



Masked Meanderings, August 2020 — Larry's Version

8.8.2020

Hadn't been out West in a while, and you forget things about it until you're back — how big the sky actually is, how much work mountain driving is even though the payoff is a view that makes you not want to blink. You forget the desert smells like something specific, dry, a little sweet, almost like raisins. You forget how fast the temperature drops once the sun's down, no matter how hot the day got.

Plenty of people thought a road trip during a pandemic was a bad idea. We didn't feel that way. Masks on, distance kept, and a campground makes that easy — you just stay on your own site. Bathrooms required masks, and if anything they were cleaner than usual because of it. In stores and rest stops we just steered clear of anyone not masked up. The variety out there was something — the usual blue medical ones, bandannas, vented masks, cloth in every pattern you could think of. One guy at a store had the Joker's face on his, Heath Ledger's version, greasy smile and all — unsettling. Somebody at a Walmart had apparently forgotten his and just buttoned his shirt collar up over his nose instead. I'm fairly sure I saw one guy at a rest stop wearing a mask and a MAGA hat at the same time, though nobody else in the family will back me up on that one. Every trail we hiked was empty enough that we carried masks without needing them.

Trip started with a problem, like most of ours do. Abina had a bad skating fall — scraped up her hip, side, legs pretty seriously, had to get the wounds dressed carefully before we could even leave. Got her comfortable enough and headed out, across Illinois into Iowa, camping at the Coralville Dam complex. The girls had packed an absurd amount of food — good thing about the new shelving, actually fits now. Hot, everybody a little tense. Girls decided to sleep in the tent this trip for the extra space and privacy. Chia went with them, naturally.

8.9.2020

Let Leni take the wheel for a stretch. She's driven the truck plenty, but never with the trailer on — different animal entirely, slower acceleration, careful braking, tight turns you really have to think through. She did fine, barely broke a sweat over it.

8.10.2020

Got a text from B&T telling us not to come in — office closed because of some unrest downtown, protests, reports of looting and shots fired at police. Kept an eye on it through the day; seemed to settle down fairly fast.

Thunderstorm blew up late morning, high winds — out on open prairie those winds come in fast with nothing to slow them down. The girls tried to strike the tent in time but it collapsed on them and everybody piled into the trailer, because for a minute it looked like it could turn into something worse, maybe even a tornado nearby. Once it passed, we counted the damage — snapped tent poles, tent done for. It was pushing 20 years old, so maybe its time had come anyway. Downed branches around the campground, and the rig next to us lost its awning entirely. Took the opportunity to run to Walmart, did a conference call from the truck while everybody shopped. One tent left on the shelf — a white teepee-style thing, cheap, cute, no idea yet how it'd hold up in wind.



8.11.2020

One night told us everything — that tent wasn't going to cut it. Moved too much in wind even staked down right, big footprint, and the white fabric let in way too much light too early. Fine for a kid in a backyard, not for real camping. Packed it back up and returned it at the Walmart in Fort Morgan, Colorado — they took it back without a fuss even though we'd used it, but they had zero tents in stock to replace it with. Kept heading west while I ran GPS searches for camping stores. Somehow the directions took us most of the way to Denver by mistake. Cabela's had a thin selection, wrong sizes, overpriced. Sportsman's

Warehouse turned out to be the answer — heavy on guns and camo, but they had exactly one tent left that fit what we needed. Grabbed some jerky too. Salmon jerky turned out to be a hit with some of us — the clerk mentioned his wife thinks it's too fishy, which, fair enough, everybody's got their limits.

Hard night finding a campsite — this turned out to be the theme of the whole trip, more people camping than usual thanks to the pandemic, motels feeling less safe, flying out of the question for a lot of folks, plus spotty reception in the mountains making advance reservations a gamble. Ended up near Golden, which I've always liked — narrow roads, mountains coming up steep close to the road. Changed a lot since we were last through; there's a big new casino complex now, multiple hotel towers. Not really my kind of scenery as a visitor, but I imagine it's good for the local economy. I've been driving these mountain roads long enough to handle them fine, but it's still real work, no matter how many years in. Scrapped the plan to stay two nights — the site we found was way up a winding road, and getting to town and back ate more time than the mileage suggested. Just a couple hookups next to a convenience store called Base Camp at Golden Gate. Sign on the door: "Walk slowly. Elevation 9,820 feet."

