio Repeater  
596' Guy Level 3  
588' Beacon Level 2  
570' 2 Ghz TSL Dish  
438' Sidelight Level 2 (LED Sidelights)  
389' Guy Level 2  
296' Beacon Level 1  
183' Guy Level 1  
146' Sidelight Level 1 (LED Sidelights)  
93' 7Ghz Northbound Dish (Cummins)  
80' 7Ghz SW Dish (Galesburg)  
63' 7Ghz Southbound Dish (Gardner)

**Each Tower section is 30' long.**

**Tower has 21 painted bands, each is 98' high.<sup>(66)</sup>**

<sup>66</sup> About those painted bands: one thing I couldn't help notice is the aesthetic differences between this Tower and it's cousin to the east. I asked him why these beacons slowly pulse red,

He shows me construction photos of the massive anchors that hold the guy-wires, roughly forty feet long, being encased in concrete. I take a few more photos in the control room. He then offers to bring me past the fence, right up to the base. I mask my anxiety well. Outside, the wind has picked up. We pass the gate, and I have to ask him, for my own sanity, if I should be wary of anything, if I should stay away from anything, to which he replies with a chuckle and a firm, “No”. The whole amalgamation of steel and wires and tubes is perfectly safe, insulated—no real danger to speak of. Staring at the footings now, I believe I was a bit disrespectful in my earlier entry when I compared the three Tower legs to a cheap railing. The things are massive, bolted down to a concrete slab which sits on ninety-eight foot wooden piles. I can see the tiny two person elevator and ask him if he’s ever gone up?

“Oh yeah, all the time back in the seventies and eighties. Eventually our insurance got too expensive and we had to start contracting out even simple repairs.”

He says the same about the fences, those being recent additions as well. I ask him what it feels like, being at the top, and all he can say is, “It’s strange. You’re up there, and if you let go of the Tower you can feel it move. On windy days the top can sway by about ten feet in any direction.” We head back inside after I’ve taken my photos. It’s not nearly as windy as yesterday, but there’s a chill. Before I leave, I have to ask him about the base-jumpers.

“Yep. In the late seventies, before there was a fence. Not that that would have stopped them. They’d come out here right around 5 a.m. and climb the ladder. And that would take, oh, two maybe

while the ones on the other tower strobe white. He explained that painted towers are visible during daylight and only need the beacons at night. The other tower is left raw, galvanized, and may not be as visible, so the strobes are on 24/7. This Tower is repainted every twenty or thirty years, and is due for a fresh coat next year (something I had noticed in my photos, the paint visibly peeling and fading).

three hours. And these guys had to have been in relatively good shape, it's pretty tiring climbing straight up. They'd get to the top and wait for the sunrise and then jump. It would have to be on a fairly windless day otherwise they'd get blow back into the Tower."

I tell him that I'll be going over to Elm Bend Farm to talk with Karen Brown and her daughter Beth, and his face lights up. He starts telling me about Karen's late husband, Buster Brown (nicknamed after the Brown Shoe Company mascot, Buster). He would get in touch with the station to let them know when the beacon lights needed changing, if people were partying in the fields below the Tower, if they were trying to climb the Tower, if they were trying to shoot the beacons. I stop him at that last one. He elaborates, explaining how people would target practice using rifles. Their aim was to take out a red beacon (naturally). He says that they never really managed to hit the beacons, but they did bring the whole network down once. Responding to an alarm on the pressurized wires that carry the signal up to the antenna, he found .22 caliber bullet holes in the protective enclosure. They'd missed the beacon but hit the most sensitive part of the Tower.

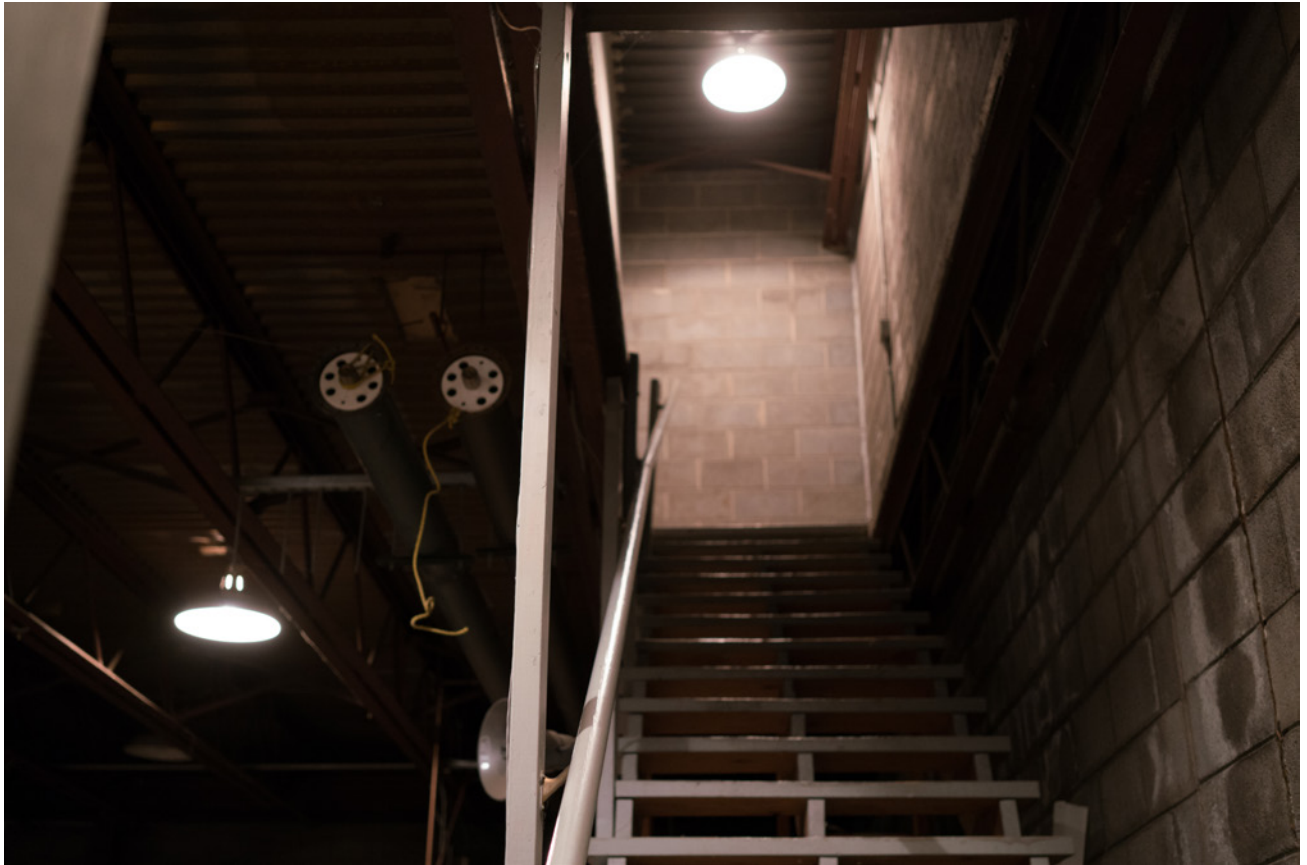
I thank him for his time and he promises to email me some technical data sheets about the Tower. I wish I could stay longer and take more photos, but he seemed busy and he'd already given me an hour of his time. I tell him I plan to stick around the Tower for a while, that I'll probably see him when he leaves at 4 p.m., but I never did.



























Outside, I get in my car and drive back to the furthest guy-wire, setting up a time lapse and giving Beth a call. She answers on the first ring. It's noon by now and I ask if I can head on over. "Of course," she says. I pack my bag and start the long walk towards Elm Bend Farm.



I never made it to the end, despite not having an end in mind. I'm not sure what I expected. Maybe the road would just turn from asphalt to gravel, gravel to dirt, and then the road would be no more. Maybe the road would just end abruptly. Maybe, at that abrupt end, there would be a sign saying "Here Be Dragons, Turn Back". Whatever the end was, I never found it.

The plan was simply to drive. I would leave my home with a few cameras, some cash, some emergency rations, a cellphone, an audio recorder, and, most importantly, an iPod. I had only the most general destination in mind. North. How far North could I get from where I left? "Not very," was the answer. My first end came only three hours in, when I found myself driving through beach towns, glimpses of water to my left. I picked a street at random, parked my car, and went for a walk. This road ended at a beach. A cursory glance at my phone—a practice I was trying hard to avoid—tells me I'm staring into Georgian Bay. Maybe I should have planned this out a little.

There's a certain rhythm to driving, a rhythm I find meditative. I was on the road because Donald asked me what I would do, right this moment, to advance my thesis. I had two answers. One: I could go for a twenty-four hour drive. He asked me why, and I said I don't know, but that there's something there. Two: I could interview people and have them document what their mind conjured when

reading a piece of literature. The second was more in line with what I had been pursuing up to that point.

I chose the first.

This is a practice I developed to get away from work and give myself some time to think (or not think). I'll usually drive aimlessly, usually far away from traffic and cities. I'll play music often,<sup>(67)</sup> though sometimes the sound of tires on road is enough. I'll simply watch the horizon and let the landscape roll steadily by. The best drives happen at dusk or dawn, when an hour is about all you need to experience a significant change in light. There's a rhythm to it all—the light, the landscape, the drone of tires and engines, the music. This rhythm helps most at times when my mind is filled with noise. This was one of those times, and I figured a 24 hour drive would act as a form of electroshock therapy, reset my mind, get rid of the noise, help me think clearly again.

Right now, the rhythm is all wrong. I'm not driving the way I normally drive. There are specific drives I take, where the route is now second nature, where I can almost go blindfolded. These roads are familiar to me, comforting. This is not one of those drives. This is scary, intimidating. I keep looking at my phone, distracted, worried I'll end up somewhere other than 'North'. I gave myself twelve hours on the road, least I exhaust myself and fall asleep at the

67 I thought about maybe giving this idea its own space, but here will do just fine. That fundamental appeal in driving is very much present in music as well, and more specifically, in repetition. I will listen to songs and albums on repeat for hours, days even. Eventually, I'm not hearing the music anymore, but something else. Repetition is a keyword that I've entirely left out but may be critical in the end. Anyways, here are the albums I listened to during this trip (or at least, the ones that have been documented in some form or another): McClusky - Do Dallas; Hamilton + Rostam - I Had A Dream You Were Mine, Bon Iver - 22, A Million; Dirty Beaches - Drifters; Portishead - Portishead; Handsome Furs - Face Control; Timber Timbre - S/T; The Microphones - It Was Hot, We Stayed In the Water; The Field - The Follower; Radiohead - A Moon Shaped Pool; The Field - Cupid's Head; Fleetwood Mac - Rumors; Flying Lotus - Cosmogramma; Frank Ocean - Blond; Tim Hecker - Virgins.

wheel. This drive is turning dangerous. Threatening. The opposite of the meditative drive I thought I needed.

It gets worse on the second day. I stay overnight in Cochrane, Ontario. This is pretty close to as far North of Cambridge as you'd want to go, but the road still goes. I haven't reached the end. I wake up, shower, eat, and leave. I don't check the weather forecast.



I've been writing for a while now, not knowing how to tell this story—or if I even should. My talk with Beth and her mom was really fascinating, but also incredibly personal. I never got her express permission to share it, though she did let me record the whole thing. I stopped partway through as the conversation veered away from the Tower, and much of what's to follow is technically irrelevant, though I've lost sight of what exactly it is I'm out here for—in terms of my personal experience, it may be very relevant.

It's long, the longest entry by far, and I apologize if it rambles. I considered maybe moving it to another section, but that didn't quite feel right either.

Here's a brief summary, which you can skip if you want the full version: After about thirty minutes of discussing the Tower with Beth's mom, Karen, I'm pulled into a fascinating and revelatory conversation with Beth, who is a talented photographer and artist, is remarkably well read, who consumes information voraciously, who uses the Internet the way I'd imagine the people who developed the Internet hoped it would be used, who talks about architecture like an architecture grad, who speaks of Shakespeare and Kurosawa, and who, of course, has a hard story for being here on the farm with her mom, a story that I can't help but think about as I leave the house four hours later and find myself unable to focus during my last day at the Tower.

*The Little Yellow Farm*

I walk up to the main house, unsure whether to use the front, side, or back door—each about the same distance from the driveway, oddly enough. I try the back and give a knock. From behind me, I hear Beth call out.

“Marco! Hi, I’m Beth.”

She’s wearing blue denim pants and a Carhartt sweatshirt. She’s younger and taller than I imagined over the phone, wearing her hair in a single braid over her shoulder. Her eyes are cool blue and she wears no make-up. I can’t place her age because she’s not trying to fight it. There’s not a trace of gray in her hair, though she looks a bit tired. She leads me in through the side door, into a tiny vestibule. As the door opens, an orange cat runs out, and Beth points to the scratches on her arm.

“I’ve been trying to tame that one. He’s a new addition.”

Inside the vestibule, stairs lead up to the main house and down to the basement. Over the phone, she had shown some reserve at the thought of having me over, saying “I hope you don’t mind a mess”. She reiterated that thought now.

I enter through the dining room, and would stay there for the next four hours, catching only a glimpse of the living room, kitchen, bathroom and pantry through the narrow door frames. It’s messy, she wasn’t lying. There’s an old treadmill and TV right by the dining room table. There are piles of mail and papers on various surfaces. The room I was in may have been rectangular but it was hard to tell. Large bookcases and armoires flanked each wall, filled with objects and books and mementos. I set my bag down by the cloth-covered table, which could seat six comfortably if not for the portable TV and pill bottles and laptop and, again, papers (just papers, hard to tell exactly what kind).

“Meet my mom, Karen. Mom, this is Marco!”

I peek through the doorway to my left, into the kitchen. A short, stout woman in her seventies or eighties stands at the sink, using a crutch to hold herself up. She turns around and smiles broadly from ear to ear.

“So you’re Marco!”

I wonder what kind of impression I make. I haven’t trimmed my beard in weeks. I left the cap in my room—figured that would be more respectable. My hair is messy and curled from the wind. I don’t look put together, but they didn’t seem to care much.

