

*ROAD DEBRIS*

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This dissertation comprises two parts: Part I, which discusses the growing trend in project books in contemporary poetry, and Part II, a collection of poems titled, *Road Debris*.

There is an increasing trend in the number of project books, which are collections of poetry unified in both thematic and formal ways. The individual poems in a project book share overt connections which allow the book to work on many different levels, blending elements of fiction and non-fiction or sharing a specific theme or speaker. While these books have the advantage of being easily memorable, which might gain poets an edge in book contests, there are also many risks involved. The main issue surrounding project books is if the individual poems can justify the book, or do they seem too repetitive or forced. As more poets, especially newer ones, try to use the project book as a shortcut to publication, it can result in poorly written poems forced to fit into a particular concept. By examining three successful cotemporary project books—*The Quick of It*, by Eamon Grennan; *Incident Light*, by H. L. Hix; and *Romey's Order* by Astory Riley—this essay discusses how these books work in order to understand the potential of the project book. All of these books work in distinctly different ways, yet they all fall into the category of project book. While project books will inevitably result in poor imitations, it allows books of poetry to expand and explore in different directions.

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PART I  
PROJECT BOOKS: EXPANDING THE DIMENSIONS OF A COLLECTION OF  
POETRY



Recently, there has been an increase in the number of book-length poetic sequences, books that are organized around a specific and highlighted connection—what Joel Brouwer has called books with hooks. While this impulse to unify a long group of poems is not new—Sidney’s *Astrophel and Stella* is an example of a sonnet sequence connected by a loose narrative—the popularity of this type of book is increasing in contemporary poetry. In fact, it’s becoming a trend. Because of the highlighted connections, the project book creates an extra context or dimension for both the author and reader to explore. Many project books use formal, thematic and/or narrative elements to create a consistent, familiar pattern, offering poets a different method for organizing a collection than does the conventional poetry book—what Katrina Vandenberg calls the “mix-tape” approach. In a “mix-tape” collection, the poems may still have connections, but they are not as overt as in a project book. The project book has become a popular choice for writers, especially new ones, because the hook itself might be memorable even if the poems are not—which could help a project book stand out in a contest.

Brouwer gives a list of 50 books as examples of books with hooks, including: *Meadowlands*, by Louise Glück, which uses *The Odyssey* as the context for a sequence of semi-autobiographical poems about a failing marriage; *A Companion For Owls*, by Maurice Manning, which is a collection in the voice of Daniel Boone; and Brouwer’s own book, *Centuries*, in which all the poems consist of 100 words. He worries that the increasing number of project books will start to seem like a short-cut to publication, resulting in an overflow of weak imitations. Brouwer summarizes an argument from Beth Ann Fennely which describes why the project can be so alluring, especially to younger

writers, while bringing up some of the dangers:

Since so many first books get published through the medium of contests these days, young poets feel pressure to stand out from the crowd, and one way to do that is to have a hook, a logline, so that after the judge has read 300 mss., she'll remember "that one about tin mines in Bolivia." Your tin poems might not be the greatest poems — especially since you only enjoyed writing twenty of them, and the thirty after that were a choreful slog — but they might well stick in the mind more forcefully than better poems in diverse styles on diverse subjects, simply by dint of repetition. (Brouwer)

Brouwer's blog was written in 2009, and the number of project books has continued to climb since then, confirming some of his points. In a recent blog post, Erika Meitner brings up this same issue from the standpoint of a contest reader: "When I told a poet-friend I was screening approximately a zillion manuscripts, she posited that... I would be influenced by the apparent coherence of 'project books'—that I would gravitate toward sequences of poems because they seemed automatically like books." Meitner goes on to discuss the positive and negative aspects of both the mix-tape and the project book approach, and while she admits to a small bias against project books, she discovers they made up about half of her finalists. She summarizes the dangers of the project book:

While having a project can certainly make a manuscript easier to grasp and remember...as a screener, I had a much harder time figuring out whether or not a connected poetic sequence was working, or if I could trust it. Many, many manuscripts suffered from the Emerson, Lake & Palmer problem—the author felt like they had to plow on with the concept, even when it had clearly outlived its artistic life-span by the 10<sup>th</sup> poem. (Meitner)

Meitner and Brouwer share the same concern about project books—can the poems justify and sustain the book?

Despite the risks, there are many advantages to consider. An effective project book can be more ambitious than a conventional collection of poetry because of the

possibilities the extra dimension creates. This allows books of poetry to work in different ways, like a novel, an interview, a biography, a history—there are many possibilities. The project book is still in the early stages of development, and there are still more ideas to be explored. By analyzing three distinctly different and successful contemporary project books—*The Quick of It*, by Eamon Grennan, *Incident Light* by H. L. Hix and *Romey's Order* by Atsuro Riley—I show how these books create and utilize an extra dimension of context to work more fully as a book rather than a collection of poetry. The popularity of the project book does not diminish its merits. Success often results in poor imitations, but it can also result in inspiration.

### *The Quick of It*

*The Quick of It* is an example of a project book with subtle connections—all the poems are ten line meditations on nature, and none of the poems are titled. In an interview with William Walsh, Grennan discusses the subject for his meditations: “The weather. The fauna, the flora, the weather. And, the emotional pressure that you bring to bear on these things. They are kind of like meditations in miniature that begin with a notation and then try to load it as much as you can” (Walsh). The most important connection between these meditations is the way Grennan focuses on the moment of enlightenment or epiphany—the way he describes the conception of his ideas. Grennan opens his second poem with central question for his book: “So this is what it comes down to? Earth and sand / Skimmed, trimmed, filleted from rocky bone, leaving only / Solid, unshakable bottom, which won't in the end give in” (5). This image describes Grennan's desire to dissect, to carve flesh from bone in attempt to capture

the exact instant when his thoughts move from descriptive to meditative. Whether dealing with life or death, Grennan has ten lines to offer reader's a glimpse at the essence of truth he discovers in his meditations.