Store had two registers, one liquor, one camping supplies, and the clerk bounced between them with good humor. The girls picked up a six-pack from a place called Pickle Liquors — hard to pass that name up. Prices were what you'd expect at 9,800 feet.

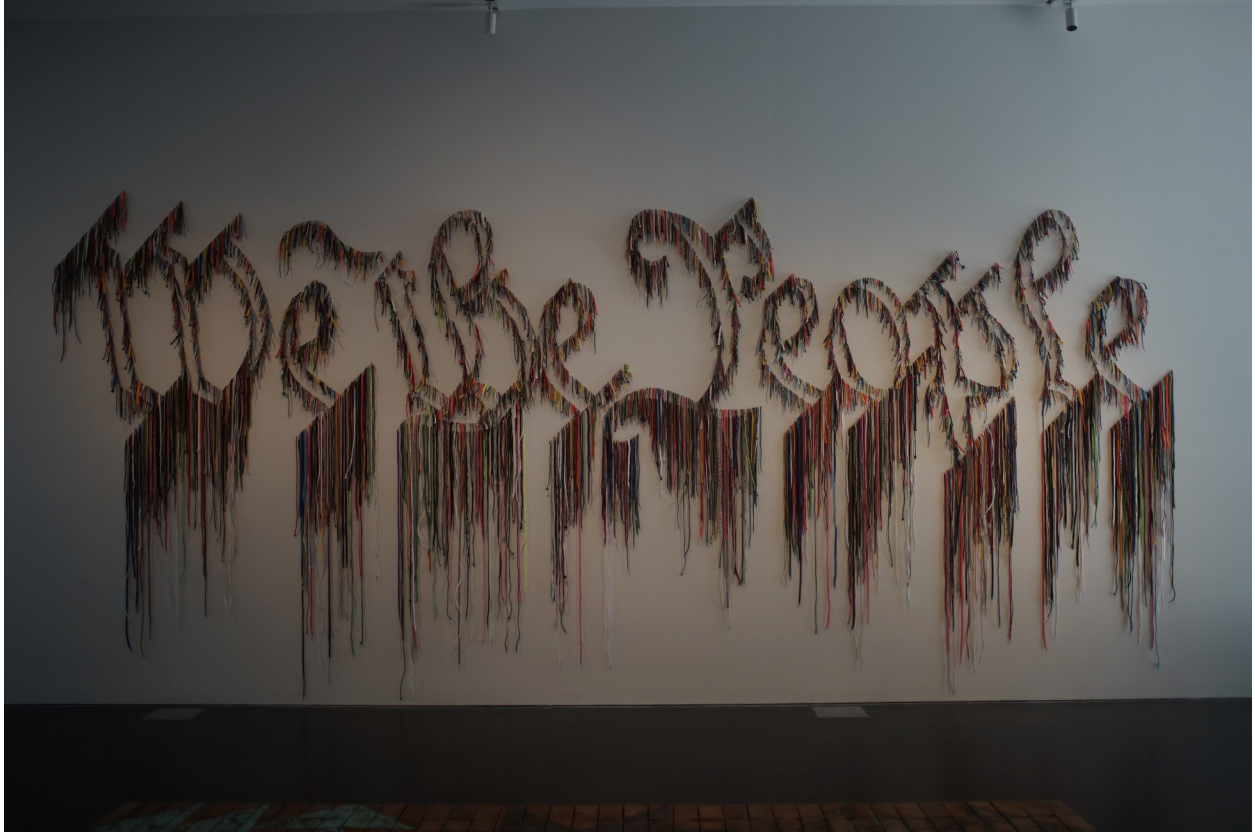
Had phone trouble earlier in the day — turned out not everyone had matching SIM cards. Called the carrier, sorted it by turning Darcy's phone into a hotspot for the rest of us. She became the default source of information for pretty much the whole trip after that.