We shake hands and move towards the table. Beth offers me coffee and I gladly accept. I ask if I have their permission to record the conversation (I do). Beth warns me that I’ll have to ask my questions and then just let her mom ramble on and on. Karen doesn’t ramble. At all. I don’t know what I expected, but she’s remarkably lucid and vivacious. Sharp. We take a seat, Karen at the head and I beside her, the treadmill and living room behind me. I start the recorder as Beth fixes the coffee. Through the door frame I spot a respirator by the couch in the living room, where more piles of stuff are neatly stacked between furniture. The TV is on—stays on for the duration of our talk.

This is what Karen tells me, recalled from the first hour that I recorded:

She married Buster Brown in 1978, which is when she moved to Elm Bend Farm. When the Tower was erected in ‘64, she was finishing up nursing school in Minneapolis. She doesn’t tell me much I don’t already know. We talk about the collapse of that other tower, how helicopters from a nearby military base would tour people around the tower, sometimes trying to make the tower sway by

hovering near it.<sup>(68)</sup> During one of those times, the blades caught on the guy-wires, crashing the helicopter and killing all four on board, bringing the tower down with it. Buster knew something had gone wrong because they were milking cows in the barn when the power went out. He went over to help free a man who was trapped in the control room, surrounded by a mess of burning steel.

Throughout this story, Beth would chime in to add details or corrections. She mentions the Dead Men, another name for those massive forty foot anchors, and how horses could bring the towers down by scratching their backs against the wires at just the right frequency, citing Galloping Gertie<sup>(69)</sup> to sell the point. She pulls out the poster she had promised me, which features Katy High, Miss Tall USA from 1964. In a stupefying feat of unlikely cross-promotion, the broadcast call letters were changed from the original KEND to KTHI—Katy High. They were later changed to the current KVYL when NBC took over in the nineties. Here's the poster is all its glory, graciously photographed and cropped by Beth herself.<sup>(70)</sup>

I remark how I couldn't believe they managed to dig this poster up. Beth tells me her mother's memory is still in good shape, that she remembers where everything is. I look around the room and find that surprising, but later, after the recorder has gone off, Karen starts pointing to objects and explains what they are, what stories they hold, and I suspect every object in this house has a story, that what looks like a mess to me is a roughly curated family history.

After a while, having exhausted my questions, Beth says, "I don't know if we have a whole lot more to add other than... I got pictures of the weather! I love clouds."

68 Karen would later clarify that this was, of course, not remotely sanctioned by the government, the pilots acting of their own reckless accord.

69 The Tacoma Narrows Bridge Collapse.

70 I should note that, when Beth says she took photos of the poster for me, I was kind of skeptical. She offhandedly mentions that I probably have better equipment. When I see the crops, I'm impressed. That's not the last time she'll impress me.



## MEET KATY HIGH

Miss Grand Northern  
West, Fall 1954

<b>1</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>
FEBRUARY	MARCH	APRIL	MAY
JUNE	JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER
OCTOBER	NOVEMBER	DECEMBER	JANUARY '55

## ...AND THE WORLD'S TALLEST TOWER: 2,063 FEET HIGH!

Never before has a tower reached more than 1,763 feet into the skies. Now, in the terrific Red River Valley, stands a 1954 televisor from the world's tallest man-made structure — 2,063 feet above the ground, with maximum power of 316,000 watts, serving Fargo-Moorhead, and Grand Forks-East Grand Forks, with city grade service. No other station has city grade service into both cities. KTHS also is the only station with studios in both cities.

CHANNEL 11 - MAXIMUM POWER - FARGO, N. D.  
Presented by BLAIR TELEVISION ASSOCIATES      Registered, JERRY S. WITTE, Minneapolis, Minn.

Pl. 131 KTHI Promotional Poster  
 Courtesy of Beth Bateman and Karen Brown

Thirty minutes in, the questions about the Tower end, and the real conversation starts. She shows me photos on her laptop, and they're kind of incredible. The subjects themselves are obviously photogenic, but Beth has a good eye, shooting close-up after close-up, framing them as abstracts. She says she's documenting them for paintings she hopes to do one day when she has more time. I ask if photography is a hobby of hers, and her answer foreshadows what's to come:

“Not... well, it's more point and shoot. I don't claim to be a photographer. That takes more time than I got. But I do... when I find things, I like to record them.”

I ask what camera she uses, and she fumbles the answer, saying something like, “Oh some Canon Eos something”. I'll later notice it's a 7D, the same camera I've used for the last seven years before up[down]grading to my Sony.

We go through more cloud photos and I'm stunned. We talk about one in particular and she describes it as having “an architecture of it's own.” I tell her she should do something with these. She ignores the comment. I tell her she mentioned she was in elder care on the phone, carefully trying to figure out what she does out here. She points to her mom and we laugh as I understand what she meant. At this, Karen comments:

“Well somebody said ‘why don't you move into town’ and I said ‘why would I move into town?’ I see the sunrise in the morning and the sunset in the evening. I've got beautiful skies full of stars. Why would I move into town? You don't see that stuff in town.”

After that, she gets up to rummage in the next room as Beth and I look through more photos. She comes back with a framed drawing. It's a landscape, intricately detailed. My reaction is, “Oh, what's this?”

Karen replies, “A drawing. A fantasy drawing.”

“By?”

From behind me, Beth says, “Me.”

I turn to Beth, incredulous, “You drew this?”

“Yep. Ballpoint Pen. I had a lot of time waiting.”

I figured later upon replaying the tape that she must have meant waiting tables.<sup>(71)</sup> I ask to take a photo, impressed once again by this strangely articulate and talented woman. She says not to bother, she has a high-quality copy she can give me, which she signs and hands to me in a clean folder (see plate 132).

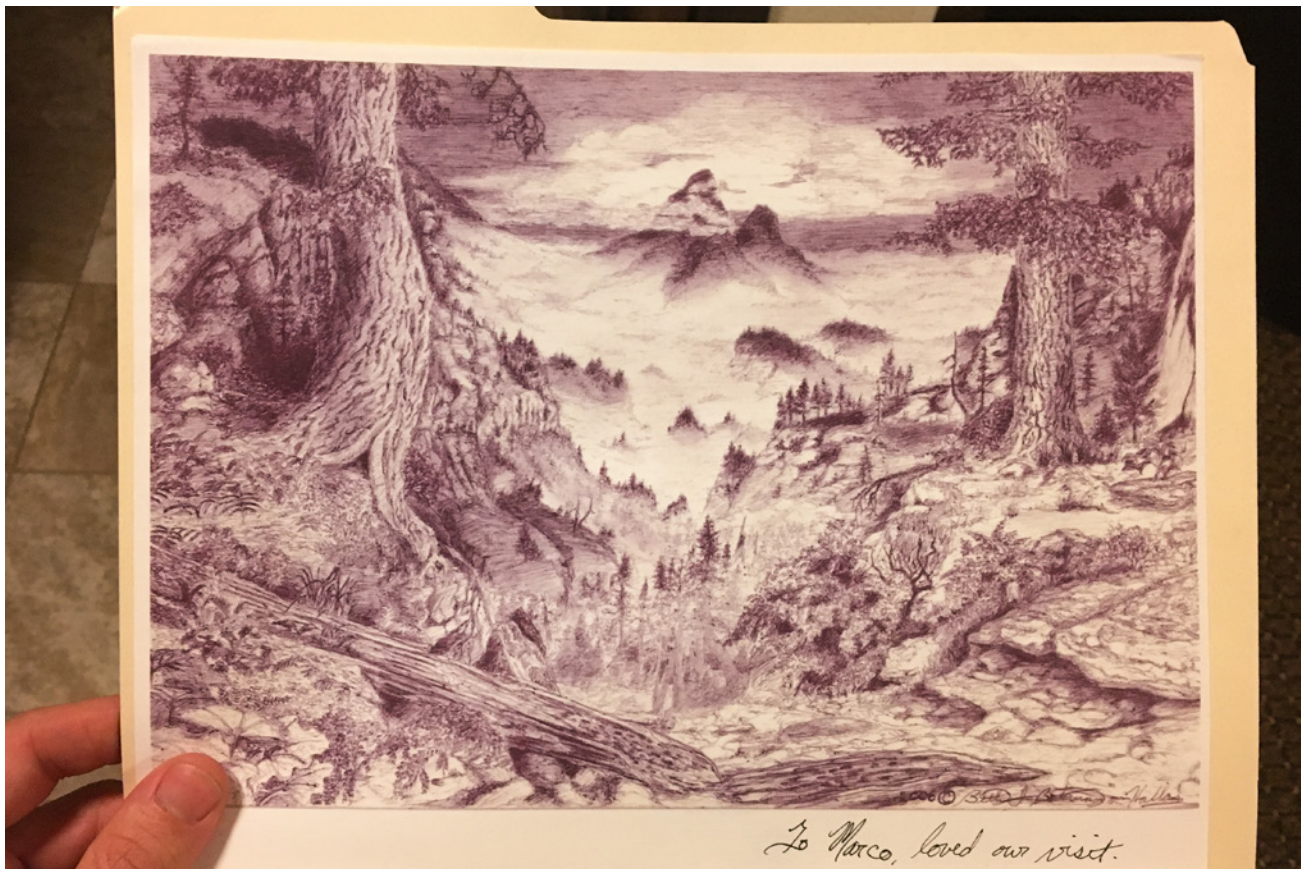
As we’re looking through more photos, all taken from the front yard, she laments the loss of a tree that was cut down, noting that it had the most interesting bark pattern. She apologizes for being fascinated by the weirdest things, and I tell her that I understand, that I’m in North Dakota to see a fucking tower (I omit the expletive in her presence). This sets her off. She opens a folder to show me photos of Westminster Abby’s ceiling, noting how the structure is clearly expressed and that she likes seeing that in architecture.

And at this point I can’t help but wonder: who the hell is this person and what is she doing in the middle of nowhere, North Dakota?

She shows me more photos of various spaces, noting the quality of light, the recently restored mosaic floors, the medieval symbolism embedded in the iconography. She shows me photos of newly uncovered megalithic structures in Russia, photos of similar structures in America. She shows me beautiful abandoned subway stations. I ask if these are her photos and she says no, she just pulls stuff she’s interested in off the Internet.

She then talks about her husband, how he used to be a truck driver, how he would explore old caves of archaeological interest,

71 In a later exchange, Beth revealed that she actually simply meant “waiting”, as in waiting around. Waiting at home, waiting in the cab of her husband’s truck. Just waiting.



Pl. 132 "Fantasy Drawing"

By Beth Bateman, Ballpoint Pen and Copy Paper

describing him as a less educated Indiana Jones. She talks about how she would join him on rides across the country and venture off the beaten path, finding herself picking up sea shells and rocks from roadside ditches. I ask her if she'd often join him, and she replies that no, she would take care of his two kids.

"His kids?"

"Yeah, his, from a previous marriage. Well, I mean, they're my kids. I consider them mine."

"Do you have any of your own?"

"Nope, never did." She trails off.

"She collects animals instead," Karen chimes, "easier to deal with."

Beth's desktop background is a still from the 1986 film 'Labyrinth', starring David Bowie and a young Jennifer Connelly. I ask her about it and she's surprised that I even know the movie. She says she loves fantasy. She'll later quote C.S. Lewis as we discuss pride and humility. She'll bring up an interaction with a South African man who looked like a villain from a soap opera, and we'll discuss the nature of evil. That leads into a conversation about Shakespeare, and when I admit that I haven't read much, that in Quebec we read Molière instead, she says, incredibly, "Well, have you seen any Kurosawa films? That's Shakespeare."

Again, what is this person doing here, where the closest town is Blanchard, population 26. And I start to consider that question more seriously as we keep talking about all of these different subjects. I ask her how long she's lived here on the farm with her mother, and she does the math: ten years. She's been here since 2007. We keep talking—about ancient cultures, about language, about schizophrenia and talking to yourself. At that she makes a self-deprecating joke about her age (something she often does) and starts laughing. Karen and I join her, and as our laughter fades, Beth's grows in intensity, and it seems for a few seconds that it would turn into

sobs, but she catches herself, tapering off instead, leaving the room in discomforting quiet. We keep talking, about weather patterns and WW1, about the best way to escape quicksand<sup>(72)</sup> and amidst the whirlwind of non-stop information, I hear Beth speak the words that drown out the rest, the context lost on me now as I replay them over and over in my head, the exact phrasing impossible to forget:

“... well, that’s what happens when your husband tries to bash your head in with table vise.”

My face drops and I look to Karen, who looks away. Not knowing what to say, I ask, stupidly, “Ex-Husband?”

“Yeah, ex-husband.”

“Right, I mean, I wasn’t sure.”

I follow that with, “I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, he decided to become a meth addict in his 50’s.”

And suddenly I think about how, from the way she spoke of him—in the past tense, with a certain fondness, and never using the word ‘ex’—I had assumed he passed. Then it occurs to me that maybe that’s how she chooses to see it, that it’s easier for her to imagine the man she married died long before he fell into addiction, before he attacked her with a table vise.

I think about that, no longer paying attention to the conversation, about how you don’t compare a violent, abusive ex to Indiana Jones, that she must have indeed once loved him, and that he must have, at one time, been good to her. I think about how this curious woman, thirsty for knowledge, may have been happiest on the road, adventurous husband at her side, off in those ditches, exploring, discovering, learning. I think about why she moved out here, ten

72 If you’re curious: lie flat on your back, increase your surface area, and slowly shimmy your legs free.

years ago, that maybe it wasn't to provide care for her mother, who tells me that only a year ago she was mowing the lawn herself, who even now, despite the crutch, seems lively and mobile. Beth looks out the window several times, asking aloud, "What do you think? We too tired to go in to town?" having planned a trip to the grocery store, and I think about the 'we' in that sentence, how it's not just a turn of phrase. She keeps making vague comments about her health issues, never with any specificity, and I wonder how close her husband got to his ultimate goal.

And then I realize that none of this might be true—all projection and speculation—but I can't help but let my mind wander after hearing those words, and I couldn't possibly ask her to confirm my suspicions, because I wasn't honest with my intentions: that I was there mostly for her, that from the first message she left, from the moment she properly pronounced a name that even most professors stumble on, that right then I felt like there was a story here, that there was something about this woman, another contradiction amongst the many I've experienced here. I pretend to be interested in the Tower, but most of my questions had been answered by Lyle just a few hours earlier. "Why would an architecture student would want to hear my story?" she would wonder. Why do I? I can't justify it to myself, and I couldn't begin to justify it to Beth. So I don't pry, because it's not my place. Instead, I let her go on.