Close, precise descriptions of a specific moment in nature form the foundation for most of Grennan's poems. His meditations usually focus on living things like animals, especially birds (wrens, herons, loons, blackbirds, crows, plovers, hawks, swallows, starlings, ducks, geese, doves, chickadees, starlings). This meditative approach resonates through Grennan's poems, giving the reader a sense of familiarity with the language and speaker as well as the natural settings, landscapes and animals. Most of these poems use the same kind of meditation—from the physical to the emotional—providing insight into the author's mind and the way he sees and interprets the world.

The language and intensity of these poems does not diminish throughout the entire collection. Each poem offers a slow-motion—short, but deadly accurate—snapshot of a moment of clarity or the cross-section of a specific thought, which communicates the essence of these poems on a more cerebral level. They are condensed—full of urgency and energy. These poems are razor sharp, perfectly focused, straight-forward and full of beauty, capturing the essence or truth of a split second of time.

In the poem, "As if on cue," Grennan uses a description of breathing to connect himself with a heron passing by to show how even something as simple as breathing is beautiful:

Frigid air's taken in at the mouth, to mix with the warm world  
Of tongue and palate, gums at blood heat: it informs with its *frisson* of chill  
The spongy honeycomb of lungs, and lives a few expansive instants there  
Before turning like a swimmer and journeying back and out into the frosted air  
As a quick wisp of steam, the sign of my being here and now. (8)

The tranquility of being in the here and now is followed by foreshadows of change. The heron and speaker are both “seeking a safe / Still fluent place to feed in peace, before this cold un-homes everything” (8). For the moment everything is good, but soon it will be un-homed—the speaker’s brief connection to nature can’t last.

Grennan uses the heron in another poem dealing with mortality. The poem “When a heron that protected bird” describes the brutal truth of nature. The first half of the poem is a snapshot of hawk preparing to kill a heron:

When a heron, that protected bird, and a windhovering hawk appear  
Framed in the one window for a minute, as the bigger flaps  
Towards Tully Mountain and the other does its Nijinsky trick of standing  
On air—wings so fast they’re like a long sentence out of Beckett, energy  
Immensely expended on going nowhere, shaping up for the kill—“ (50).

Grennan captures both the beauty and terror of nature in this stanza by describing a serene moment in nature moments before death strikes. The heron does not comprehend the importance of that single moment. This thought is interrupted by another one:

—I don’t  
Only remember the heron folding and unfolding itself over Omey Strand  
When we spread your mother’s ashes on the water and I said *an image*  
*Of eternity* (though *patience* must be what I meant), but think also

Of the small heart hiding in heather-tufts and hoping—breath by breath,  
smell by smell—for another instant free of those lethal eyes, then another.  
(50).

With the image of impending death, Grennan's thoughts connect to another memory of a heron—when he and his wife spread her mother's ashes on the water. This thought enacts the movement of his meditation—the impending death of the heron reminds the speaker about eternity and patience: “*An image of eternity* (though *patience* must be what I meant),” (50). The ashes return to the earth, completing the cycle of life. By replacing *eternity* with *patience*, Grennan emphasizes the difference in perception of time between man and eternity. Mankind is just another pile of dust being returned to the ground. He ends the poem by identifying with the heron—knowing death is inevitable but hoping for another moment of peace.

In one of his more sensual poems, Grennan uses youth and desire to contrast the sense of mortality that increases with age:

Touch-me-not wherever I look—its tiny orange cup and spur curling or  
spitting seed.  
If I brush against its frail green stem while running myself into the ground  
here

Where students have begun to saturate the space again, their ripe bodies  
shining  
From every corner, travelling singly, doubly, or in packs, their youth a raw  
burn

Against the season I feel in my depths: arms, bare legs, the way, like  
brazen water,  
Slack shoulder blades and back muscles ripple, greased and made sleek  
by the clean

Sweat-film that gleams there. So I learn the cloud-lid on life, again, is *full*  
*of rifts*  
*Of glowing light*, and may even lift to let through an eye-hooking slash of  
blue—

As a woman in a summer dress riding a bike will let the silk ride suddenly  
up  
In no breeze but her own motion, and her thigh is alight there where your  
eyes are. (54)

The opening phrase uses the image of a touch-me-not flower as a metaphor for the ripe bodies of the students. They are presented as forbidden objects of desire. The raw burn of sexuality and vitality from the students radiates in waves against the sense of mortality the author feels in his aging body. This moment of tension adds to the weight of this poem. The speaker envies the vibrancy of life he feels emanating from the students—a vibrancy his mind relates to but his aging body no longer produces.. Soaking in the energy from this scene, the speaker is able to feel the passions of youth once again.

The consistency of these poems establishes a growing conflict—the expectation of each poem to describe the movement of thoughts from observational to introspective. This tension is heightened through the subtle connections Grennan uses to organize this book. Grennan shares these insights of wisdom in the face of his own mortality, celebrating all that it means to be alive.