Having a working phone mattered more than it used to, since a lot of park systems and even private campgrounds run online-only reservations now, which is a real problem with no service. None of those systems are especially user-friendly, and there's no live support to speak of — sometimes you need a whole account just for one night's stay. More than once we had to pull over and burn real time wrestling with a reservation system before we could even keep driving, just to be sure of a bed for the night. Technology's fine until it isn't, especially in mountain terrain with spotty coverage.

Not much room at the Golden site, but the girls put the new tent up anyway. Good tent — spacious, quick to set up, rain fly and all.

8.12.2020

Denver got the better of us technology-wise again — the Art Museum was sold out of timed online tickets for the day. Went to the Museum of Contemporary Art instead, also reservation-only but with room. Went in shifts, me and Lu first, so somebody stayed with the truck and Chia. Downtown Denver isn't built for a truck and trailer — found parking eventually but got charged double for taking up two spots, even with the lot half empty. Can't turn the rig around easily enough for a ramp.



The exhibit — “We the People,” by an artist named Nari Ward from Jamaica — was built out of found objects, themes around refugees and slavery. Fire hoses, old strollers, a piano, bottles with messages nobody would ever read. One piece stuck with me — a photo of a church floor down South with a pattern of holes in it, a folk design that doubled as breathing holes for slaves hidden underneath during the era it was built. Practical and symbolic at once. He’s used that same motif elsewhere in copper and other materials. Girls got free face masks designed by well-known artists — something about a group entry rule, since Lu and I weren’t offered any.

Backtracked that night since we’d overshot west, camping at Jackson Lake State Park, plenty of room along the shore. Left Chia in the trailer and went to the Wild Animal Sanctuary, a place Geneva had recommended after visiting earlier in the year. Worth every bit of the recommendation — nothing like it. It’s a rescue operation, big open habitats, rehab, medical care for big cats and other large animals pulled out of bad situations — petting zoos, circuses, private homes that had no business keeping them.

Not an easy place to find, small country roads with no signage, and a stalled freight train nearly stopped us getting there at all. Got there late, which turned out to be the right time anyway, since the animals sleep through the heat of the day. You start with a video on the mission, then walk a 35-foot-high walkway a mile and a half long. Apparently the animals don’t register anything overhead as a threat, so they mostly ignore people up there — useful, since a lot of them have had bad experiences with humans at ground level and do

better with minimal contact. Below us, wide grassy habitats with fencing you could barely see, animals at every stage of recovery. As the sun went down — a deep red from a couple of wildfires burning nearby — we started spotting more of them: lions in the dry grass, foxes in dens and under bushes, some animals sleeping up on wooden spools or concrete culverts or platform ladders. Watched two young bears tussle briefly and then both back off. Lions and tigers lazing around like housecats scaled way up. One bear sitting upright looked exactly like Baloo.



Once it got dark, the roaring started — one big male, then others picking it up across the whole property, some so far off you couldn't even see them. A guide walking us back called it roll call, the lions checking on each other across the distance. You could see the diaphragm work on those roars, real technique — a singer could learn something watching that. Our guide, Linda, had been doing this a while and clearly loved it, like everyone else on staff. They take these animals in from shut-down illegal roadside zoos and circuses, often sick, starved, or just broken down from small enclosures for years, and nurse them back — medical care, real food, gradually more room to roam until they're ready for the big habitats, sometimes even paired with others. Rough stories, but good endings.

Strange thing — the place sits near a shooting range, and you can hear shots echoing across the property the whole time. Asked the guide about it; she said it worries them but so far no problems, no stray shots, no stress showing in the animals.

Forty dollars a head plus a required donation, not cheap, but worth every bit of it — you're not just watching these animals, you're funding the reason they get a better life than the one they came from. Opposite of a zoo, really. Built around the animals, and people are just guests looking on from a distance.