She talks about where they were living when it happened, in [REDACTED], [REDACTED],<sup>(73)</sup> and how it's a bad place. She speaks like a character in a noir film.

73 Redacted at Beth's request.

“I think it’s the weather. It just gathers there.”

“It’s where people go to escape their dirty past, and they tend to bring that dirt with them.”<sup>(74)</sup>

“It’s the type of place where if you meet someone at a bar, you don’t ask for their name, you ask what they’re called.”

Eventually, we steer the conversation back to the things Beth is interested in—there’s a seemingly endless supply of those. The sun is falling quickly and though I try to end the conversation, feeling like I’ve overstayed my welcome, cutting into their lunch time, Beth keeps talking, and I can’t help but participate. She mentions that she’s actually quite shy, but that she feels like I’m able to follow her stream-of-consciousness style of thinking (her words), that I seem to get her.

Before I stopped the recording, almost three hours ago by now, I asked if I could photograph her and her mom. Beth is cool with it, but Karen is self-conscious, instead offering an older photo of herself. I take a picture of it, refusing to keep it, feeling like they’ve already shared enough with me. Beth insists that she gets one of me. She catches me trying to tame my hair as I look into the bathroom mirror. She laughs and says, “Don’t worry, you’ve got the windswept look.” She takes a photo, but then tells me to hold my camera up. I do, and she explains that, “Portraits are more meaningful when they contain a bit about who the person is, what they like—like your camera. You take it everywhere and it’s a part of who you are.” Before this exchange, the camera had stayed in my bag, and I only pulled it out now to take her picture. It was either a lucky guess, or she’s incredibly intuitive.

74 Beth insists that she wouldn’t have said this, or at least not in this way. I remember these words being spoken though, the cliché oddly fitting. This sparked a debate about the veracity of memories. In the end, I don’t think it matters how she worded it, as according to Beth, the sentiment is accurate.



Despite her willingness to be photographed, she's clearly uneasy. I take two photos. A blurry one, the afternoon light fading fast, failing to provide for the scene, and another, this time sharp, but the moment lost, Beth's initial smile gone, replaced by a forced smirk. It's not a great portrait, but I can't bring myself to pry more than I already have, so I put the camera away.

I leave after spending four hours with them, promising to say goodbye after I've finished at the Tower. It's 4 p.m. and I've got maybe thirty or forty minutes before the sun sets. My plan was to spend the afternoon capturing more footage. I had asked for permission to walk around their property to take some photos, and as I do I find myself distracted. I walk through those fields around the Tower, fairly confident that I won't get shot or arrested, and try to record some video, but I'm phoning it in. I walk to my car and try to warm up for a bit before taking some photos of the Dead Men.

I can't stop thinking about Beth and her mom, and about how ultimately pointless this whole endeavor may be. I wonder, now, why I needed to write this all down, why it affected me so much, and I think it once again has to do with my preconceived notions. When I dropped that letter in their mailbox, when I still saw their property as something creepy, out of horror film, I imagined the people who lived there would be unwelcoming, skeptical of this academic city kid. I imagined they would be uneducated. I made more snap judgments, the same judgments I made when talking to Schantel. I felt unequipped to deal with the magnitude of everything I had encountered out here—the Road, the Tower, and finally Beth. And that weighed on me as I tried to take photos of an object that was suddenly a backdrop instead of a main character—my whole reason for being here inane.















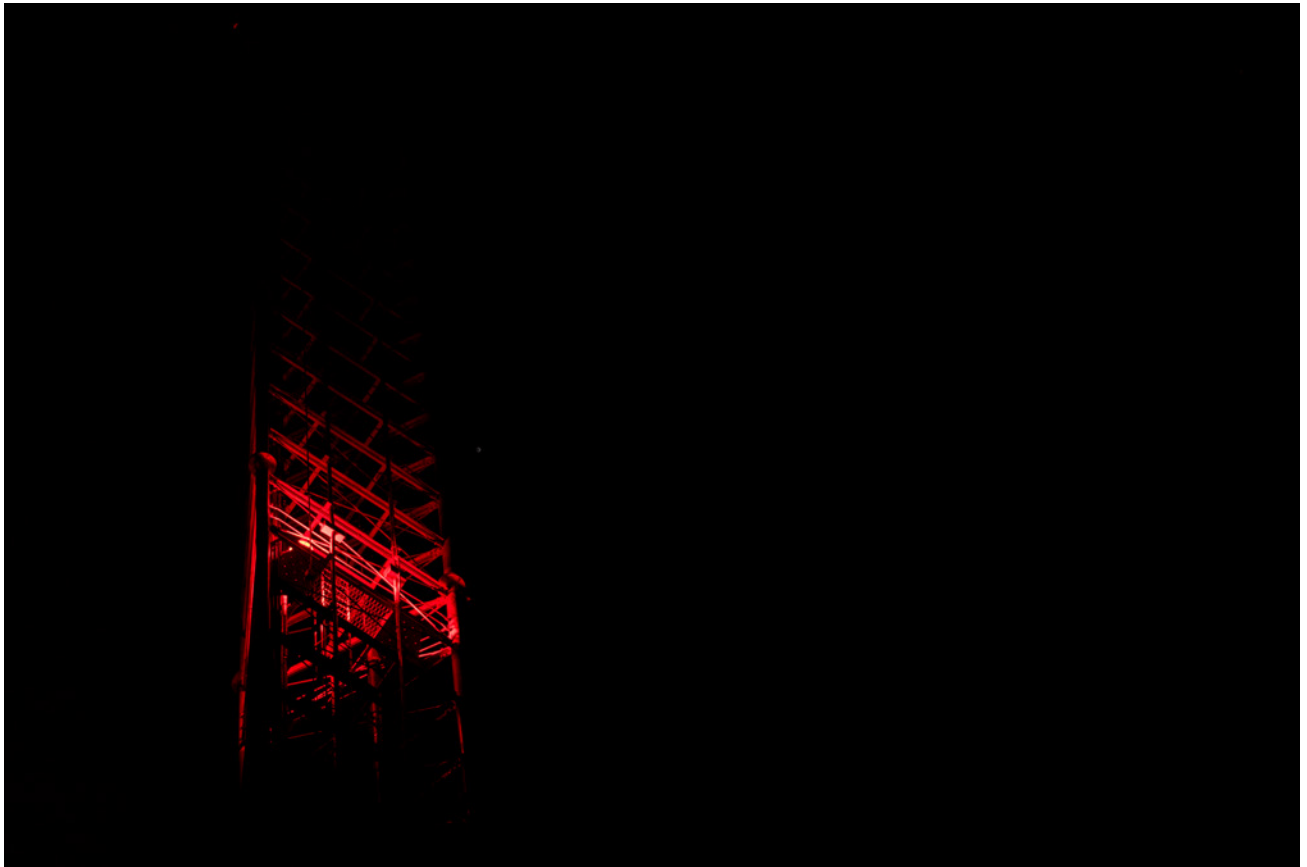














I stop by Beth's house to say goodbye on my way out, to thank her one last time. I pull into the front yard, and before I even kill the engine, there she is, walking up to join me. It's dark out, but the floodlights bathe us in warm, yellow light. We stand side by side, exchanging a few last words as we watch the Tower lights. She asks me what I'll do when I finish my thesis. The question catches me off guard, as it always does. I don't tend to think far ahead. We talk about theory versus practice, and about what kind of designer I want to be. We talk about the stars, how clear they are from the farm, how the best place to see them is in the desert where she used to travel with her husband. She insists I keep in touch. She hates when people disappear after their brief visits, and I can't help but feel guilty, knowing I came for a story and got what I wanted. I wonder how many other people simply pass through, never to be heard from again. I decide right then I'll send her a copy of my thesis, whether she features in it or not, and I wonder what she'd think if she read this.

After a while, the conversation simply tapers off, and we watch the Tower beacons pulse.

"It really is something, if you think about it."

And at that I feel somewhat justified in being here, knowing that Beth can feel the same wonder that I feel.

She pauses.

"Not much to look at though."



I've just had a difficult conversation with Donald. The subject was Beth. I told him that I wanted to reach out to her, to get her approval to share her story. I said I wanted to share the website with her and Donald immediately objected. I was initially struck by how adamant he was. I had my own reservations, though they were rooted in tact, in the exact wording I should use when I wrote to Beth. He insisted I not link the website, that I not share any of the passages. Noting my confusion, Donald fetched a book by Janet Malcolm about a lawsuit between a convicted murderer and the journalist who wrote about the crime. He read the first page and before he's done I realize how naive I've been:

Every journalist who is not too stupid or too full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible. He is a kind of confidence man, preying on people's vanity, ignorance, or loneliness, gaining their trust and betraying them without remorse. Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subject of a piece of non-fiction writing learns—when the article or book appears—his hard lesson. [...] On reading the article or book in question, he has to face the fact that the journalist—who seemed so friendly and sympathetic, so keen to understand him fully, so remarkably attuned to his vision of things—never had the slightest intention of collaborating with him on his story but always intended to write a story of his own.<sup>(75)</sup>

75 Malcolm, Janet. *The Journalist and the Murderer*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 3.



I don't believe I was stupid or full of myself, though I was definitely blind, oblivious to the hard truth that I preyed upon her loneliness and her ignorance. She was ignorant of my intentions, and my honesty in noting as much does not make this any less morally questionably. In her eyes, I must have seemed so "friendly and sympathetic, so keen to understand [her] fully, so remarkably attuned to [her] vision of things." The worst part is that ultimately I wrote about her incredibly personal story for my own benefit. There's no question that this entry struck the most chords, that I've had the most feedback about Beth, and it's perhaps telling that it had the least to do with why I was out here in the first place.

So where do I go from here? None of that feedback was negative. I tried to write empathetically and sensitively about a difficult subject, and believe, for the most part, I succeeded. But part of me knew that something was wrong when I felt I needed guidance from Donald about how to broach the subject with Beth, that I committed to ink a story that was not mine to tell, that justifying it as a "story of [my] own" is cheap and deceptive, though maybe that comes with the territory.

I don't want to edit the text, and I think it has value within the framework of my trip to North Dakota. I'm simply trying to manage and understand these feelings. I don't think I'm exactly cut out for this, and I wonder at what point I decided to play Journalist.



I've been writing for a while now, not knowing how to tell this story—or if I even should. My talk with Beth and her mom was really fascinating, but also incredibly personal. I never got her express permission to share it, though she did let me record the whole thing. I stopped partway through as the conversation veered away from the Tower, and much of what's to follow is technically irrelevant, though I've lost sight of what exactly it is I'm out here for, so in terms of my personal experience, it may be very relevant.

It's long, the longest entry by far, and I apologize if it rambles. I considered maybe moving it to another section, but that didn't quite feel right either.

Here's a brief summary, which you can skip if you want the full version: After about 30 minutes of discussing the Tower with Beth's mom, Karen, I'm pulled into a fascinating and revelatory conversation with Beth, who is a talented photographer and artist, is remarkably well read,\* who consumes information voraciously, who uses the Internet the way I'd imagine the people who developed the Internet hoped it would be used, who talks about architecture like an architecture grad, who speaks of Shakespeare and Kurosawa, and who, of course, has a tragic story† for being here on the farm with her mom, a story that I can't help but think about as I leave the house four hours later and find myself unable to focus during my last day at the Tower.

\* That is an illusion. Most of my reading has been for pleasure and many of the “must read books” that qualify for the well-read crowd of the last three generations I found too depressing. Beautifully written but depressing and uninteresting.

I have two college courses on DVD; one on fictional writing and the other on compelling sentence structure. Both of these use examples from people that are great writers but I have no desire to read.

† Not tragic, bit hard luck but hardly tragic. My husband's is tragic. I have hope for a good ending. I don't foresee any for his. But for all that, I keep in mind that it isn't over 'till it is over.

*The Little Yellow Farm*

I walk up to the main house, unsure whether to use the front, side, or back door—each about the same distance from the driveway, oddly enough. I try the back and give a knock. From behind me, I hear Beth call out.

“Marco! Hi, I’m Beth.”

She’s wearing blue denim pants and a Carhartt sweatshirt. She’s younger and taller than I imagined over the phone, wearing her hair in a single braid over her shoulder. Her eyes are cool blue and she wears no make-up. I can’t place her age because she’s not trying to fight it. There’s not a trace of gray in her hair, though she looks a bit tired. She leads me in through the side door, into a tiny vestibule. As the door opens, an orange cat runs out, and Beth points to the scratches on her arm.

“I’ve been trying to tame that one. He’s a new addition.”

Inside the vestibule, stairs lead up to the main house and down to the basement. Over the phone, she had shown some reserve at the thought of having me over, saying “I hope you don’t mind a mess”. She reiterated that thought now.

I enter through the dining room, and would stay there for the next four hours, catching only a glimpse of the living room, kitchen, bathroom and pantry through the narrow door frames. It’s messy, she wasn’t lying. There’s an old treadmill and TV right by the dining room table. There are piles of mail and papers on various surfaces. The room I was in may have been rectangular but it was hard to tell. Large bookcases and armoires flanked each wall, filled with objects and books and mementos. I set my bag down by the cloth-covered table, which could seat six comfortably if not for the portable TV and pill bottles and laptop and, again, papers (just papers, hard to tell exactly what kind).

“Meet my mom, Karen. Mom, this is Marco!”

I peek through the doorway to my left, into the kitchen. A short, stout woman in her 70's or 80's stands at the sink, using a crutch to hold herself up. She turns around and smiles broadly from ear to ear.

“So you're Marco!”