### *Incident Light*

H.L. Hix creates a project book with even more intricate and overt connections than Grennan's, one that has formal connections—most poems are eight lines and have around ten syllables per line—as well as a specific background story, which forms the foundation for this book, and a blending of the lines between interview and poetry. Hix writes about his friend, the artist Petra Soesemann, who learned that the man who raised her was not her biological father. In the forward to the book, Hix describes her life

as “instantly mythical” (foreword). He goes on to describe how he first wanted to write her story as a biography and explains how it became a book of poetry instead: “A biography whose first fidelity is not to facts, but to imagination, biography that *loosens* reality’s hold, releases the life into lyric. Nothing attested, everything sung” (foreword). One way Hix blurs the line between Soesemann’s real life and his mythical interpretation of her life is by filtering her voice through his own, allowing the poems to blend his imagination with her life, resulting in a speaker that is complex and slightly ambiguous.

The title of the book is a term used by the philosopher, C.L. Harin, in his book *Color for Philosophers*, which deals with vision and perception. Hix provides an epigraph from Harin which gives deeper context to the term *incident light*: “An object turns out to have a transmission color, a reflection color, an interference color, etc., no two necessarily the same and each color is a function of detection angle as well as the spectrum of incident light” (1). This epigraph describes all the random factors involved in the way the eye interprets color. The same idea goes into perception, which in turn affects the truth. Hix uses the notion of incident light as a metaphor for the perception of truth. Ambiguity is an important idea for these poems—the speaker grew up believing a lie which casts a doubt across the idea of truth—what she remembers may not be totally accurate. Her story is then filtered through the mind of Hix which creates another level of distance from the facts. He decides which stories to write about and he controls the way her life is presented. This focus on ambiguity is a constant reminder that memory is not the same as reality. It provides another context in which these poems connect.



*Incident Light* is arranged like an interview. Each title poses a question for which the poem that follows provides a response to these questions. This pattern quickly creates a sense familiarity and unity. All but ten poems in this book have questions as titles like: “What is your favorite song?,” “What were you afraid of as a child?” and “When did you start smoking?” The titles are questions, and the poems are answers. However, most of the answers do not clearly answer the question in a logical or expected way; instead, the speaker responds in a more indirect manner, allowing readers to make their own connections between the titles and the poems. Many of the titles are used more than once and spread throughout the book which creates another unifying effect. In the poems with shared titles, patterns emerge. For example, “Where did you grow up?” is the title of the first poem in the collection—it is also the title of four different poems. The first four poems with this title, (pages 3, 20, 33 and 49) are eight lines long, while the final poem with this title (67) is made up of three, eight line stanzas.

These poems work together to form a narrative strand which indirectly answers the question, “Where did you grow up?” They share the same small town and train imagery and nostalgic tone. The fact that the questions are answered indirectly increases then tension of ambiguity that tightens throughout the book. If the questions were answered literally, the poems would lose their subtle illumination of the speaker’s thoughts. When taken as a whole, these poems offer a much deeper insight and understanding of the speaker than a straightforward answer would.

The fourth poem is longer and focuses on the speaker’s mother. It casts a different light on the speaker’s past—she came from her mother. The third stanza opens with this: “Bemusement must be enough for mama” (67). This statement hints at

the sadness the speaker feels toward her mother. She fears her mother's future will become her own. The next few lines explain how time has left the mother feeling lonely, isolated and old:

...mama, who  
lost her girlish figure three Scooters ago  
to the bearing of Rusty Jr. or Meg  
(who hasn't given them grandchildren, can't seem  
to settle down or find someone, and seldom  
visits). (67)

The stanza closes the same way it begins except for one word: "Bemusement must be just enough" (67). The word *just* shows the bemusement is only one step from despair—confusion, nostalgia and repetition are all that keep her going. This poem answers the question, "Where did you grow up?" in a much different way. Instead of describing the setting, the speaker focuses on her mother, offering another way to think about the past.

Hix focuses on the mother in two other poems titled "When did you start smoking?" which helps develop a clearer understanding of her relationship with her daughter while creating another narrative arc.

The first poem explains why the speaker is finally told about her birth father; the second one explains how her mother first attempts to cover up the obvious differences between mother and daughter. These two poems serve as bookends for the speaker's life—the first time mother disguises her daughter's true identity until the moment she decides to tell her daughter the truth. The first "smoking" poem is blunt, much like the

letter the speaker receives from her biological father explaining how he wanted closure. He has known about his daughter for almost 50 years. The only reason he breaks the silence after all these years is because the mother asks him to: “When my mother had a small car accident, / she recognized that the few people alive / who could tell me were in her generation” (54). She realizes that once she dies, there are very few people still alive who know the truth, which seems to be her motivation for finally telling her daughter.

The second poem deals with the mother, but the setting is her home town some time shortly after the speaker’s birth. The second line introduces the issue of her mother’s hair: “I used to ask her why she’d dyed her hair dark. / She always replied, *That was the fashion then*” (71). Hix uses straightforwardness once again to broach a sensitive issue with this poem. The back cover offers more details about Soesemann: “Her dad, like her mother, was a blue-eyed German blond; her father was Turkish, with dark eyes and dark hair like Petra’s own” (back cover). The fact that she had dark hair and eyes proves that she could not have been a product of her German parents, so her mother would dye her hair to protect the secret which she continues to guard for 50 years.

The real reason is obvious to me now,  
as it must have been to everyone else  
in that small town where before then she’d been blond.  
I always envied my parents their blond hair  
and blue eyes, having such dark features myself. (71)

Hix uses subtle irony to emphasize the significance of such a mundane question about

“mother’s hair.” The reader knows about the secret already, but Hix finds a way to let the reader share this important moment of realization with the speaker.

By using repeated titles and connecting the subjects of titles with the same name, Hix creates tension between the subject and the interviewer. When the speaker seems to avoid a question, or the answer seems disconnected from the question, Hix asks the question again. As seen in the examples above, the answers start to make more sense when the questions are repeated. The speaker may not answer the question directly, but the evasive nature of the responses produces a deeper understanding of the speaker’s life than direct answers would. The poems offer more insight when readers look closer at the poems to see how they are connected and how they work in response to the questions.