Leni drove us back with lightning going overhead and then a dust storm that dropped visibility to nothing on washboard gravel. Handled it steady the whole way.

Windy back at camp — girls put the tent up in the dark and the wind anyway. Stayed breezy with a little rain for a few hours.

8.13.2020

Sunny and hot fast the next morning. Campground sat right on a lake, so the girls and Chia waded a bit — Chia tolerates water more than loves it, but they had a good time regardless.

Needed new tires — knew they were worn but hadn't realized how bad. Drove into Boulder for it. Left me at the garage while Lu and the girls walked and got sushi and Chinese takeout for Abina's birthday, ate it under a big tree at Bloomfield Park.

No campground space anywhere that night. Drove through the White River National Forest, where the campgrounds don't take reservations, but every one was full. Back to Dillon looking for a Walmart to dry camp at — closed, no way to get permission. Saw a few trucks parked there already but didn't want to risk it. Ended up at a La Quinta, mainly because it was the only lot in town that would fit the trailer — small tourist town, no room to spare. Girls took a room with Chia; Lu and I stayed in the trailer in the parking lot, after checking with the front desk so we wouldn't trip any alarms.

8.14.2020

Woke up to a construction crew already going in the same lot — lots of noise, lots of trucks. No breakfast at the hotel because of the pandemic, so we cleared out. Found a local bakery for bagel and egg sandwiches. For Abina's birthday we hit a dispensary, since we were in legal territory — everybody stocked up.

Smoke got thicker as we drove west. Turned out huge wildfires had shut down a big stretch of I-70 west of us. Had planned to go west then south into Utah, but scrapped that and turned straight south instead. Even hours from the fire itself, visibility was rough for the first hour.

Had a reservation at the KOA in Cortez — pricey, but felt lucky to get anything at all. Paid extra for a tent site, though the girls insisted on covering that cost themselves. After dinner they broke into their dispensary purchases for a proper Rocky Mountain high. Lu and I sat that one out, though we've been known to indulge on occasion.



Cold night, but the girls had new down bags and stayed warm. Learned the visitor centers at the national parks were all closed, though the parks themselves were open — no tours, no A/C break from the heat, and none of that had shown up on any NPS site I'd checked ahead of time. Brutal heat during the day, but there were some ruins I'd wanted to see for a long time, so we figured we'd go anyway.

8.15.2020

Talked to a young family in the campground, two kids, a pop-up camper — asked about the trailer and mentioned how much time they burned setting up and breaking down every single day. Told them, that was us 15 years ago. Talked them straight into trailer life, no shame about it. Told them to try renting something small first, a cabover or little trailer, see if it takes — though I already know it will.



Tried to beat the heat but it was already blazing by 9:30. Drove to Canyons of the Ancients — Lowry Pueblo, a 2,000-year-old ruin, occupied up until sometime in the 1300s by best estimate, maybe older. You can read the different eras right in the brick — repairs, remodels layered on top of each other.



Native workers from New Mexico were doing restoration on what's called the Great Kiva — a big gathering space, standing about six feet below ground level, probably the community hub that explains why this site drew so many different groups over the centuries.



Drove deeper into the park toward Painted Hand Pueblo. Barely a road, no clear markings, until we ran into a man by his truck who told us it was his land, that he was in some kind of dispute with the Bureau of Land Management, but that his way was the only way to the pueblo — “I’ll allow you to go there and not shoot you.” Dry sense of humor out that way. Rough, primitive road. Trailhead sign said half a mile to the tower. Girls went first, Lu and I followed, and

somewhere along the way the trail thinned out into what might’ve been trail or might’ve just been flat ground, and we got separated. I called out — no answer from Lu, no answer from the girls, nothing but wind through the scrub. Eventually found Lu again; she hadn’t heard me calling either, nor the girls. Backtracked toward the truck, since that direction at least we knew. Never made the pueblo. Girls turned up later saying they’d glimpsed maybe the back of a building, not much more. Sobering how fast you can lose each other out there, close enough that you’d think you’d hear someone, and not hear a thing.