I wonder what kind of impression I make. I haven't trimmed my beard in weeks. I left the cap in my room—figured that would be more respectable. My hair is messy and curled from the wind. I don't look put together, but they didn't seem to care much.\*

We shake hands and move towards the table. Beth offers me coffee and I gladly accept. I ask if I have their permission to record the conversation (I do). Beth warns me that I'll have to ask my questions and then just let her mom ramble on and on.† Karen doesn't ramble. At all. I don't know what I expected, but she's remarkably lucid and vivacious. Sharp. We take a seat, Karen at the head and I beside her, the treadmill and living room behind me. I start the recorder as Beth fixes the coffee. Through the door frame I spot a respirator by the couch in the living room, where more piles of stuff are neatly stacked between furniture. The TV is on—stays on for the duration of our talk.

This is what Karen tells me, recalled from the first hour that I recorded:

She married Buster Brown in 1978, which is when she moved to Elm Bend Farm. When the Tower was erected in '64, she was finishing up nursing school in Minneapolis. She doesn't tell me much I

\* Didn't care at all. You made a fine impression. You looked as if you had been traveling and out in the wind, not scattered or disorganized like someone who is not caring for themselves because they are in a habitually bad state of mind.

† It is not that Mom is senile but she remembers more if allowed to approach things at her own pace and in her own way.

don't already know. We talk about the collapse of that other tower, how helicopters from a nearby military base would tour people around the tower, sometimes trying to make the tower sway by hovering near it.\* During one of those times, the blades caught on the guy-wires, crashing the helicopter and killing all four on board, bringing the tower down with it. Buster knew something had gone wrong because they were milking cows in the barn when the power went out. He went over to help free a man who was trapped in the control room, surrounded by a mess of burning steel.

Throughout this story, Beth would chime in to add details or corrections. She mentions the Dead Men, another name for those massive 40 foot anchors, and how horses could bring the towers down by scratching their backs against the wires at just the right frequency, citing Galloping Gerti to sell the point.† She pulls out the poster she had promised me, which features Katy High, Miss Tall USA from 1964. In a stupefying feat of unlikely cross-promotion, the broadcast call letters were changed from the original KEND to KTHI—Katy High. They were later changed to the current KVYL when NBC took over in the 90's. Here's the poster is all its glory, graciously photographed and cropped by Beth herself.

I remark how I couldn't believe they managed to dig this poster up. Beth tells me her mother's memory is still in good shape, that she remembers where everything is. I look around the room and find that surprising, but later, after the recorder has gone off, Karen

\* Mom wants this re-worded. It makes it sound as if these flights were approved by the commanders. The pilots were doing it in violation of the base's policies, it may have just been men from the base. Buster had tried to warn one of the officer's in charge about it but he would not listen, the response had been, "Not my boys!" or something similar.

† This is a piece of information that Mom had from Buster. I used Galloping Gertie because it is the only credible and specific example I had concerning vibration frequencies destroying a structure.

starts pointing to objects and explains what they are, what stories they hold, and I suspect every object in this house has a story, that what looks like a mess to me is a roughly curated family history.\*

After a while, having exhausted my questions, Beth says, “I don’t know if we have a whole lot more to add other than... I got pictures of the weather! I love clouds.”

Thirty minutes in, the questions about the Tower end, and the real conversation starts. She shows me photos on her laptop, and they’re kind of incredible. The subjects themselves are obviously photogenic, but Beth has a good eye, shooting close-up after close-up, framing them as abstracts. She says she’s documenting them for paintings she hopes to do one day when she has more time. I ask if photography is a hobby of hers, and her answer foreshadows what’s to come:

“Not... well, it’s more point and shoot. I don’t claim to be a photographer. That takes more time than I got. But I do... when I find things, I like to record them.”

I ask what camera she uses, and she fumbles the answer, saying something like, “Oh some Canon Eos something.” † I’ll later notice

\* Roughly correct as far as the objects go. The papers are another story. When Buster could no longer work the farm, mom and he started to travel. She wanted to have the last few years to be as good for him as possible and when he became too sick to travel she nursed him through the his last days at home.

She was also managing her parents farm. The land was leased out but someone still needed to keep an eye on the buildings and make sure they were maintained. The Trust was supposed to do it but they were lax by all accounts.

Anyway the paper work was more than she could keep up. It is better than it was when I first came here but she just can’t seem to let go and let me deal with it for fear that she wouldn’t be able to find anything.

I don’t dare push the issue because it would cause her blood pressure to soar.

† I knew it was a good camera but I do not know where it sits on the ratings scale. The last time I paid attention to that was back in the late ‘70’s when Nikon was

it's a 7D, the same camera I've used for the last seven years before up[down]grading to my Sony.

We go through more cloud photos and I'm stunned. We talk about one in particular and she describes it as having "an architecture of it's own." I tell her she should do something with these. She ignores the comment.\* I tell her she mentioned she was in elder care on the phone, carefully trying to figure out what she does out here. She points to her mom and we laugh as I understand what she meant. At this, Karen comments:

"Well somebody said 'why don't you move into town' and I said 'why would I move into town'? I see the sunrise in the morning and the sunset in the evening. I've got beautiful skies full of stars. Why would I move into town? You don't see that stuff in town."

After that, she gets up to rummage in the next room as Beth and I look through more photos. She comes back with a framed drawing. It's a landscape, intricately detailed. My reaction is, "Oh, what's this?"

Karen replies, "A drawing. A fantasy drawing."

"By?"

From behind me, Beth says, "Me."

I turn to Beth, incredulous, "You drew this?"

"Yep. Ballpoint Pen. I had a lot of time waiting."†

I figured later upon replaying the tape that she must have meant

all the rage.

\* Sorry, I guess I am told that from time to time and I find myself saying, "I don't have the time" a lot. It has been a bitter pill to swallow. There is a lot more to do around here than one may think, even though it looks as if nothing gets done.

† Not tables, waitresses are some of the busiest people I know. I meant literally waiting. When I was with R (my ex.), on the truck, we frequently had to wait for the dispatcher to call with a load, or wait while the trailer was being loaded, or if we did not do it ourselves, unloaded.

There was also plenty of waiting at home to do especially when R was home. It is a long and dull story.

waiting tables. I ask to take a photo, impressed once again by this strangely articulate and talented woman. She says not to bother, she has a high-quality\* copy she can give me, which she signs and hands to me in a clean folder.

As we're looking through more photos, all taken from the front yard, she laments the loss of a tree that was cut down, noting that it had the most interesting bark pattern.† She apologizes for being fascinated by the weirdest things, and I tell her that I understand, that I'm in North Dakota to see a fucking‡ tower (I omit the expletive in her presence). This sets her off. She opens a folder to show me photos of Westminster Abby's ceiling, noting how the structure is clearly expressed and that she likes seeing that in architecture. And at this point I can't help but wonder: who the hell is this person and what is she doing in the middle of nowhere, North Dakota?

She shows me more photos of various spaces, noting the quality of light, the recently restored mosaic floors, the medieval symbolism embedded in the iconography. She shows me photos of newly uncovered megalithic structures in Russia, photos of similar structures in America. She shows me beautiful abandoned subway

\* Reasonable quality

† Two different trees. The one that was cut down was on the gravel road headed south of here and had interesting form. The other with the interesting bark is a Moss Cup Oak in the Hillsboro park.

‡ Old fashioned anglo/saxon acronym, fornicate without consent of the king. At least that is the version I read once in the etymology of one old dictionary I had long ago. The newer one I have currently is uncertain and cites possible Norwegian or Swedish origins. If the older version is correct it begs the question, why did the king need to know? And why, in the U.S., when we say it then remember our manners say, "Pardon my French?" And why do we blame it on the French?

Just in case you misunderstand, this little note is just my humor, the language does not offend me. I look at the intent behind the words. I have heard people speak horrible things without using one cuss word and others who's language though full of cuss words are trying to express sincere and profound thanks.



stations. I ask if these are her photos and she says no, she just pulls stuff she's interested in off the Internet.

She then talks about her husband, how he used to be a truck driver, how he would explore old caves of archaeological interest, describing him as a less educated Indiana Jones.<sup>\*</sup> She talks about how she would join him on rides across the country and venture off the beaten path, finding herself picking up sea shells and rocks from roadside ditches. I ask her if she'd often join him, and she replies that no, she would take care of his two kids.

"His kids?"

"Yeah, his, from a previous marriage. Well, I mean, they're my kids. I consider them mine."

"Do you have any of your own?"

"Nope, never did." She trails off.

"She collects animals instead," Karen chimes, "easier to deal with."

Beth's desktop background is a still from the 1986 film 'Labyrinth', starring David Bowie and a young Jennifer Connelly. I ask her about it and she's surprised that I even know the movie. She says she loves fantasy. She'll later quote C.S. Lewis as we discuss pride and humility. She'll bring up an interaction with a South African man who looked like a villain from a soap opera, and we'll discuss the nature of evil. That leads to a conversation about Shakespeare, and when I admit that I haven't read much, that in Quebec we read Molière instead, she says, incredibly, "Well, have you seen any Kurosawa films? That's Shakespeare."<sup>†</sup>

\* Sorry, that was a poor comparison. I only meant that he shared the interest of old sites, oddities and certain elements of history. Other wise there are no similarities.

† To be accurate my knowledge of the connection between some of Kurosawa's films and Shakespeare is second hand from a source I have found very reliable. I have not yet been able to watch them and they are on my to do list.

Again, what is this person doing here, where the closest town is Blanchard, population 26. And I start to consider that question more seriously as we keep talking about all of these different subjects. I ask her how long she's lived here on the farm with her mother, and she does the math: ten years. She's been here since 2007. We keep talking—about ancient cultures, about language, about schizophrenia and talking to yourself. At that she makes a self-deprecating joke about her age (something she often does) and starts laughing. Karen and I join her, and as our laughter fades, Beth's grows in intensity, and it seems for a few seconds that it would turn into sobs, but she catches herself, tapering off instead,\* leaving the room in discomforting quiet. We keep talking, about weather patterns and WW1, about the best way to escape quicksand and amidst the whirlwind of non-stop information, I hear Beth speak the words that drown out the rest, the context lost on me now as I replay them over and over in my head, the exact phrasing impossible to forget:

“... well, that's what happens when your husband tries to bash your head in with a vise grip.”†

My face drops and I look to Karen, who looks away. Not knowing what to say, I ask, stupidly,‡ “Ex-Husband?”

“Yeah, ex-husband.”

“Right, I mean, I wasn't sure.”

\* I feel the need to explain this, the tension and intensity you sensed actually had to do with the health issues I chose not to go into rather than my feelings about my failed marriage. Nothing is so boring as listening to someone rabbit on about such things and unfortunately, for awhile at least, it seemed to be the only thing I found myself talking about. It was to the point that it was almost compulsive and I was boring myself to death. Suicide by boredom, there is a news paper head line for you!

† It was a table vise, see attachment. The one in the photo is larger than the one R picked up but it gives you an idea.

‡ Not stupidly. How could you have known? I hadn't told you. I should have never brought it up at a first time meeting.

I follow that with, "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, he decided to become a meth addict in his 50's."

And suddenly I think about how, from the way she spoke of him—in the past tense, with a certain fondness, and never using the word 'ex'—I had assumed he passed. Then it occurs to me that maybe that's how she chooses to see it, that it's easier for her to imagine the man she married died long before he fell into addiction, before he attacked her with a vise grip.

I think about that, no longer paying attention to the conversation, about how you don't compare a violent, abusive ex to Indiana Jones, that she must have indeed once loved him,\* and that he must have, at one time, been good to her. I think about how this curious

\* Still love him, just not "in love" with him; it is more a feeling as if he is a brother or even my child. If I had the strength and ability to save him I would. Unfortunately the bitter truth is you can save a person from man-eating tigers, volcanoes, flood or famine but you can not save him from himself.

How can I still love him? I have forgiven him and having done that I am released from chains of darkness. Chains with names like Bitterness, Hatred and worst of all Self Pity.

My, don't I sound dramatic but accurate all the same.

True, I do have trouble with these emotions from time to time but it is not the deep seated, endlessly seething, stinking miasma that poisons a life like some I have seen but a thing on the surface that comes and goes with my bouts of illness.

Perhaps this may seem odd to you but the simple fact that my husband in a fit of rage considered walloping me with a table vise is not particularly personal to me because it is not part of my internal life but only an occurrence. Abuse stories are a dime a dozen and many much worse than my own. The discussion about abuse has reached such a fevered pitch here in the U.S. that you are not part of the "in crowd" unless you have been abused. The frenzy is not conducive to overcoming victimhood but to wallowing in it, like a pig in mud. Worse yet, from personal experience I have known too many of those victims, those that wallow in their victimhood, use it as an excuse to victimize others therefore multiplying abuse rather than stopping it.

That I am over coming abuse and not allowing it to poison my life is the truly personal part.

woman, thirsty for knowledge, may have been happiest on the road, adventurous husband at her side, off in those ditches, exploring, discovering, learning.

I think about why she moved out here, 10 years ago, that maybe it wasn't to provide care for her mother, who tells me that only a year ago she was mowing the lawn herself,\* who even now seems lively and mobile despite the crutch. Beth looks out the window several times, asking aloud, "What do you think? We too tired to go in to town?" having planned a trip to the grocery store, and I think about the 'we' in that sentence, how it's not just a turn of phrase. She keeps making vague comments about her health issues, never

\* What mom didn't say was I had to help her walk to the riding mower and get up on it. Then I had to monitor what was going on in case she got into trouble or needed some other assistance and help her off when she was done.

She was not doing as well as she likes to believe when I first came here either but there is no reason to argue the point.

I had been considering that mom would need someone to take care of her for several years and wondering how I was going to pull it off and still keep up my marital duties. I phrase it that way because I had realized at one point that R did not love me and things were not going to get better. The last days were like the last scene in "The Fall of the House of Usher" when it burns down and the outer shell collapses inward. The house is already gutted and just the outer walls left standing until the last. The end was long and slow yet sudden. Its total collapse released me to do what else needed to be done with a clean conscious. It was only three days after I announced my intentions that I departed.

I never did want to live here in North Dakota (and especially on this particular farm) ever again, but if I did, I very much would have wanted it to be on my own dime. It took two years for my health to return. Constant stress and poor nutrition had taken a heavy toll. Then just as I became fit enough to consider a job on top of caring for mom and this place, I became seriously ill.