Almost all the poems in *Incident Light* are eight lines long; however, there are a few exceptions. The exceptions also fit a pattern. The two poems that stand out the most are: “What were you afraid of most as a child?” and “Do you believe in ghosts?” Both of these poems are five pages long and more prose-like than the others. These poems have many narrative qualities: interesting characters, danger and surprise. “What were you afraid of most as a child?” opens with a line that immediately creates suspense and mystery: “Finding myself at night with two drunk murderers / riding in a rusted-out Ford stationwagon / begs some explanation” (14). This poem tells a long, cohesive story for the reader. The other long poem, “Do you believe in ghosts?” is similar in many ways to “What were you afraid of most as a child?”—both use strong, plot driven stories about the speaker’s encounters with fascinating strangers whom are all murderers. These poems about intriguing strangers are much longer and more in

depth than the poems about Soesemann's family. The fact that Soesemann's family is able to keep the secret of her birth for so long shows their devotion to hide the truth. Hix contrasts this with the strangers who are willing to talk to Soesemann openly about murder, showing that secrets are sometimes easier to share with strangers than family. In her review of this book, Susan Schultz comments about the significance of these poems: "The ease of telling murderous secrets on airplanes meets its absolute counterweight in Petra's family silence." By keeping a strict form for the majority of these poems, especially most of the poems about family, the exceptions to the rule become more noticeable and significant.

By interweaving the speaker, the titles, the form and the tone, this book works on readers from a variety of angles—biographical, confessional, psychological, even historical—while still standing on their own based on the strength of their language. *Incident Light* shows the diversity and possibility available from the project book. Hix invents his own genre—mixing non-fiction, biography, interview and poetry to tell the story of his friend while making a statement about the ambiguity of experience.

### *Romey's Order*

Asturo Riley's first book of poetry, *Romey's Order*, is in the voice of the fictional Romey—a young, half-Japanese boy growing up in the rural south—who tries to make sense of his world by trying to put everything around him—his heritage, language and surroundings—in order. Romey's impulse to organize and create order for his world comes from his sense of displacement and alienation. He realizes that he doesn't fit

easily into the culture and landscape of the rural south because of his mixed heritage is The idea of understanding—of accepting himself for what he is—drives this book.

While the speaker has a distinct voice, the poems themselves are varied, including a poem in the shape of a skillet and an abecedarian. The poems, like the speaker, come from a diverse background. Romey searches for the best way to express himself by experimenting with different forms, but his voice is always the same—it is the connective tissue which holds the book together. The narrative quality of these poems allows this book to work as kind of poetic memoir.

Romey's inventive language is one of the driving forces of this book. He makes up words (belly-worry, jamb-slap, fly-blown, gray-greasy, surface-craze) to describe things with unique perspective. For example, the first stanza in "Roses" makes sense despite its use of made up words: "The house with the nick- and snigger-name *Snort and Grunt*. / Shunned trailer-house, (pocked) scorn-brunt. Side-indented, / thorn-bined, boondocked in a hollow" (44). The alliterated sounds flow together smoothly, "nick and snigger-name, *Snort and Grunt*—his language is infused with the musicality of his voice. The image of the beat up trailer home in some backwoods hollow is vividly seen from this description even though the phrases "scorn-brunt" and "thorn-bined" have no true definition, the meaning is clear. The familiar phrase "Brunt of the scorn" can be condensed to "scorn-brunt, and the word "thorn-bined" brings images of tangled vines. These invented words give Romey a way to create order in his world.

The first poem in the book, "Flint-Chant" opens with "Once upon a time" (3). This frames Romey's story like a fairy tale while introducing the main character. "Flint-Chant" is the only poem Riley writes about Romey from the third person point of view; it

also sets the foundation for Romey's impulse to find order. The second stanza opens: "What the boy called inside-*oku* called him back" (3). This shows the ambiguity of language for Romey—he can't decide if "inside" or "*oku*" is the better word for his location, so he uses both. Later in the second stanza Riley uses several phrases to try and find the perfect description. "Tight-curved as he had to get—like a cling-shrimp one day, a pill-bug, a bass-clef, a bison's eye, an abalone (*ocean-ear!*), antler-arc, Ark-ant, apostrophe another—" (3). Riley auditions a variety of words to describe the image of Romey curled up inside an abandoned drainpipe—following his imagination as he searches for the best way to describe the world.

The influence of rural South Carolina permeates Romey's language. The word choices in "Fosterling-Song" are a good example of his rural, southern influence: "Hadn't he come to us out from Country Home / cleaved to a cauld-swaddle / cloth (of coarse croker-sack weave) / he all the time plucked and wrung?" (41). From the name of a place—"Country Home"—to the colloquial sounding: "all the time plucked and wrung," and the rough images of "cauld-swaddle cloth (of coarse croker-sack weave)," Riley is always searching for the perfect phrases to express himself. The poem "Tablet" even describes a country meal, complete with a list of southern dishes: "Keen-pipit *Snap-Beans, Pot-Beans, Sweet-Potato-Shoes; Collard-Bills (in Hock-Stock), Hoppin'John—and Okry Stew. Cabbage Pie, Cymbing, Fry, Crowder-Peas in Cream; Cornbread (Tea-Glassed, Buttermilked), Streak-of-Lean & Creasy Greens!*" (22). Riley's language mixes various rhyming patterns with alliteration to create a certain musicality to describe down home cooking and capture the atmosphere of the local Greasy Spoon, complete with a sign that reads, "We cook Good most every night!

