

SÁNDOR LAU, a Chinese/Hungarian-American, was born in 1975 and grew up in Elizabeth, the pearl of Colorado's eastern plains. He studied English and Spanish at the University of Oklahoma and has moonlighted as a journalist and photographer in the US and Taiwan. In January 2000, a Fulbright grant brought him to the University of Auckland, where he is a Master's student in filmmaking. Sándor's writing has also appeared in *The Listener*, *Sport*, *JAAM*, *Poetry NZ* and *The Collection of New Zealand Poetry and Prose*. 'It's Not Downhill if You Have to Pedal' draws on his experiences cycling from Kaitaia to Wellington and Greymouth to Christchurch.

IT'S NOT DOWNHILL IF YOU HAVE TO PEDAL

Do not even talk to me about Josh and Murray. I have more to worry about than those two. Like this hill. Like pedalling the next 17.3 kilometres all uphill.

WITH CRAZY FUCKERS IN HOLDENS TRYING TO RUN ME DOWN!

Sorry about that. That guy nearly killed me.

MONKEY!

It just gets on my nerves when mulletheads risk my life because they can't slow down to 140 Ks on the curves spitting gravel like shrapnel, and I'm trying not to fall off the cliff on the left or become a billboard statistic on the road to my right.

I'M SAVING THE EARTH HERE, ASSHOLE!

Sorry. It's not your fault. Someone has to tell those bogans to watch how they drive. When we were in Auckland, people did nothing but whine about Asian drivers. Now, out in the stix, they see a yellow boy, and they try to run me down.

That one had four exhaust pipes. Four. I wouldn't even know what to do with two. I'm sweating my balls off in the dust and exhaust on the margins of the highway so this guy can enjoy himself spewing out all his petroleum farts.

Let me give you some advice. Don't ever take a trip with two brothers. You know why? Guess whose side they always take, no matter what the subject, no matter what the argument, no matter if Josh has got us lost three and a half

times and forgot the map at the backpackers last night and we're in a rainstorm and the nearest lodging is 15 Ks down the road, Murray is always going to think Josh is right.

Hey, that's fine. They're in Wellington now. I hope they liked seeing the country through the windows of a train, like goldfish looking outside the aquarium. I hope they're enjoying their bars and museums and movies or whatever they're doing. All that great shit you can only do in Wellington. We don't have any of that in Denver. We've known each other since we were still peeing our pants, since the days when the furthest we were allowed to go on our bikes was down to get a slushy. Which is why I should have known better.

From the day Murray twisted his ankle because he didn't tie his laces and they got caught in his pedal and Josh and I had to carry him home and we were all late to my birthday party and the other kids all left — from that day, I should have known they would pull shit like this.

'It's not downhill if you have to pedal,' Murray snivels, just because there's a bit of gravel on the slope so you have to push a little. We're supposed to go all the way from Cape Reinga to Invercargill. Halfway down the North Island between some town I can't pronounce that starts with Wh and has seven Rs in it, and some other town I can't pronounce that starts with R and four Whs in it, Murray's got blisters and Murray's got sunburn. Which was a perfect excuse. Josh would rather be checking his e-mail to the tune of a double cappuccino with soy milk anyway, and little Murray and his blisters are the best pretext he could have imagined.

I don't think they really understand. No, I don't think they really understand at all. I think they thought this trip

was supposed to be fun in the way jumping on the trampoline is fun, the way nookie is fun, the way pancake breakfast is fun.

This could have been the time we all did it together, so that for the rest of our lives we could laugh about how we had tan lines from helmet straps, and about the hitchhiker who wanted us to give him a ride on the luggage racks, and how we were attacked by muscle cars and SUVs and garbage trucks, and despite the hurdles, we pedalled ourselves so far that you can measure it on the globe.

Instead, we can remember this as the time I lost my temper over a few little things, and Josh and Murray would rather have been in the Maritime Museum trying to figure out what the hell a sextant is for, so they bailed on the trip and even took the tyre repair kit with them. As if they can use it on their sextant.

You know what I love about this country most? This. These one-lane tunnels without even a light. Give way. Unless you can make someone else give it to you. What am I going to do? Carry my bike over the top of the mountain?

Well, at least there's a light at the end. I guess I should have bought a light for this piece of shit machine. Doesn't make much sense to buy an accessory that costs more than the bike, though. Josh and Murray kill me with their speedracemobiles. Gears that actually change when you want them to. Ergonomic hand grips and custom-moulded ass-pads.

Thinking the light would be useful right now. Yeah. Real useful. OK. No problem. They don't give out licences to the blind. This guy's gonna see my reflectors, right? Without headlights. Still, he'll see me. Anyway, what am I gonna do, back up 65 metres to the start of the tunnel? He'll see me. He'll see me.

NO, MOTHERFUCKER, THERE IS NOT ANYTHING YOU CAN DO TO HELP! PLEASE, DON'T WORRY, I ALWAYS BLEED LIKE THAT. WHAT? I SHOULD HAVE HAD A LIGHT? NO, I WILL NOT PAY FOR THE SCRATCH ON YOUR PAJERO.

OK. It's over. That bleeding is annoying because it is running down my leg and filling up my shoe, but I am not stopping any more. I cannot stop. I still have to go another 12 Ks, still all uphill, now bleeding, getting dark soon. But the Muddy Gumboot Lodge, just over the ridge, according to the map, is the only accommodation between here and the next anything with running water.