If I really wanted to find a nice comfortable hole to hide in it would definitely not be here.

with any specificity, and I wonder how close her husband got to his ultimate goal.\*

And then I realize that none of this might be true—all projection and speculation—but I can't help but let my mind wander after hearing those words, and I couldn't possibly ask her to confirm my suspicions, because I wasn't honest with my intentions: that I was there mostly for her, that from the first message she left, from the moment she properly pronounced a name even most professors stumble on, that right then I felt like there was a story here, that there was something about this woman, another contradiction amongst the many I've experienced here. I pretend to be interested

\* I doubt he had any goal in mind what so ever. I have come to the conclusion that he frequently was unaware of what he was doing or why. He was as much a danger to himself as he was and probably still is to me or others. He was not an introspective person at all. He would just be feeling irritable or angry and just act on it.

Even before the drug habit he had fits of bad temper and even rage that came out of nowhere. These did not start occurring until after the wedding and after we retrieved our children from his parents care. We were living in [REDACTED] at the time but the really bad stuff did not start until we moved back to [REDACTED] where he was born. I have wondered if living outside his comfort zone is what kept him in line the first seven years of our marriage or if he just kept his "bad" out on the road where I could not see it. He was a long haul truck driver. The kids and I only saw him once every two weeks or so.

The worst of the relationship was never knowing when he was going to blow, having to take the continual verbal abuse and being blamed for all that went wrong. But do not think I was some helpless creature. Until the drugs started to rob him of what little self control he had, he would not have dared raise his hand to me. I let him know right at the beginning that if he struck me there would be very unpleasant consequences. The way I stated it was, "If you ever hit me, remember that you have to sleep some time." He took me seriously.

The incident with the table vise ended without injury because as he prepared to throw it I crouched for battle and said in a low forceful voice "Do It! Just do it!" I knew there was blood in my eyes, if he was so far gone that he did, it would have to be all out war. His eyes widened, he paused and then set it down.

in the Tower, but most of my questions had been answered by Lyle just a few hours earlier. “Why would an architecture student would want to hear my story?” she would wonder. Why do I? I can’t justify it to myself, and I couldn’t begin to justify it to Beth. So I don’t pry, because it’s not my place to. Instead, I let her go on.

She talks about where they were living when it happened, in [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and how it’s a bad place.\* She speaks like a character in a noir film.†

“I think it’s the weather. It just gathers there.”

“It’s where people go to escape their dirty past, and they tend to bring that dirt with them.”‡

“It’s the type of place where if you meet someone at a bar, you don’t ask for their name, you ask what they’re called.”§

\* I think it is best to omit the name of the town and even the state. There a lot of good people there too. I would also say it is not the town specific it is the areas in the back woods that the not asking ones name is sometimes practiced. Little hidden places that are more just wide spots in the back roads were a tiny town once resided. Sometimes the only thing left is a bar and a few run down houses. There are a lot of good photo opportunities back there. Both spectacularly beautiful or spooky and even humorous.

† Did I really? That is too funny.

‡ I know I didn't say that or at least not in that way. Though the thought behind the words is the close. To be fair, some of those people are just so broken they find it hard to tolerate their own kind.

§ This is what R said to me specifically of the "[REDACTED] Saloon". It is, with a few run down houses, all that is left of a tiny mining town. We were up there one summer. The name comes from a horrible collapse of the mine that was thought preventable. There was a commemorative plaque there, I read it but the details have become fogged over the years. I remember the site vividly enough and it looked as if part of the mountainside had slid down and may have even buried part of the town.

Having said that, however, I met plenty of people there that met that description. So I took it to be an accurate statement.

Eventually, we steer the conversation back to the things Beth is interested in—there’s a seemingly endless supply of those. The sun is falling quickly and though I try to end the conversation, feeling like I’ve overstayed my welcome, cutting into their lunch time, Beth keeps talking, and I can’t help but participate. She mentions that she’s actually quite shy, but that she feels like I’m able to follow her stream-of-consciousness style of thinking (her words), that I seem to get her.

Before I stopped the recording, almost three hours ago by now, I asked if I could photograph her and her mom. Beth is cool with it, but Karen is self-conscious, instead offering an older photo of herself. I take a picture of it, refusing to keep it, feeling like they’ve already shared enough with me. Beth insists that she gets one of me. She catches me trying to tame my hair as I look into the bathroom mirror. She laughs and says “Don’t worry, you’ve got the windswept look.” She takes a photo, but then tells me to hold my camera up. I do, and she explains that “Portraits are more meaningful when they contain a bit about who the person is, what they like—like your camera. You take it everywhere and it’s a part of who you are.”

I suspect that I dwell on this particular negative because R seemed drawn to people that were if not criminal at least always seeing how close to the line they could tread. Some were dangerous.

There was one man who looked at my then eleven year old daughter in away that if I could have gotten away with it, it would have been the last time he saw anything.

R would bring them home and I was frequently in a position to deal with them on my own. Fortunately they either for some odd reason respected me, some found me intimidating (Isn't that a hoot! Sorry, translation; laughable) or if they were working themselves up to do a mischief we had moved away. I am thinking of a particular man R brought home while we lived in █████, █████. He had a history of violence and he was getting a bit to familiar with me when R was not around. R decided quite suddenly to move us back to █████. I half wondered if R had done something illegal and got spooked.

Before this, the camera had stayed in my bag, and I only pulled it out now to take her picture. It was either a lucky guess, or she's incredibly intuitive.\*

Despite her willingness to be photographed, she's clearly uneasy. I take two photos. A blurry one, the afternoon light fading fast, failing to provide for the scene, and another, this time sharp, but the moment lost, Beth's initial smile gone, replaced by a forced smirk. It's not a great portrait, but I can't bring myself to pry more than I already have, so I put the camera away.

I leave after spending four hours with them, promising to say goodbye after I've finished at the Tower. It's 4 p.m. and I've got maybe thirty or forty minutes before the sun sets. My plan was to spend the afternoon capturing more footage. I had asked for permission to walk around their property to take some photos, and as I do I find myself distracted. I walk through those fields around the Tower, fairly confident that I won't get shot or arrested, and try to record some video, but I'm phoning it in. I walk to my car and try to warm up for a bit before taking some photos of the Dead Men.

I can't stop thinking about Beth and her mom, and about how ultimately pointless this whole endeavor may be. I wonder, now, about why I felt like I needed to write this all down, why it affected me so much, and I think it has once again to do with my preconceived notions. When I dropped that letter in their mailbox, when I still saw their property as something creepy, out of horror film,† I imagined the people who lived there would be unwelcom-

\* The quality of the bag and I seem to remember a good quality tripod, the artistic nature you revealed in your conversation and even though I know little to nothing of what it takes to be an architect I can imagine that it can be a very effective tool of the trade. And luck as well. Did I tell you I am a fan of Sherlock Holmes?

† Don't blame your preconceptions too much about this feeling. A pall seems to hang over this place, I noticed it when I first visited. I was nine or ten years old at the time and did not think to put a name to my feelings of unease. It was a working farm



ing, skeptical of this academic city kid. I imagined they would be uneducated. I made more snap judgments,\* the same judgments I made when talking to Schantel. I felt unequipped to deal with the magnitude of everything I had encountered out here—the Road, the Tower, and finally Beth. And that weighed on me as I tried to take photos of an object that was suddenly a backdrop instead of a main character—my whole reason for being here inane.

I stop by Beth's house to say goodbye on my way out, to thank her one last time. I pull into the front yard, and before I even kill the engine, there she is, walking up to join me. It's dark out, but the

at the time with milk cattle in the pasture, calves in the barn, herding dogs, barn cats to play with and even a few horses; paradise for a kid that loves animals and is used to the country, not the greying hulk it is now. But it still felt very off and I did not like coming here.

It is not as strong as it used to be or perhaps I have grown accustomed to it. But if it is new to you and you have the preconceptions as well, that can make it awful tough. It takes a certain amount of courage to overcome. Well done Marco.

Bye the bye, I did not move here when Mom married Buster. I went to live with my father and his family near ██████████. It was a spot of peace and beauty, at least for me for a little while. The house there was an old, rundown, spooky looking Victorian home but if there were any ghosts there they were friendly and welcoming.

\* Everyone does this, that you are aware and can guard against it is good. Our view of the world is heavily influenced by what we see in the media and even by fictional stories we see in movies and TV, especially if it is a theme that has been repeated over and over again in various ways. It is actually very hard to untangle the opinions we have developed from actual first hand experience and what has been formed by what we have read, watched or been told by someone when we were small.

I remember when I was about twenty-five, I was having a debate with someone and I made a statement about something (I don't even remember what it was now but that is not important) with great conviction. Later on when I was going through things in my mind, I wondered where I got it and why I believed it. It was then I realized that I needed to go through what I thought or believed about things and confirm their truth or revamp them based on new or better information.

floodlights bathe us in warm, yellow light. We stand side by side, exchanging a few last words as we watch the Tower lights. She asks me what I'll do when I finish my thesis. The question catches me off guard, as it always does. I don't tend to think far ahead. We talk about theory versus practice, and about what kind of designer I want to be. We talk about the stars, how clear they are from the farm, how the best place to see them is in the desert where she used to travel with her husband. She insists that I keep in touch, that she hates when people disappear after their brief visits, and I can't help but feel bad, knowing I came for a story and got what I wanted, feeling like a vulture.\* I wonder how many other people simply pass through, never to be heard from again. I decide right then that I'll send her a copy of my thesis, whether she features in it or not, and I wonder what she'd think if she read this.

After a while, the conversation simply tapers off, and we watch the Tower beacons pulse.

"It really is something, if you think about it."

And at that I feel somewhat justified in being here, knowing that Beth can feel the same wonder that I feel.†

She pauses.

"Not much to look at though."

\* Stop feeling bad, I enjoyed our time together.

† I do, but when you speak I think you suffer from the same double vision I do. I feel the wonder of all the knowledge of how the world of the physical works and what it takes to build such a tall structure that can endure the elements and that gives it the beauty that we see.

However when seen simply as a form with out the understanding it lacks. The Eiffel Tower though not as tall has more interest form wise.

Beauty, however, is in the eye of the beholder.





Hi Donald,

So I figured I should probably come clean about a few things. Last week I mentioned some health issue that I needed to see to ASAP. Well, it turns out I may have been diagnosed with Myasthenia Gravis, an autoimmune disease that sounds a whole lot worse than it actually is. It's basically a form of targeted muscular fatigue, and right now it's been targeting the muscles in my left eye. As a result, I've had double vision for the last two weeks, as well as a weak eye lid. It's been making day to day life pretty difficult, and I've only just started a barrage of tests meant to rule out other possible causes (your usual cancers, tumors, blood clots, etc). Needless to say my thesis work has fallen off quite a bit, given the fact that reading or looking at anything for a while gives me headaches and eye strain.

So, to be honest I don't really know where I stand right now. I'm kind of just waiting for a positive diagnosis so I can start treatment, but it's looking like the whole process might take another month or so, which is going to severely affect my output.

Basically, I'm going to talk to Emily about this, get all the doctor's notes validated and such. As for your class, well I'd like to talk to you tomorrow alone, if possible. I'm not sure yet if I'm going to attend the morning session, but if I do, I don't really want to have to address this whole thing in front of the class. So I might just lay low in the back.

Thanks, and please let me know when you have a few minutes to meet. I don't want to discuss work as much as I want to discuss possible strategies for working around this. My goal is to complete TRD1 this semester, no matter what. I don't want

to lose a year of my time because of this, and I really don't think it needs to come to that.

Sorry for the long-winded email!

Marco

Nov 14, 2016

What followed this email would lay the ground work for the rest of my thesis.

To figure out why my eyes were failing me, I took several train rides to see specialists in Montreal (my hometown, where I still have health insurance). I took the train because I did not trust myself to drive six hours with an eye-patch—depth perception, it turn out, is pretty useful.

On the last train ride, after a final barrage of tests (including a disorienting ride in an MRI machine), I did two things: I wrote, and I shot footage out the window of the moving train. Now, being unable to focus on a screen for any considerable length of time, what I wrote was short and to the point. Still, I had to take breaks. I would look out the window, fascinated and frustrated. The rails that run between Toronto and Montreal pass through backyards and small towns and empty fields with abandoned barns and grain silos and industrial waste lands and public parks with playgrounds empty in these winter months, and at times the fields are covered in fresh layers of snow and at others they are gray and wet in the November rain and it all goes by so fast, in an instant over, your eyes darting between one thing and the next, switching between the blur of the foreground and the slow crawl of the horizon. Frustration set in as I closed one eye then the other to truly appreciate the relentlessness of it all, trying to banish that ghostly twin landscape, the effect worse as I look off in the distance.

It's in that moment of frustration that I took my phone out and pressed it to the window. I would hit record for a minute, trying to keep the camera as still as possible, the whole train acting as a near-perfect dolly<sup>(76)</sup> despite the speed. I would record and playback the footage, over and over, and the first thing I noticed is how fast everything moved, left to right or right to left depending on which side of the (almost empty) train I filmed on. The way my admittedly defective eyes tracked movement was not captured by the real-time footage my camera recorded. The common shutter speed when recording video is double the frame rate. If you're shooting at 24 frames-per-second<sup>(77)</sup>, the shutter speed would thus be 1/48<sup>th</sup> of a second. 30 fps would need 1/60<sup>th</sup>. This creates a pleasant and very slight blur in each frame of the footage, which helps your mind fill in the gaps.<sup>(78)</sup> One unfortunate side effect is that shots that track a subject laterally emphasize this blur—and the higher the speed of the tracking, the worse it gets. But your eyes don't track the way a camera does. They are not objective and fixed. They don't receive light evenly and constantly.

So I slowed the footage down. I started shooting at 120 fps, using a shutter speed of 1/250s and playing each shot back at 24 fps. The new footage, five times slower than real-time, not only captures the detail that your eyes can track, but also the detail you'd never have time to perceive.

I ended up with a nearly objective recording of that relentless ride. I would record a section and play it back, not only to reduce the strain of looking at distant objects, but to catch details that I would otherwise miss. This impulse to capture and document everything is nothing new, but there was an urgency to my situation this

76 If you don't know, a dolly is essentially a train track for film cameras. The effect is to limit the camera movement along one axis.