Everlasting Rolls cost extra” (21). Riley immerses readers in Romey’s language and imagination which quickly hook the reader into his world.

Perhaps the poem that best demonstrates Romey’s voice to the fullest is “Filmstrip.” This poem is unique in this collection. It is centered and the lines are short, (1 to 4 words):

Trace of a wild-man  
ruts of root-man;  
king-snakes  
snipe-cocks  
rock-skinks  
snappers;  
crink of boot man  
funk of shack man. (31)

These rough images drive this poem—each one brings up another way to describe the wild-man. Romey’s desire to order his world—to discover himself—permeates all these poems. His constant impulse to come up with the perfect way to express himself builds the foundation for his voice. *Romey’s Order* uses narrative elements to create a context in which the speaker searches for meaning in his world. Riley uses the project book to work much like a memoir, adding another dimension to his book.

Project books utilize an extra layer of meaning or connection which gives authors a variety of possibilities to explore. As seen with these examples, poetry can be blended with other genres (such as fiction or interview) to create a different kind of experience for both the reader and writer, and there are still unexplored territory to be



discovered. Like any trend, the project book will inevitably bring about hollow imitations; however, while this is a valid concern, the potential is well worth the risk. Poetry, like other forms of writing, is always changing, adapting and evolving. Project books are just another step in that evolution. The conventional, mix-tape approach to poetry is in no danger of becoming extinct, and the trendiness of project books will eventually decline, making way for another trend. As Meitner describes, there may be an influx of project book entries in contest, but the fact remains an interesting concept cannot make up for poor writing. Instead of seeing this trend as negative, it should be viewed as another tool at the poet's disposal, one that will continue to grow stronger and sharper with time.

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PART II  
*ROAD DEBRIS*

“I don’t build up illusion ’til it makes me sick.”

“Most of the Time” - Bob Dylan

## Way Station

I never trusted interstates and bypasses—the way they choked out the old highways and farm roads, replaced scenery with billboards, small towns with convenience stores. Diners, service stations, tourist traps and downtowns slowly fade into old newspaper clippings, browned with age, smelling of mildew and memory. Like a blockage in an artery, small towns are bypassed by the interstate—forgotten or replaced but never repaired.

I don't trust anyone without regrets.

Section I.

Historical Markers

## Photo at Jackrabbit Trading Post

My dad showed us the old snapshot of himself  
in front of a faded yellow sign that proclaimed  
“Here It Is” next to a giant, painted-black rabbit.  
He said we would take our picture in that exact spot  
when we passed through. We chased the signs  
for 600 miles, hearing stories about painted deserts,  
petrified forests and haunted Navajo court houses.  
When we finally pulled up to the yellow sign,  
it was coated in fresh paint. The rabbit didn’t look the same.  
My dad shook his head slowly, pulled out the worn snapshot—  
*it’s always too late*, he said as he slipped the photo  
into my hand and forced a smile for the new picture.

Gunter, TX, 1989

In my mind it's always night,  
but it was more like a deep October  
blue—afterbirth of a tobacco sunrise.  
You didn't flinch. You didn't  
even say a prayer for the dead.

You shot the injured colt.  
I can still hear the gunshot in thunder,  
see the blood-foamed mouth.  
The colt and I breathed  
fear and leather.

I can still see the polished eye,  
almost too intelligent, too aware.

You told me not to watch, but I  
can never look away. You said the mother  
wouldn't even watch her baby die.  
But I knew somebody should.



## Bridges and Barges

Last summer my father and I walked  
the railroad tracks from the Bayou Bridge  
to the Arkansas River, counting the beer bottles,  
armadillo shells and cow bones scattered  
across the hot metal tracks.

The barges sulked down the river, heavy  
with rusted red and yellow shipping containers  
stacked two high. We watched one barge  
until it disappeared around the river's curve.

When we felt the rumble of the train  
we placed pennies on the track and waited.  
The breeze cut by the train blasted through  
our hair and clothes—and for that one instant  
we were pressed into boys again.

## The Murrell Home - Tahlequah, OK

We grew up three miles from the cemetery  
where Chief John Ross was buried. His tombstone,  
worn with time, erodes away the year he was born  
and the year he died. My brother and I  
walked to the house where his family lived.

The rooms, preserved behind ropes,  
decorated with replicas of what the original rooms  
might have held, were dusted once a week.

We made up stories about bullet holes  
in the windows, blood stains on the beds  
and rocking chairs that moved on their own.

Vibrations from the cannons that make thunder  
for the Trail of Tears drama rattled our windows  
every weekend in the summer—kept us up like buffalo,  
listening for the distant rumble of hoof beats.

Philadelphia Cemetery: Just outside of Gober, TX

We made our yearly pilgrimage to the cemetery

where most of my father's family were buried.

The little white church in front of the cemetery

had been vacant for over 30 years.

I realized none of these small brick churches ever had windows—

nothing that could be vandalized by time.

Every summer while we cleared out the weeds

my father reminded us that no one else

would ever be laid to rest here:

*A few years after I'm gone this place*

*will be forgotten.*

Last year the tombstones looked like islands

floating in a sea of Bluebonnets. I said

it would be a shame to cut them down.

We got lost in the beauty of that place.

*Give it another month and these Bluebonnets*

*will burn off and the weeds will take over.*

My father broke the silence.

*But it won't hurt if we leave them alone for a while.*



## Way Station

It didn't drop below 80 degrees until October. I found an old postcard you sent me from London several years ago—Big Ben covered in snow and a scribbled cliché. I started to throw it away, hesitated, and hid it in the back of a photo album.