Anyway, Josh and Murray are going to be jealous now. Of my scar. And not just that. That I did it and they bailed. And I won't have to tell anyone, they'll just know. You pedal your bike so far you can see it on the globe, and your confidence blows a hole through the ceiling. And everyone sees it.

No matter what chicks tell you, it's not your looks or how much money you have or how big your dick is. It's confidence. It's how much you believe in yourself. And I'm going to walk in and Josh is going to be trying to pick up some Swedish girl and she's going to see me and he won't even get to finish his sentence about good and evil in the films of Bergman.

I bet they miss me, too. I bet right now, they're sitting down having tea with a Japanese couple. The guy has dreadlocks and wears his jeans around his knees, and the girl has dyed her tips grey, and has Hello Kitty tattooed on her left hip. But they're still asking each other questions like, 'Do you have any hobbies?' And Josh and Murray are killing themselves trying to remember something about Kurosawa or kabuki.

Meanwhile, they're wishing the Colorado Chinaman was there. They're wishing we were sprinting down the docks together to see who's the first to plunge off the pier into Wellington Harbour. They're wishing we had all pedalled up Mt Victoria with some Speights in the backpack to enjoy with the sunset and remember all falling in love with Emily Rodriguez the same summer. They're wishing they hadn't left me, their best friend since pants-peeing days, alone on the roadside to be attacked by brigands, pirates, wolves, sharks, drivers.

Not again. Fuck me with a chainsaw. I can see the future. Those kids back there in the VW have not slept in three days, and felt like taking a drive. And the girls are going to pretend to be impressed if the punk with the shaved head scores a direct hit with the milkshake. Jesus Christ, they weave any more and they're going to have a basket.

I WANTED STRAWBERRY, NOT CHOCOLATE, ASSHOLE!

You would not believe how hard a paper cup gets at 89 kilometres an hour. At least strawberry would have matched the blood. Now I have to get off for a second. That shit all over my body is too disgusting. At least I can dump some of the blood out of my shoe.

Josh, Murray, I am not enjoying this sunset. Still 5 Ks to go to the top of the hill and we are not drinking beer and I do not have a place to sleep. I am getting ammunition. Next fucker who tries to run me down gets this rock through the windshield and I am not joking. OK, back to the grind.

It's not that bad. Josh and Murray know I have a temper. They're going to forgive me. They always have. They always do. I forgave Josh after that party when I was too wasted to drive and he said he was fine then parked the car

in Cherry Creek. I forgave Murray after Josh and I had bestowed upon him the great honour of looking at my Dad's Hong Kong porn collection then he swiped three magazines and a video out from under all our noses. And when Dad gave me the belt, I didn't even think Murray's name, or Josh's, just in case they might slip out.

So yeah, I shouldn't have called them that. I can't really say I didn't mean it at the time. People don't say things they don't mean. But, Jesus, when you've cheated on sophomore physics assignment seventeen together, and all simultaneously fallen in love with Miss April 1998 in the culvert behind the locker plant, and all got drunk for the first time together on canned beer with pull tabs, and all sat through twelve hours in vagabond class next to the woman who pees every twenty-eight minutes so you could get to New Zealand together, are you going to let it be like that? Are you going to let some angry words mean more than the last however many years since you swore your solemn pact never to let any girls in the fort?

COME ON, I DARE YOU. I DARE YOU TO EVEN COME ON MY SIDE OF THE ROAD. THROW GRAVEL IN MY FACE. RUN ME OFF THE CLIFF. GIVE ME ANOTHER MILKSHAKE. I WANT YOU TO DO IT. YOU LIKE GEOLOGY? YOU LIKE SPIDERWEBS? COME ON! YOU LIKE THAT? YOU LIKE YOUR WINDSHIELD NOW? THAT'S RIGHT. DON'T EVEN TURN AROUND. JUST KEEP DRIVING. MAYBE YOU'LL REMEMBER YOUR MANNERS NEXT TIME.

Motherfuckers were asking for it. You should have seen them aiming for me. It was either me or them. First strike initiative, that's the only way to survive. Anyway, if they can afford a car, they can afford a windshield. I had to do it,

in the name of all cyclists.

Whoa daddy, that was going too far. Was probably Josh and Murray coming to get my ass. At least the rock didn't go through the windshield. At least the motherfuckers will remember to watch for bikes. I'm saving the earth here. Only two kilometres to go.

Is this what I've been waiting for? I think this is what I've been waiting for. I think this is it, wait, I'm having a hard time registering. I don't even remember what it's like to stop pedalling. Still a few more minutes of light and I'm over the top and it's all downhill and there's the Muddy Gumboot Lodge, and they even have their lights on for me. Josh, Murray, motherfuckers. I know you wish you were with me now.

Hi, I need a bed for tonight. Your windshield? And a phone. I can explain. Did you see those punks with the milkshake? Deported for throwing a pebble? Two brothers, Josh and Murray. I am so sorry. How could I get to the hospital with everyone trying to kill me? I will pay for a new one. And clean up all the broken glass. I'm sorry about the blood on your carpet. Do you have a phone? I have to call Josh and Murray. You practically hunted me down out there, what was I going to do? I can't believe I let those boys go alone. Haven't you ever heard of helping someone out? They couldn't even get us from the town that starts with Wh and has seven Rs to the town that starts with R and has four Whs, and that was using the map, so I don't know how they're going to get by in Wellington without me. I mean, I didn't injure anyone, did I? Those boys are useless without me. They won't survive the rest of the trip, seriously. They need me, so can I please just make one phone call, just one. They miss me, I know they do.