77 From here on out I will use fps.

78 Some filmmakers play with this for creative purposes. Steven Spielberg chose to shoot the opening invasion of Normandy sequence in *Saving Private Ryan* at a high shutter speed, reducing the blur and creating a jittery, gritty image that compliments the chaos on screen.

time. I would jump between trying to write about my experience in Montreal and recording the landscape—cutting section after section and examining them on my phone.

I would later try to recreate this footage in my car, but the effect was not the same. The car sits lower in the land, that hovering, disembodied view point lost. The car is not a dolly, each crack and bump translated to the sensor, warping and shifting the horizon line—the essential constant to which every other element in the landscape should register. And still, the method was set. Wherever I would go, whatever I would do, I would retain the spirit of that train footage—unbiased, relentless, overwhelming, excessive, obsessive. I'll never show you one photo. I'll show you a series, each part of a larger story, each maybe unimpressive on its own, each maybe mundane, but each a cross-section in time and space, each tracking movement through both, and most importantly, each a view through my eyes—eyes which may one day fail me again.

And so to answer the question which brought you here, the question of what brought me to North Dakota, to the tallest Tower and longest Road. In his introduction to a collection of essays by John Berger, Geoff Dyer observes that D.H. Lawrence, George Orwell and Berger “arranged their lives in such a way as to seek out experiences appropriate to their respective gifts.”<sup>(79)</sup> And while I hesitate to call any of my inclinations “gifts”, let alone place myself alongside Lawrence, Orwell or Berger, there's no doubt that the trip itself was only a means to an end, a carefully arranged set of experiences I could draw from, a kind of placeholder for something else, something bellow the surface. Because beyond all that, beyond the motels and towers and roads and people I knew I'd get to capture and write about, the truth is I simply needed something to look at.

79 Dyer, Geoff. “Editor's Introduction.” *Introduction to John Berger: selected essays*, edited by Geoff Dyer. (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), xi



I leave Beth on the lawn, snapping a few photos on my way out. I'm in my car now, on the highway, driving back to my hotel room.

Tomorrow I'll leave Fargo one last time, starting the long journey back to Toronto. I'll pack my bags, head down to the lobby and talk to Schantel, who'll pat herself on the back for the money she saved me, joking to her colleague about how, "This guy didn't even know about the Canada Rate!"

I'll set up a time lapse, this time through the rear window, taking advice from a friend, though my GoPro will continuously dislodge over the next two days (of course).

I'll leave in the dark, early, driving along those massive streets and big box stores and unending suburbs, going east on the 94, this time turning neither north nor south, leaving the Tower and the 46 behind me as I drive into Minnesota.

I'll stay at a crummy motel in a crummy suburb outside Chicago. My room will have drooping ceiling tiles, terrible lighting, and hot water that varies reliably between scalding and just-not-quite-warm-enough. I'll wonder how this place got four stars. The next morning I'll eat the most pathetic excuse for a so called 'hot breakfast'—their answer to the stale but reliable continental breakfast. I'll wish I had stuck with toast. I'll leave that dumpster-fire of a motel and drive through Chicago, where I'll see the Willis tower, second tallest building in the US, and I'll stack it next to the KVLV Tower and still fail to really grasp the scale of it.

Driving through Illinois and Michigan, I'll spend an ungodly amount of money on tolls. I'll pay a toll right before crossing a bridge, and then pay another immediately after, and I won't question it because I will simply want to get home by then.







I'll throw a bag of oranges out before crossing the border, thinking they'll be confiscated like the bag I had tried to sneak in on arrival, only to curse myself when it won't even come up during questioning.

I'll re-enter Canada through Sarnia. I'll be served my A&W burger by a woman who could use some serious etiquette tips from the friendly folks in Fargo. I'll drive through London and past Cambridge, along that familiar stretch of 401, where I'll take the Express Toll Route to shave ten minutes off my drive—tolls be damned.

I'll approach Toronto and reality will set in. I'll be stuck in traffic on the Gardiner and feel a familiar rage I haven't felt in two weeks. I'll remember how astoundingly bad Toronto drivers are, a perfect storm of incompetence and self-righteousness. Five minutes from my apartment, I'll be bumper to bumper with tourists heading to a Christmas Market, reminded that there are too many damned people in this damned city, and they all insist on driving because it's somehow still faster than the TTC.

I'll get home and feel the comfort of a loved one.

I'll get to work the next day, unpacking all of this, thinking about what it all meant. I'll think about all the million little things I could have done differently, not the least of which will be to never use a GoPro again. I'll write the thesis and defend earlier than I thought,<sup>(80)</sup> and it will be fine. I'll graduate and wonder what the hell to do with myself. Starr will go to grad school and I will follow her, working for a while, and the only pressing question about the world we live in will be how to plug architecture into whatever equation yields the most dollars per square foot.

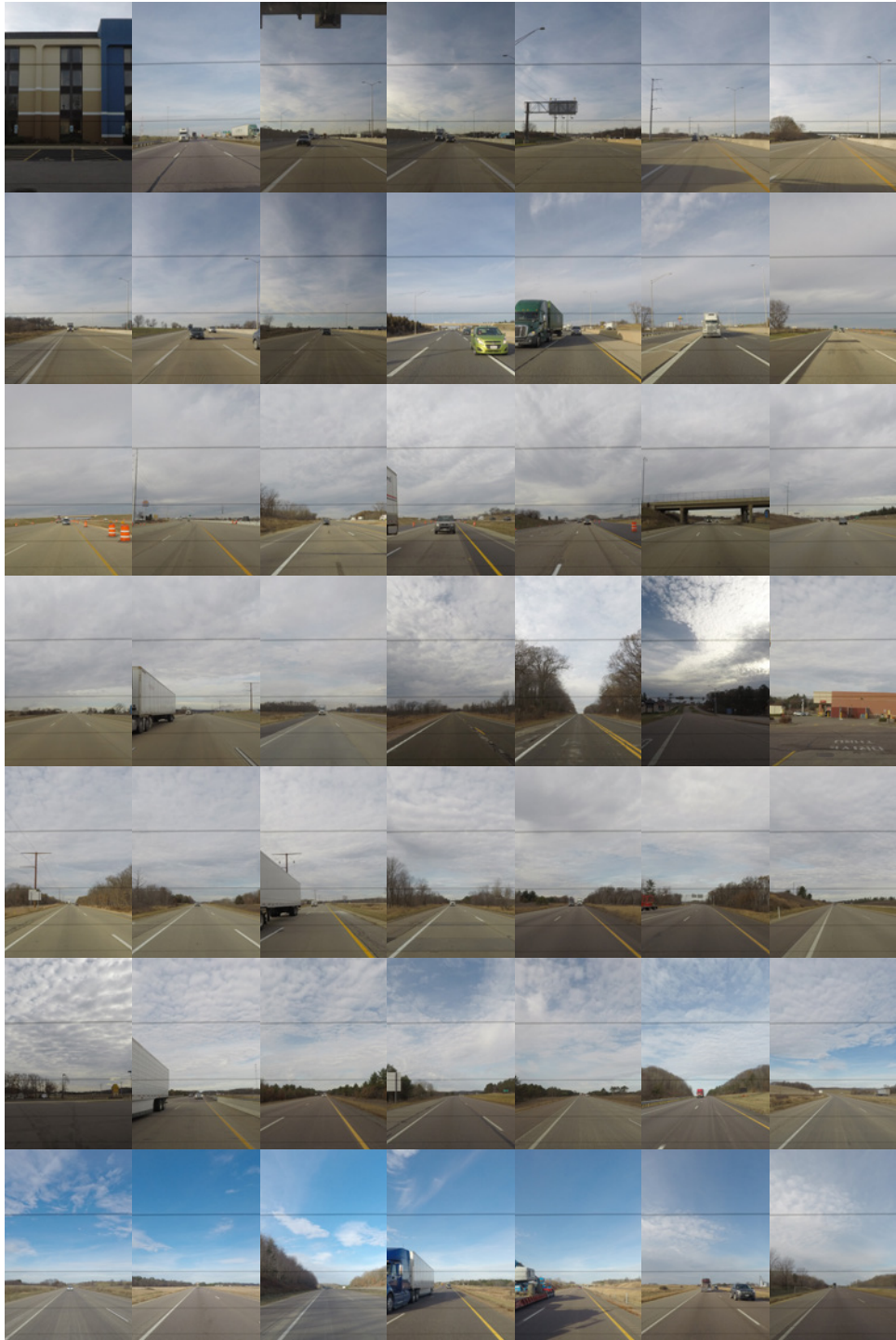
80 Wishful thinking, in retrospect.

I'll think about how cynical the last six years have made me, about how our work terms should have prepared us for this, and I'll wonder why we still create this false sense of hope in studio, despite being faced with the realities of professional practice every four months. I'll think about Schantel and Beth, about how their questions about the world cannot possibly be answered by architecture, that those types of questions are the only ones that really matter to 99% of people, and I'll wonder why we, architects, insist on trying. I'll think about the masks our professors wear—The Writer, The Craftsman, The Poet, The Sculptor, The Theorist, The Coder, The Graphic Designer, The Data Analyst, The Photographer, The Historian, The Urban Planner, The Social Activist, ██████████<sup>(81)</sup>—and I'll feel like we've been sold a lie, because none of those masks come in handy in the real world—not for most of us, at least.

And I'll write all of this down, these cynical thoughts I've kept to myself, as a sort of exorcism, to hopefully banish them and think about beauty once again, think about the work I've done over the last two weeks and hope that it will have been worthwhile.

But fuck it—that's no way to end a story. I'll delete days twelve and thirteen, ending this story here instead, on day eleven, driving under starry skies and through moonlit fields, reminiscing about long roads and tall towers, replaying the day in my head, alone in my car, feeling a ton of conflicting emotions after a frankly emotional day, but feeling no cynicism, not right now, not on the highway, not as I drive towards Fargo, North Dakota.

81 Redacted at Donald's request. Given the content, I didn't object.



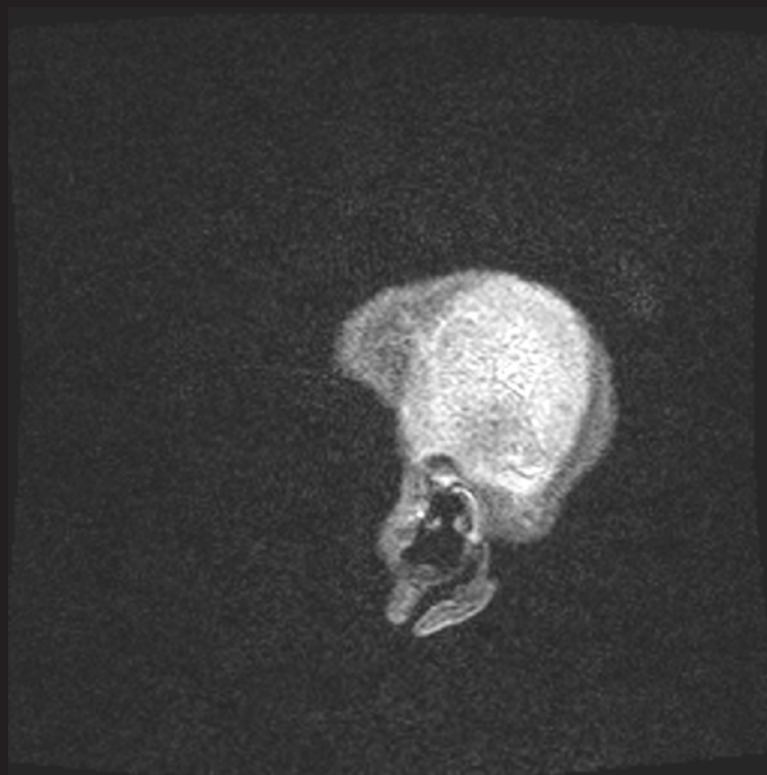


And for all of you good people in the Midwest,  
sorry [I] said fuck so much.