Pushed on down an even rougher road supposedly leading to more ruins — never found those either. Around 100 degrees by then, and Lu started feeling sick from the heat despite hats, sunscreen, plenty of water. Long drive back to Cortez, though the scenery — layered pink and cream rock — made up for some of it. Mexican takeout, back to camp to recover.

Went into Cortez that evening for a Native American dance and music performance at the Cortez Cultural Center. Forgot how much I missed a live show until we were sitting there watching one. Masked, distanced, maybe 25 people total, and we found out afterward it was the last performance of the summer. A family act — grandfather, his wife and her sister, a grandson, and a three-year-old granddaughter. Outdoor amphitheater behind the center, with a stucco back wall painted trompe l’oeil to look like a stacked pueblo, ladders, windows, little painted figures going about their day. The grandfather emceed, introduced

everyone with their tribal affiliations, called the little girl — named Rain — a “full-blooded Cute.” Danced to recorded music and live flute and drum both, explaining the stories behind each piece. The teenage grandson danced and played flute too, clearly talented, and it struck me how unusual it is these days to see a kid that age that invested in his own history. The hoop dance was the highlight — the grandfather working in and out of a shifting arrangement of hoops, forming shapes meant to call up animals his ancestors would’ve recognized. The women, little Rain included, did a Jingle Dance in dresses sewn with metal pieces that rang out with every step, keeping time with the drum.

I ended up talking with the grandfather for a good while after the show while Lu and the girls shopped the gift shop — good books, real native crafts. Kept some distance in mind since we’d been told this family had come from an area hit hard by Covid. Talked a long time, especially with the grandfather and his grandson, and I walked away with a flute — smooth polished wood, about 20 inches, wrapped in soft cream leather, not unlike the one he’d played that night.

8.16.2020



Hot again. Drove out to Hovenweep, “deserted valley” in Paiute. Two rangers on hand at the visitor center to answer questions, no tours running, but having someone to talk to about what we were seeing helped. Lu took a short hike and then stayed back with Chia rather than risk another bout of heat sickness like the day before. We found a little patch of shade from a scrubby tree with a decent view of the canyon and the ruins from there. Buildings

are at least a thousand years old — nobody's entirely sure what they were all used for. Bathrooms stayed open even with the building closed, plus a breezeway and a water station, which I came back to extremely thirsty after forgetting to bring a bottle with me on the hike.

To be fair, these two are national monuments, not full national parks, which affects how



much infrastructure gets built — roads, buildings, that kind of thing. Still, harder to navigate than I expected. Interesting ruins, but I think the difficulty of just getting there turns a lot of people off who'd otherwise appreciate them. The posted maps didn't help — misleading, sometimes flat wrong.

Drove farther in toward a ruin called El Cajon. Signs called the road "unimproved," which undersells it — poorly marked or not marked at all,

rough as a carnival ride. Testy conversation in the truck over several miles of that, something close to mutiny threatened, and we never did find the site. Parked at one point and went ahead on foot alone while everyone else stayed put — came back empty-handed.

Back on the main road, one more large ruin grouping — even with 4WD, everyone was tired of the bouncing by then, and the AC wasn't keeping up with 100-degree sun. Went off alone again for a while, came back tired and dehydrated.

Too worn out that evening for much of anything — watched part of a Jackie Chan movie on the laptop, didn't finish that either.

8.17.2020

Original plan had us heading toward Moab and Arches, since a few of us hadn't seen it, but the forecast up there was a week straight of triple digits. Changed direction a third time and turned back east toward cooler air, and man, did it feel good once we climbed a few thousand feet back into the mountains. Went past Pagosa Springs and back over Wolf Creek Pass — some of the toughest mountain driving we've done, and Leni's now handled it twice, both directions. I always want a photo at the Continental Divide sign at the summit, but there's never a pullout big enough for the trailer. Sign's riddled with bullet holes anyway.