I should have written you back.

Section II.

Road Debris

2009

The road narrowed, trees crowded, stretched,  
intruded, weaving together a canopy. Time  
clicked backwards. The empty lot  
was clogged with forgotten junk:  
a burned out Volkswagen bus, plywood bookshelves,  
a shopping cart full of worn-out shoes—  
I saw my reflection distorted on the monitor  
of a discarded computer and stared  
at my shrunken and stretched image.  
Threw rocks until I finally broke it;  
the dusty screen imploded with a gasp.

1997

Around midnight the fan belt broke,  
leaving us vulnerable on the one lane dirt road.  
We liked it, being stranded, alone,  
dancing in the headlights until the battery died.  
I pushed the truck. You sang  
Patsy Cline while you steered.  
The car rolled slowly—I pushed it  
for almost an hour before we came into  
contact with another car. The driver  
gave us a ride to the nearest payphone.  
I should have kept on pushing.



That summer I hitch-hiked across town.  
Just to see what it was like. My first ride  
was from an old man—he believed the lie  
about my bike being stolen. I directed  
him to the other side of town before  
I pointed to a random house and told him  
it was mine. I wandered for hours with  
my thumb out, hoping someone would take  
me seriously. Dusk settled, and I was lost.

1990

My mom yelled for me to close my eyes.

I started to ask why but never finished.

The cat only looked asleep, except for the blood  
dried in cracks under his nose.

I'd lost my dog the previous winter. We'd found him  
after rigor mortis set in. She told me then  
his body was only frozen.

Maybe now she didn't want to remember.

I already knew about loss.

2008

The ditch always floods, drowning the birds.  
Their corpses are wet, bloated, featherless.  
I rake them into trash bags with the wet leaves  
and stagnant water fills the holes. You complain  
about the smell, your hair, the headaches.  
I try to keep the driveway from flooding again.  
You tell me not to waste my time,  
but how I am supposed to forget the birds?

2001

The car rolled out of the gray stone  
and black iron cemetery gates,  
too much sun for a funeral—my grandmother  
never liked hot summer days. I wiped  
the tears and sweat from beneath  
my sunglasses. Flowers only brighten  
and disguised the smell of the fresh dirt.  
The gravestones blended into the cement road.  
I wished it would rain.

Nike Air Jordan's, black, tattered, hanging  
ornaments decorating the sagging power line,  
like the pouch of flab on an old woman's tricep.  
I first noticed them in the spring. I always wanted  
a pair. I've always wondered how they got there.  
That summer we tried for hours to knock the shoes  
from the wire—rocks, sticks, a football,  
nothing worked. Some things look better out  
of place.

1991

The black garbage bag rolled out of the truck  
in slow motion. I watched from the back window.  
Coats, socks, jeans and underwear cart-wheeled  
across the interstate and vanished underneath  
an oncoming semi. I pressed my hand  
to the glass. Two shirts and a red sock came to rest  
in the grassy median. No one went back for the clothes.  
No one ever goes back.

1999

If this were a movie, it would be raining  
when I said goodbye. I asked for the ring  
back as you watched through blurred  
eyes, still waking up. You didn't even ask why—  
we left too much unsaid.

Every time I look back I see your face  
as you wave goodbye—a shadow of hesitation  
flashes through your eyes. I turn around as you open the door—  
Nothing was real.

I drove home without the radio.

2006

The silence of snow-covered earth grows louder  
in this slow early winter drive along the river.  
Try to convince myself *this* life is better  
as I roll down the windows to let a shock of cold air  
erase the heat in my face—my body purified through fresh,  
frozen air. I stop the truck when I reach the edge  
and watch the snow as it falls from a tree, crashing  
through the delicate layer of ice that can't ever seem to spread  
its frozen roots deeper into the river.  
I just keep telling myself it doesn't mean anything  
as I ease the truck down the hill.



1993

The last autumn of Magnolias,  
still green while the other trees  
start burning. We walked, spoke in whispers,  
counted the fallen seed pods as the first wisp  
of cold air flowed through the wind.  
I stopped to kiss your hand—  
we blushed air into vapor. Under the buzzing street lamp,  
green turns to brown, whispers of *what if* murmur  
through the falling leaves.

1996

The time the city put up the new stoplight—  
I remember driving you home for the first time,  
soft green light spread across the frosty pavement.  
You wore a Santa hat and the icicles gathered  
around the windows of our snow-globe romance.  
We kissed until the light turned red and back to green.  
Later the same night, a group of kids shot out the new stoplight  
with pellet guns—we lost the snow.

2002

White glass iced the road, reflecting flashes  
of red and blue in the windshield leftovers.

I looked at the wreckage, hoping  
one more glimpse of finality would be enough  
to de-sensitize me—

A horn gets my attention.

I re-focus on the yellow stripes, hypnotized.

No time to remember: blown-out tires, skid marks,  
a crushed door, broken mirrors and dreams.

I could have swerved to miss you.

2007

The cement bridge hasn't been used  
in over sixty years, ever since the big flood  
erased the dirt road on one side.  
I see the same spray-painted initials  
that have marked the bridge since I was a kid.  
In the summers we used to dare each other to jump.  
I drive out here in the winter sometimes,  
just to be alone—momentarily displaced  
in time, re-tracing every step where I went wrong.

2004

I drove past sunset to your old house.

We never carved our initials into the Elm.

We never did a lot of things. The road  
is paved now—no more trails of dust.

For the first time, I understood—

It was always my fault. Every time

I smell strawberries and powdered sugar,

I hear your voice. Some memories

have a taste, yours is a smell.