— Gay Perry  
*Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*









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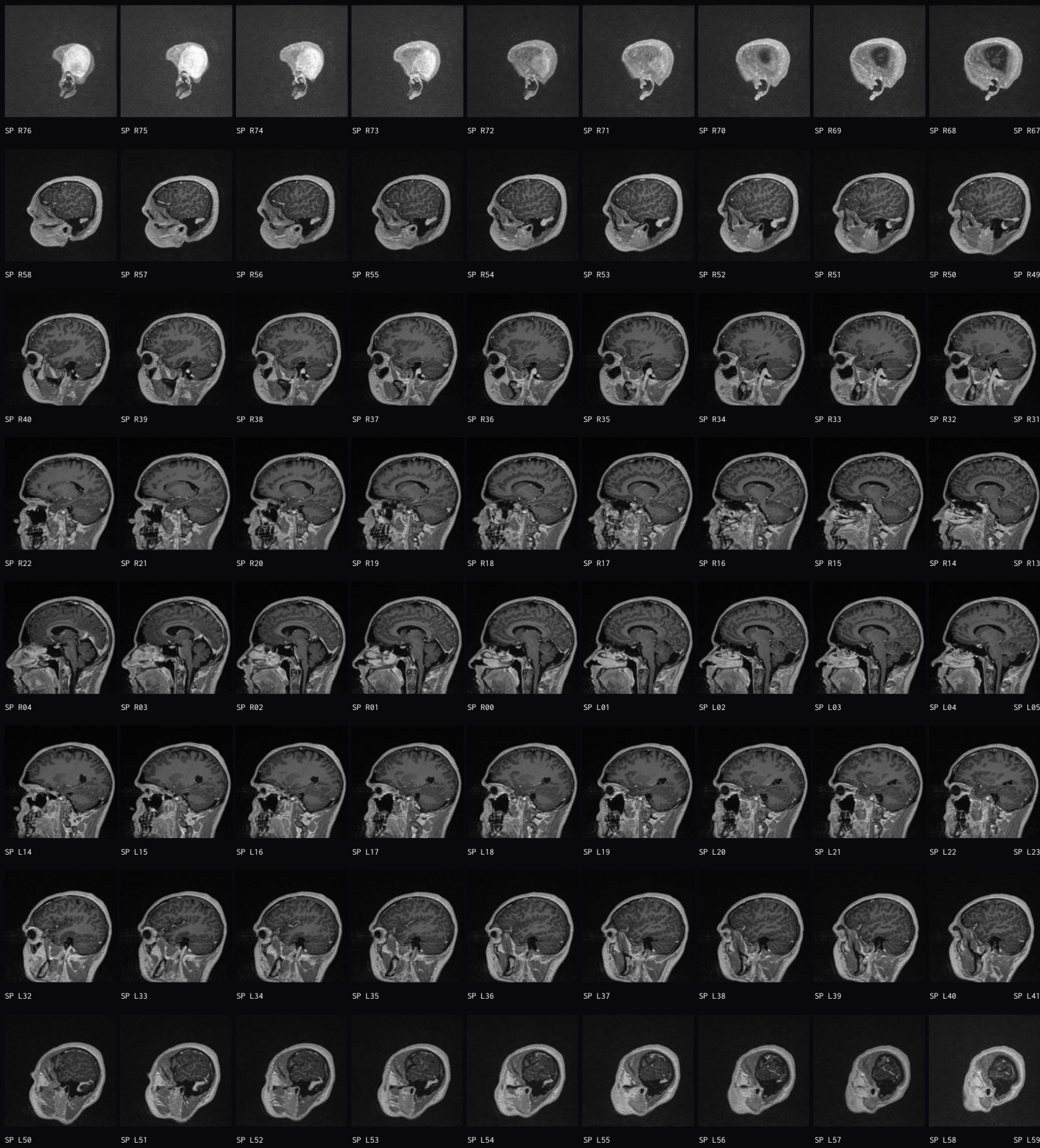
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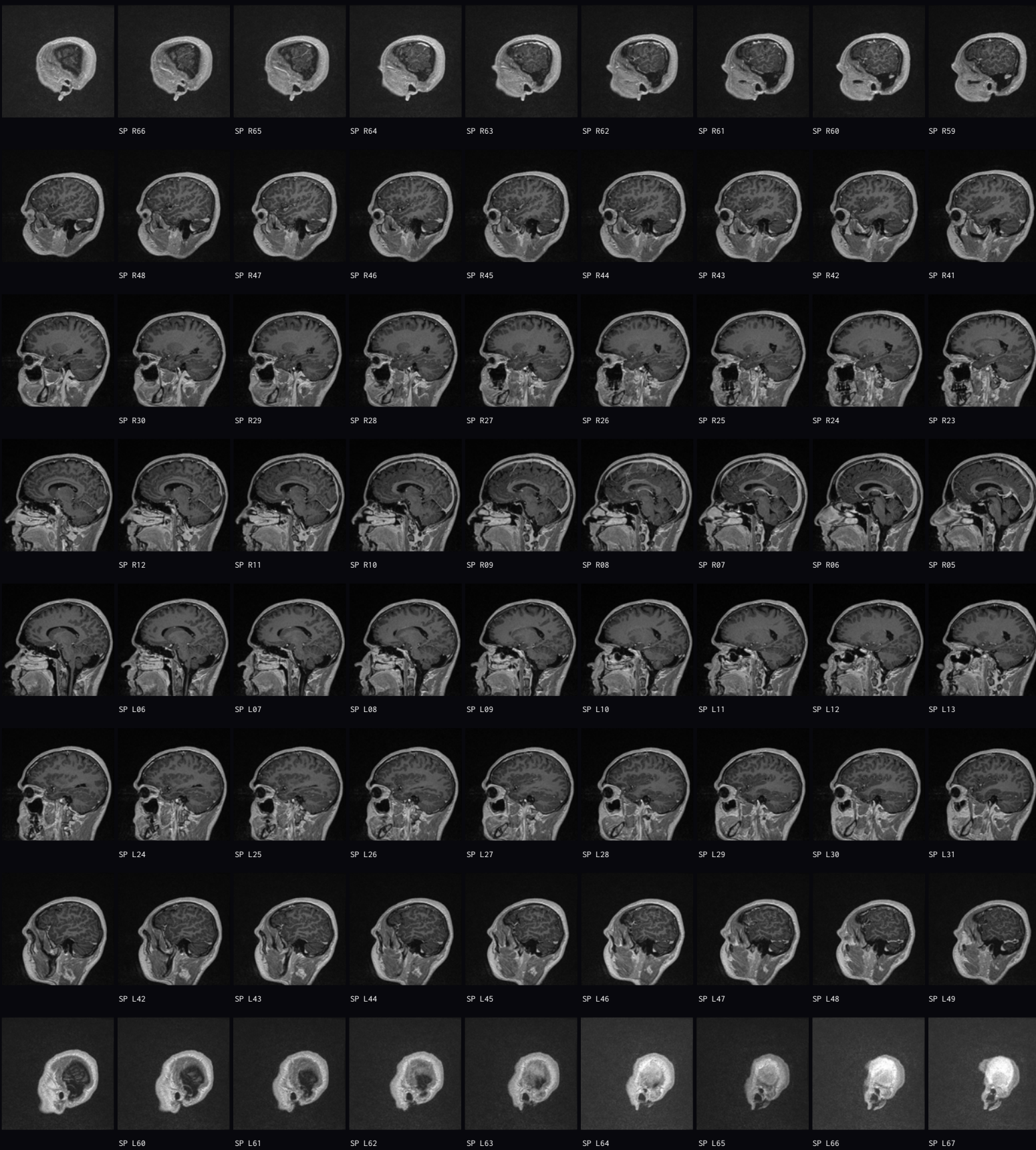
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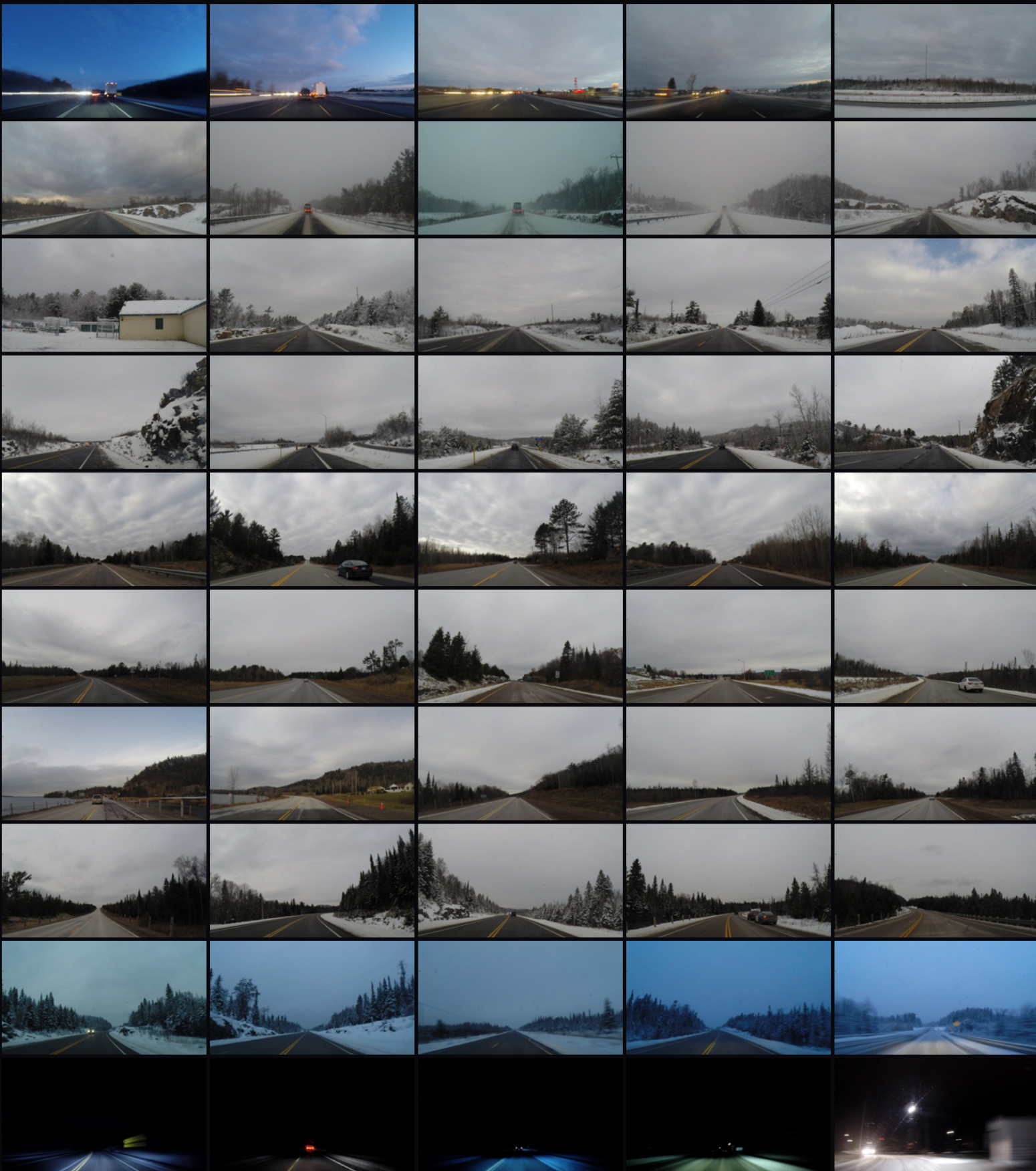
APPENDIX A  
Contact Sheets