First campground we found — Fun Valley Family Resort, nothing like our usual spot. Big, paid activities everywhere, mini golf, tubing, though the drought had the San Juan River too low for much tubing this year. Lots of people fishing, even a "guaranteed catch" pond. Temps in the low 80s felt incredible after the desert heat. Asked for shade. The open sites



seemed to be where the big rigs parked, probably for satellite reception — whole little rows of them like small neighborhoods, some with fences and mailboxes and lawn ornaments like they'd been coming back for years. We crossed a little wooden bridge into a wooded section laid out on the diagonal — not cheap, but not the worst we'd paid, and no extra charge for the tent this time. Fire, relax, good dinner from the girls — mushroom protein, kale, tomato, onion, goat cheese

and parmesan.

8.18.2020

Took a full rest day at the resort. Girls made pancakes and scrambled eggs with radish, onion, chicken sausage for brunch. Long walk after with Chia around the park perimeter, where they found a trail leading outside the property. Tried badminton but the wind wouldn't allow it. Lu and I read in the tent — she knitted, I just relaxed — and we watched Flyboys that evening while the girls played cards. Quiet, low-key day, and the rest plus the cooler air did everybody some good. Tempers evened out.



8.19.2020

Tried to get the campground office WiFi working — the building probably serves as a restaurant or clubhouse in normal times, mostly empty now except the clerk and a handful of people loitering near the back entrance trying to get a signal. Some had luck, some didn't, from what I overheard. Security guard confirmed cheerfully that the WiFi's a coin flip. Darcy got through; I never did.

Drove into South Fork for better WiFi at the visitor center parking lot. Asked the guide there about hiking — his directions led us to what turned out to be ATV terrain, not hiking trails, so we moved on.

Went to a BLM site called Elephant Rocks — we'd been to a similarly named state park in Missouri once, big rounded boulders you could climb. These were more angular, but elephant-sized all the same, sitting out in open desert. From there to La Garita, another

rough near-road with washboard stretches and a standing puddle from recent rain that we had to skirt around the edge of — no warning signs, though it's hard to imagine anything but 4WD managing that route. La Garita translates roughly to “sentry box” — a huge window cut into a small mountain, climbable if you're up for it. No real parking lot, just a wide turnaround. Lu and I climbed partway up the opposite hill to watch the girls and Chia scale it. Abina made it to the window itself, which turned out to be a couple hundred feet up — taller than it looked from below, closer to 25 feet of opening once you're actually there.



Got stopped at an intersection that evening by a guy with a white ponytail, driving a truck with a water tank rig that looked straight out of the movie Holes. Turned out he was originally from Wisconsin. Asked if we needed camping and told us the surrounding land belonged to the BLM — free camping, up to 14 days. Somebody in the truck made the joke about BLM meaning something else these days; the girls figured it counted as their birthright either way. Headed back to Elephant Rocks since that was the closest thing to shelter around. Parked the trailer near some of the bigger rocks, girls pitched the tent some distance off. Could see distant town lights once it got dark, but otherwise wide open and mostly empty for miles. Quiet, a little rain that evening, then the girls dropped the rain fly for stargazing. Something about being out there completely alone like that. Made a note we need to plan better for dry camping — we were completely out of water by that point, which made “dry camp” more literal than intended.

8.20.2020

IHOP for breakfast, only thing open — friendly staff, distanced seating, felt safe. Ate our fill of eggs, pancakes, potatoes, then bought water for the day at a convenience store in Del Norte.

Had a reservation in Goodland, Kansas, but a massive rainstorm stopped us cold just outside Colorado Springs. Made it to a store parking lot before it really let loose and did some shopping while flash flood warnings blew up everyone's phones. Spectacular lightning, clear on one side of the road and pitch dark storming on the other as we kept driving east. Last big mountain we passed, called La Blanca, actually seemed to glow white in the evening light.

Cancelled Kansas, booked into a small campground in Seibert, Colorado instead — one bathroom, tent pitched right next to it, lights on all night. By the time we stopped it was 9 p.m. and we were too tired for the lights to matter. Stormy through the night; I kept checking the window to make sure the tent was still staked.