When I looked in the rear view mirror

there was nothing but paved road.

2000

It's never like I thought it would be.

No flying cars or moon colonies,  
no robot butlers or broken hearts—

just the same lonely back roads littered with discarded tires,  
tree limbs, deserted convenience stores with boarded windows,  
empty parking lots and promises.

There wasn't even a fight.

You told me you loved somebody else, so I said  
it was over.

I thought you would disagree.

1998

We drove out to War Creek bridge as blue sky  
grayed to dusk. We spread out the dusty quilt  
across the truck bed and waited for the fireworks.  
All the trucks on the bridge synchronized  
their radios to Garth Brooks. Burning Marlboros,  
spilt Budweiser and river water: outdoor perfume.  
We planned out the rest of our lives until  
the first rocket exploded and fell asleep  
beneath the smoke and the fading moon.

2003

Big trucks molt tires, black snake skins,  
fossils are all that remain on this country highway.  
The last gas station died with its owner in '91—  
boarded windows, a rusted gas pump and the skeleton  
of a propane truck, a museum of the better days.  
The payphone still works for a quarter, but the truck  
hasn't moved in over a decade; beer can droppings,  
the local contribution for the future.  
I drive through every summer just to know  
I'm going somewhere.



1995

Followed the fading sound of the train  
until I found the river bridge. I stopped the car  
and waited until the next train rolled by. Forgotten  
fishing line, empty cans and Styrofoam ice chests  
form drifts around the cement picnic tables  
and fire pits. I counted the house lights across  
the water. Anything near the river feels older.  
The water is always running, but I don't know  
if it ever gets anywhere.

2005

Discarded burger wrappers lined the ditch,  
manna for the lost travelers. I followed  
the litter like a bread-crumbs trail, tried  
to go back five years, but the trail  
only goes one way. The dirt road is paved now.  
The bridge where we painted our initials,  
torn down. Only the trash remains.  
I took one last breath and knew nothing.



## Way Station

Drove past the creek where we used to catch crawdads—right next to the paved low-water bridge that stays dry—sometimes for months—between rains. Shallow reservoirs of water, dotted with rocks and stray tree limbs pool on both sides of the road before dropping over a small rock ledge, filling the thin trail of water that slowly stretches into a creek where I see a kid, ankle-deep in water deftly lifting rocks with his fingers—like a surgeon—trying not to nick an artery of dirt which muddies the water and startles the crawfish away.

I wish I'd never learned how to catch them with a small piece of ham on a string—just dangle it slowly around the rocks and wait for the crawdads to grab onto it with their powerful brown claws.

Section III.

Mile Markers

## Mile 1 – Home

Left home for Vegas around dawn, our first real vacation—just us and the road. I told you to only pack one suitcase, this trip was supposed to be an escape, a chance to slow down. You insisted on taking your work phone.

Mile 165 – Little Rock, AR

Stopped north of the river for gas,  
and filled the cooler with ice and coke.  
You bought bubble gum and sunflower  
seeds, asked me which came first:  
Kansas or Arkansas—fake laugh.  
I made eyes at the girl with the purple  
hair at the back cooler. You didn't see.  
Moved on with the sun at our backs.

## Mile 101: Russellville, AR

Lost track somewhere after ten,  
counting Wal-Marts. At least one  
every thirty miles. We thought  
about convenience.



Mile 27 – Alma, AR

The billboard on the outskirts of Alma:

*State Football Champions, 97-98.*

I started telling stories about  
my football career. You said  
that was my problem—I'm always  
stuck in the past. I asked what that said  
about our future.

Mile 265- Checotah, OK

Took your picture on the edge of town  
next to the sign that announces your favorite  
singer grew up here. You wondered  
if she still felt famous, even at home.  
I said you can get used to anything.

## Mile 157 – Oklahoma City, OK

Somewhere near Tinker Air Force base  
we started singing the state song  
from that old movie. We decided to take a look  
at the new Chickasaw casino—everything is digital now.  
I lost 20 bucks at Blackjack while you  
went to the restroom. I pretended not  
to notice you blush when the cowboy  
tipped his hat to you.

Mile 23– Sayre, OK

Nothing but pig farms and empty fields,

I could have navigated by scent. You

wondered how anyone could live

in these conditions—

I thought we already knew.

Mile 164– Shamrock, TX

Before we knew it the hills were gone.

The last one disappeared without  
putting up a fight. We decided  
not to stray from the interstate.

We might vanish like the scenery.

Mile 78 – Amarillo, TX

Midnight drive down old route 66;  
only seemed right to listen to country,  
Nothing but dead trees and deserted  
parking lots. You pretended to sleep,  
I drove, opened another coke, and turned  
on the heater until you took off your jacket.  
Laughed again when I saw  
the butterfly tattoo—  
aftermath of teenage rebellion.

Mile 29 – Adrian, TX

Rode with the windows down, one arm  
in the sun, truck-driver's tan.  
You told stories about summers  
in Texas: even the swimming pools  
were sweating. Your parents worried  
about sunburns and warned you about me.

Mile 355, Santa Rosa, NM

The romance of dirty rodeo arenas  
and bull riding, ropes and belt buckles.

When I came back with the drinks you were smiling  
beneath a black felt cowboy hat, holding a rose.

I hadn't seen that look in your eyes for years.



Mile 145 – Albuquerque, NM

Lunch at Taqueria Mexico, authentic  
Mexican food. I drank water—you sipped  
Coke from a glass bottle. Took a picture of you  
in front of the woman in red on the hand-painted  
mural of the restaurant wall. Later  
we kissed near the Rio Grande; you said  
this wasn't a good time. I *didn't* say:  
*It never is*—just put a second bag of ice  
and a gallon of water into the cooler:  
time to move on.