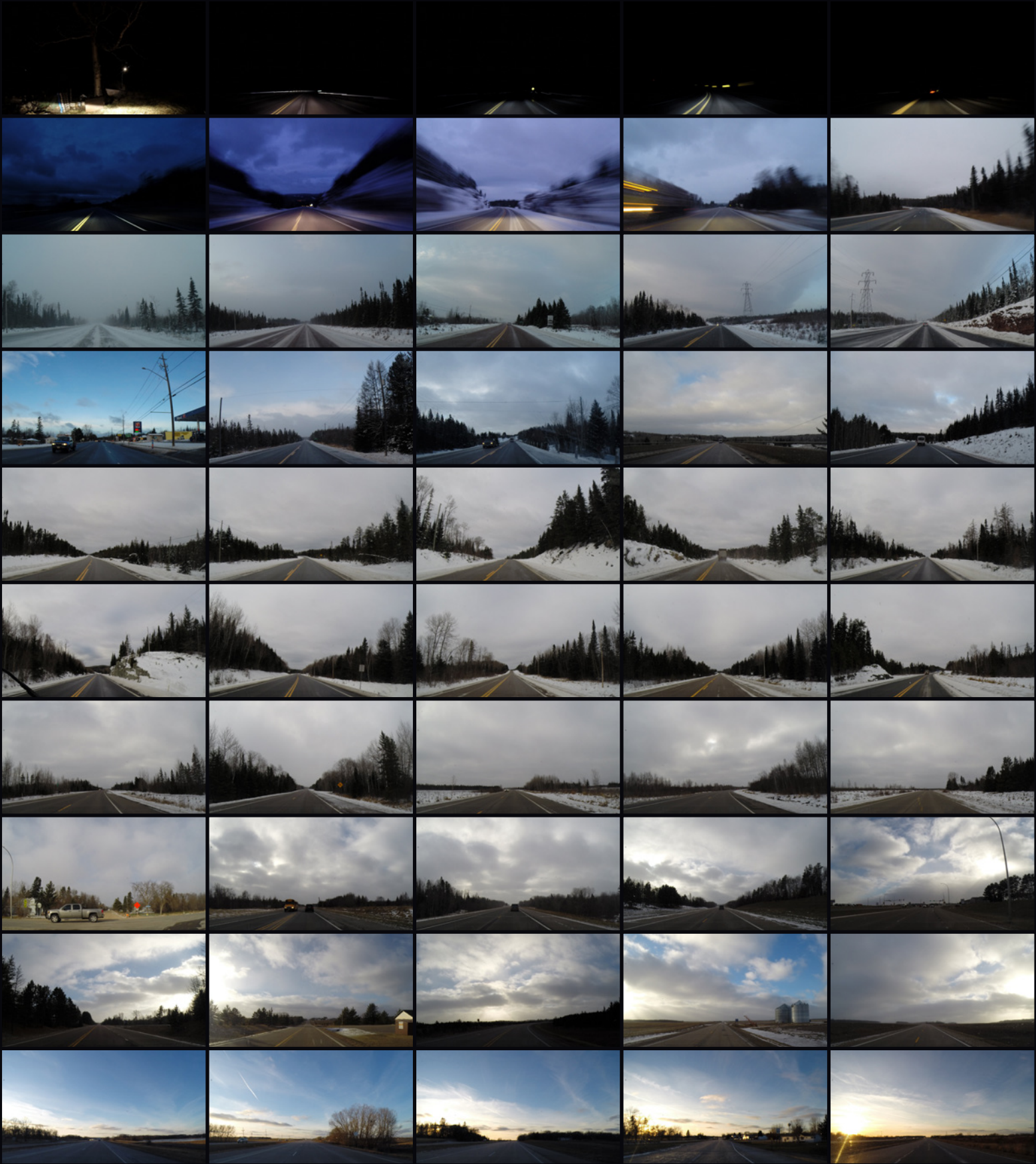
































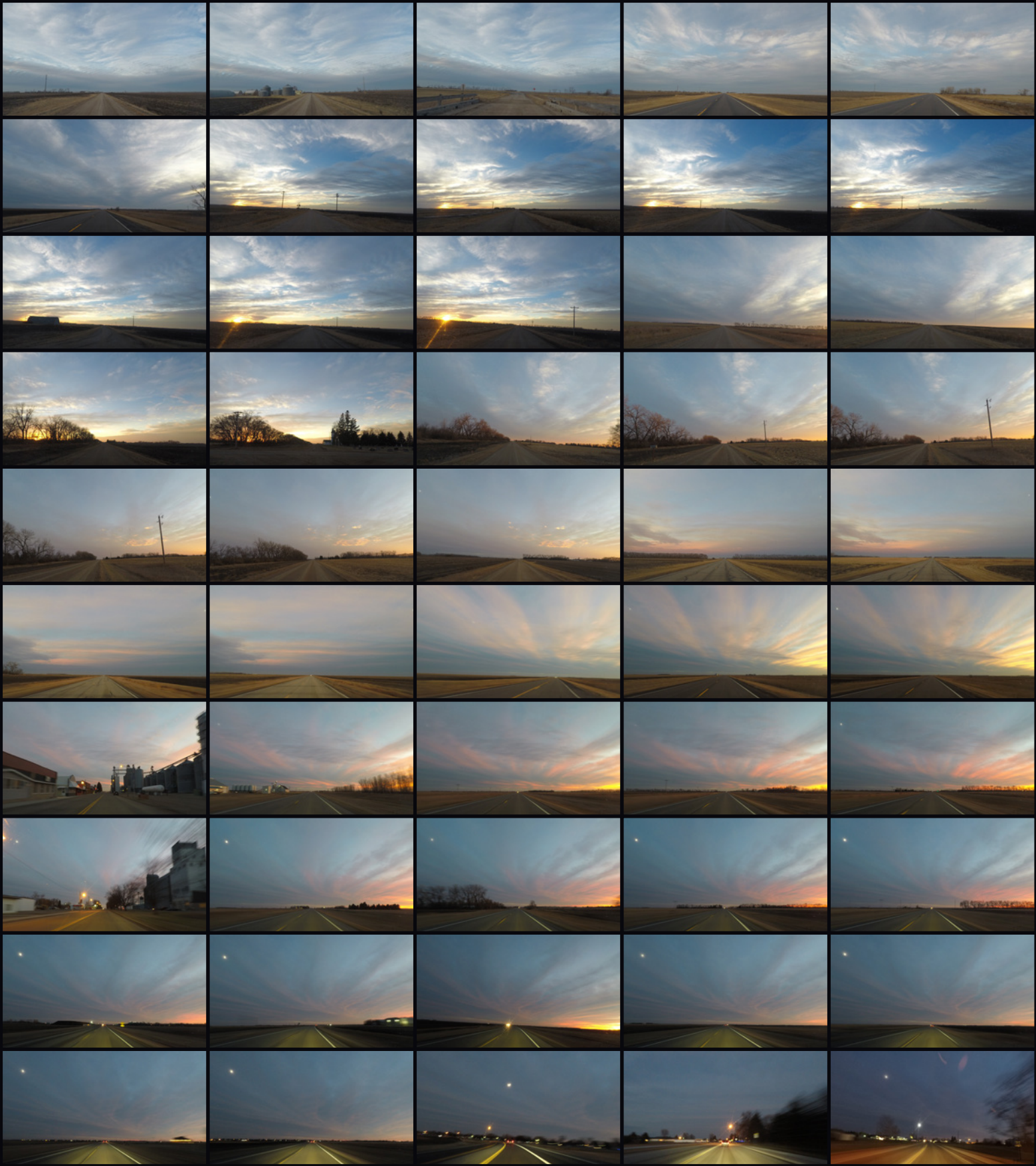






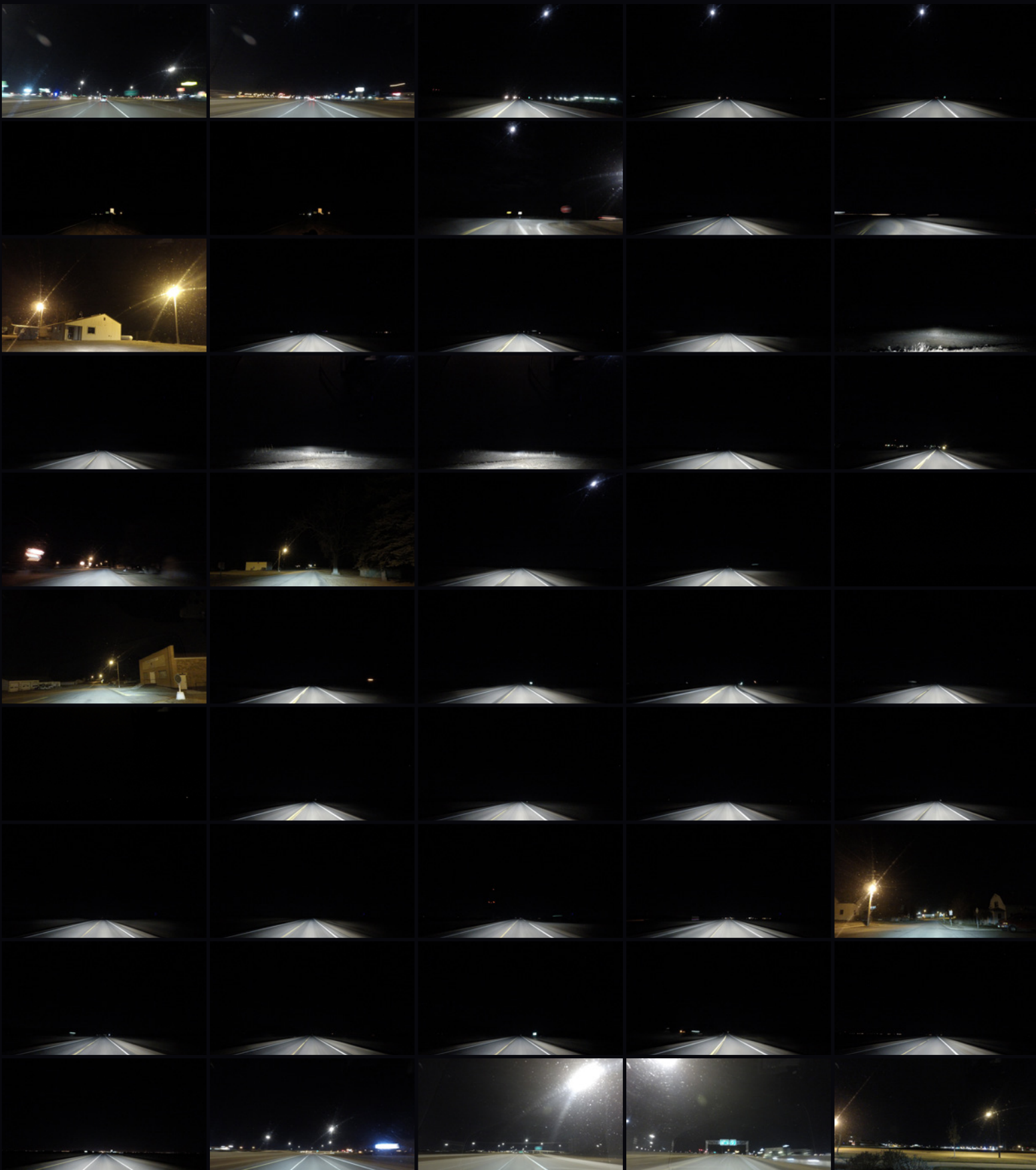


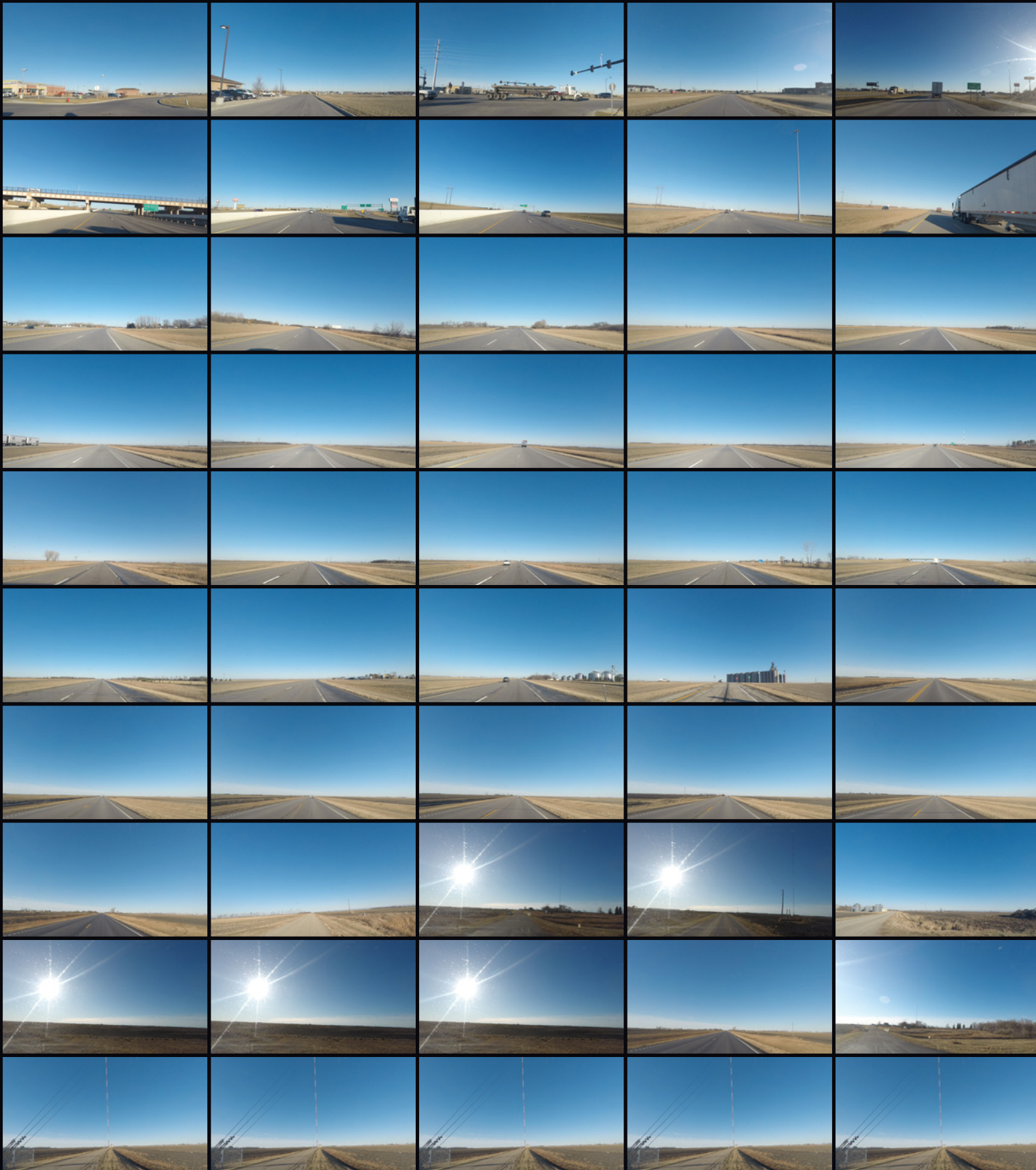


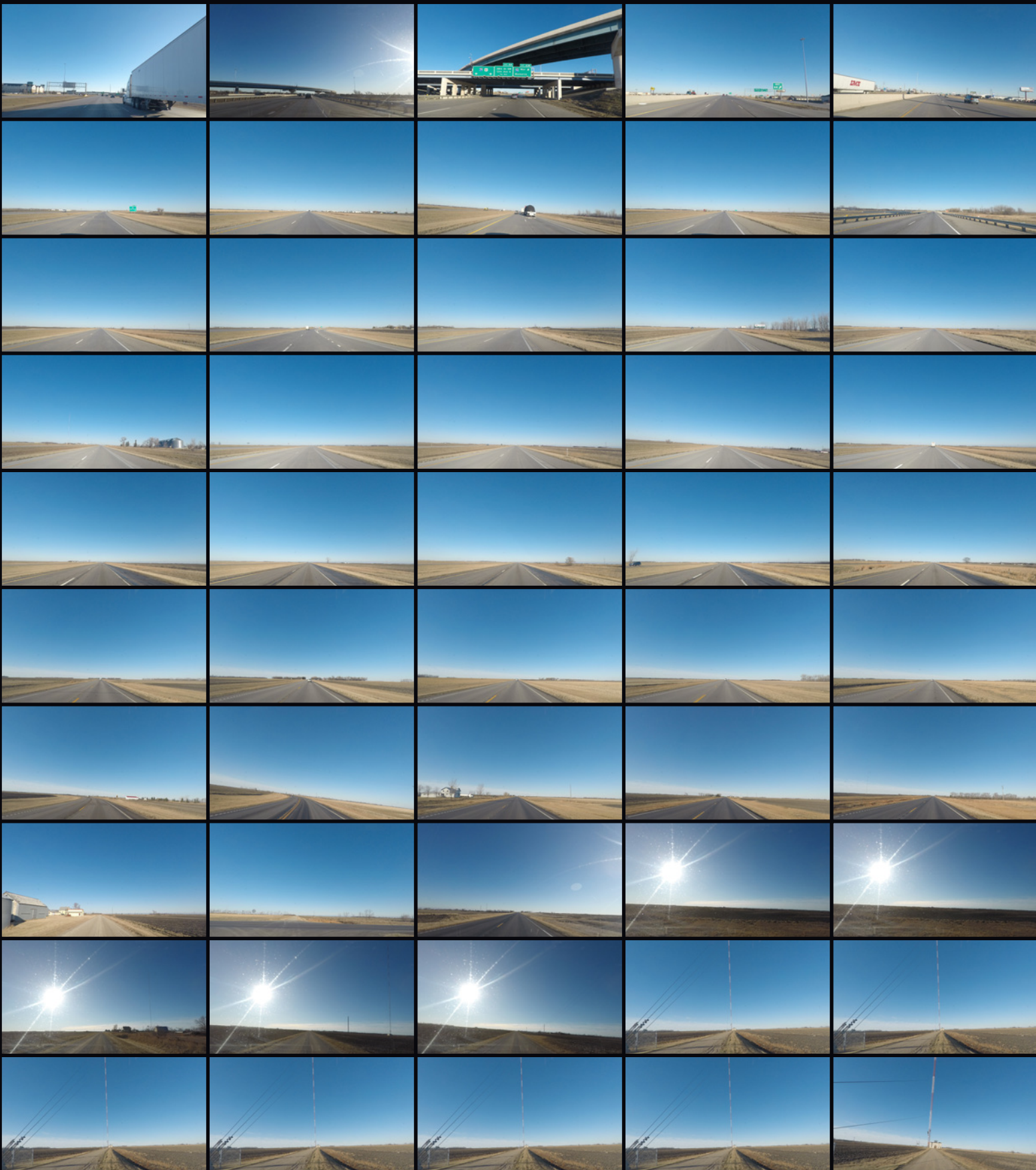
















## APPENDIX B

### Swatches