## Mile 47 – Continental Divide, NM

Took our picture next to the memorial  
that signaled the continental divide.  
You said the rivers had to decide  
which way to flow: the Pacific or Gulf of Mexico.  
I said I'd pick the one that took me back.  
I knew you wouldn't understand.

Mile 300 – Allentown, AZ

The sun always in our eyes, we crept slowly  
through Navajo country. No real city  
for over 100 miles—just a painted desert  
and the skeletons of trees. You reminded me  
again that we should have flown.

Mile 205 – Flagstaff, AZ

Night time at the hotel Monte Vista,  
room 402, where John Wayne once slept.  
We listened to stories about the phantom  
bell boy, but never saw him. Ordered a pizza,  
drank warm beer, watched  
some western starring Gregory Peck—  
he wore a gun and got shot in the back.  
I said with Westerns, you never had to question  
the truth—you always knew who the bad guy was.

## Mile 122 – Seligman, AZ

After days on the road miles turn  
to minutes, hours turn to years.  
Every small town water tower and motel  
hold stories we don't have time to hear.  
You lost an earring in Gallup; I changed  
a flat outside of Winslow. We thought  
the drive would be easy. You slept  
through the worst roads.

## Mile 52, Kingman, AZ

Last stop in Arizona. Another railroad town trying to hang on. You needed to freshen up at the truck stop. I wanted a chance be alone.

## Mile 0 – Arizona/Nevada Border

You were carsick when we stopped  
at the Hoover Dam. Your head hurt  
too much for you to even get out  
of the car. I told you it was worth it—  
just to comprehend the sheer magnitude  
of this cement canyon. You said  
it was just a dam, and you'd seen pictures.  
I bought a postcard— on the back I wrote  
'just a dam.'

## Mile 75 – Las Vegas, NV

The glow of Vegas grew across the desert.

I made sure we came in after dark. You

said it was like driving into a movie.

Just me and you on the road—both

of us alone.





## Way Station

One summer we made a rope swing on the railroad bridge—tied a long rope on the highest trestle. We took turns swinging out above the bayou, turning back flips off the rope, crashing head first into the green water.

Every afternoon the train rumbled over the bridge. One of us got the rope, the other two jumped.

The secret was to wait until the train reached the bridge—let the deafening horn and vibrating iron press each leap into an eternal moment of time—that instant the brain reminds the body that you can't fly.

Section IV.  
Tourist Traps

## Birthday at the Blue Whale – Catoosa, OK

We stopped at the big blue whale for your birthday.

It looked like it came straight out of a cartoon.

The town maintained the whale ever since its builder

died. The layers of sky blue paint continue

to thicken as the still pond stagnates. The rain

forced our picnic to move inside the belly of the whale.

If I was Jonah, I would want to spend my three days

with you. We wanted to remember this moment

as it was—but you forgot to pack the camera.

It's funny what people try to preserve.

## Sunset at Cadillac Ranch – Amarillo, TX

We painted our initials with black spray paint  
on the roof of a 1959 Cadillac, covering  
the silver-lettered promise: *Jason loves Ashley*  
*4ever* and watched the sunset darken  
from pink to red, casting long shadows  
from the Cadillac tombstones. A modern  
day Easter Island—awkward metal statues  
stand sentry over the dry plains. You asked  
how long it would be before our initials  
faded with the Texas sun.

## Escape to Meramec Caverns – Stanton, MO

We follow the painted barn roofs advertising  
Meramec Caverns, our last weekend to get away.  
They say Jesse James used this cave as a hideout.  
I picture him ducked behind a large stalagmite,  
resting his head against the damp limestone,  
trying not to drown in the palpable darkness.  
During the tour when they turned the lights out,  
you squeezed my hand; we became saturated  
in black. I knew the meaning of alone.

## Loss at San Miguel Chapel – Santa Fe, NM

We posed—my arm around your shoulder,  
you kissing my cheek—in front of the oldest  
chapel in America, built before the country  
was founded. The ancient adobe walls,  
small, rectangular, with an open bell tower  
and one small window. You said it was holy  
ground. I said it was fake—  
only a small portion of the original walls are left.  
You said that was enough.

## Last Holdout from the Mother Road – McClean, TX

The bypass opened in '84, but the railroad town was already halfway to a memory—another casualty of the interstate. I used to visit an uncle there. He told me how the town father died on the Titanic, frozen to his suitcase, gold watch still ticking. The people who stayed behind live on nostalgia and stubbornness. The last time I passed through was on the way to my uncle's funeral in Amarillo—bought a Route 66 shirt and a post card with a picture of the way things used to be.



## Camp Out at the Spook Light – Outside of Hornet, MO

Sometime after midnight you went back to the car,  
said it was time to give up. You always were more  
serious. I put on my jacket, my eyes retraced  
the dirt road until it ended in a tunnel of trees.  
The spot had not changed in over one hundred years.  
And then I saw the light—  
Nothing more than the distant flickering of a lantern,  
a glowing yellow light. I yelled for you to hurry  
and look before it was gone.  
I knew it was too late.



## Way Station

A train passes in the night—I stand close enough to the tracks so I can feel the breeze as the train cars glide by, hypnotized by the steady vibrations of the rails as the wheels roll gently down the tracks. My breathing falls in line with the rhythm of the crickets, frogs, cicadas and train as it beats steadily by—the moon shines through the spaces between the train cars, flashing a steady pattern of shadow and moonlight across my face.

As soon as it passes, I step onto the tracks and watch as the last train light eternally fades away—until I can't even be sure it was ever there.