

Michigan State University Libraries Short Édition

# The American Road





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with contributions by

CRAIG COTTER

GREGGORY MOORE

DOLORES HAYDEN

MICHAEL RODRIGUEZ

PAUL HOSTOVSKY

MARJORIE SAISER

CINDY HUNTER MORGAN

ANITA SKEEN

MATT MATTHEWS

JAIMEE WRISTON COLBERT

Michigan State University Libraries  
East Lansing, Michigan

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# Before Phoenix

*by Michael Rodriguez*

Miles and hours in that hot, tiny cab through Texas, New Mexico, and now Arizona to the West. For two days you've fought an evening sun so fierce you almost couldn't recognize it or yourself in its path. Occasionally during the day you've pulled over, balanced a camera on the hood of the truck, tried to pose yourself in front of some impossible desert scene that reminds you of Jesse James, some grim spaghetti western, or the Marty Robins you play in the cab. You think you'll somehow look different in these photographs and you want to mark the change.

Before Phoenix the sun dips so low over the road that even the visor and glasses won't help. You squint like some vigilante who's got tough on his past, on his midwestern root, his failures, fallen love. Everything is behind me, you tell yourself. I'm a going West, goddamit, and I wish I had a gun.

But this shoe-leather countenance cracking in the unfamiliar dust and black tar and soon you're looking for some respite to pop out of the emptiness, a place to wait out long enough

for that big orange ball to dip behind the mountains, and maybe look for something to drink, plan the next stop.

You're expecting the one-pump station with the old man out front having his chaw, some tumbleweed passing through, a few howdy strangers. But you're thirsty and'll settle for this convenience place with the computerized pumps and the showcase souvenirs. You find the fountain drinks that slosh endlessly in their sweaty glass tanks and they look foreign, dark, a little dirty even, and you ask the boy in front of you for help. He gives you a stranger's look and answers in Spanish, a language you've heard all your life but never learned.

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Michael Rodriguez is a librarian at MSU Libraries and part of the MSUL Short edition team.



# Road Trip U.S.A.

*by Dolores Hayden*

*--for Matt Kenyon, artist, creator  
of A Giant Pool of Money*

Drive with me. We'll race through Enterprise  
and stop for lunch in Endeavor

before we exit the highway at Success.  
Nobody ever named a town Debt or Depression.

Ten states host Bonanza, that's Prosperity  
in Spanish, miners shouting about a lode of silver,

and Prosperity lies near Clover. Let's snap  
some selfies at the Clover city limits

before we reach Cash, Dollar Bay, Dollars Corner.  
Then on to Talent, Confidence, Jackpot — dusty

crossroads christened by settlers aiming to own.  
We'll speed through those single-stoptlight places

hell-bent on being something bigger,  
busted boom towns, east and west. Drive with me,

we'll swing by Greenback, balance the books,  
set land grabs against unlucky losses.

The landscape promises me, promises you,  
and not every spot called Speculator went under.

Here's Money Island, houses for summer people  
not five miles from my own front porch.

# Hwy 10 and A World Away from the Schoenberg Road

*by Matt Matthews*

I don't know how Cary and me scored a ride home with two of the prettiest girls at Hampton High, but we did. They were stranded at an out-of-conference football game in Petersburg and Cary and I looked groomed and trustworthy in our letter jackets, his for marching band, mine for tennis. We were nerds, of course. He wore black birth-control glasses and my zits shone like cinnamon Red Hots. But we were sober. And, the clincher: Cary had the keys to his parents' pea-green Ford Pinto. To my amazement, even to this day, they asked us for a ride.

They were seniors, and while they were only one year older than we were, they were women and we were boys. I tingled just being in the same car with them. Though I knew it couldn't last, I felt like I was on the brink of something that was until that moment not even imaginable.

Our ears were still ringing with the fight song and cheers we and our classmates had hollered nonstop for four quarters. We were the mighty red and white, and we zealously bore testimony to the world that YOU CAN'T CRUSH A CRAB.

Becky's long, strawberry hair was pulled back behind her diminutive ears. Kim wore red, red lipstick that she refreshed before she climbed into the back seat. Becky's was a reserved, freckled beauty, and Kim radiated heat. The scent of night air and wood smoke clung to us, along with clean rain, damp wool, and hints of faraway, exotic perfume.

I sat up front with my head cork-screwed around gawking at them, chatting them up like Gomer Pyle. We all chirped inanely about the game and school. We were hoarse from cheering, and tired, and wet. It had drizzled and was cold outside, but we were cozy in Cary's woebegone Pinto whooshing through puddles around tight, winding

curves. My folks back home were probably getting ready to watch the 11 o'clock news. I might get home by the end of Andy Roberts' weather forecast. Curfew was midnight, but they were forgiving, and if this special delivery took longer than expected, so be it. Nothing in the cosmos mattered more.

Route 10, a two-lane highway, snaked from Petersburg along the James River through woods and rural fields planted with cotton and peanuts. The wet asphalt was new and black and slick. The white reflective paint on the center line was so bright it flashed like tubes of fluorescent lights as we blurred past, creating the impression of great speed, an urgent string of Morse Code dashes that stretched all the way past Smithfield to the James River Bridge at the eastern mouth of the Hampton Roads. When a covey of leaves from the branches smacked against our windshield as we shot past, we screamed with delight. They stuck to the windshield and obscured our view, adding an edge of danger. The impotent wipers batted them away after three or four pathetic swipes.

Soon we fell silent. I sat back in my seat, and the girls leaned forward craning their necks between me and Cary. I could feel their moist breath, could smell their mint gum. We watched the twisting, black road and the falling, wet leaves that burned in our high beams. I daydreamed about, but held out no hope for, a good night kiss from either of these sweet girls. This would not be the dramatic beginning of a budding romance, though I would be forever devoted to the lines of Becky's slender, milky neck, and Kim's tousled, blonde hair. After that night, Cary and I would never talk about our crushed hopes. We would tell ourselves nonchalantly that it was just a ride home from a football game. No big deal. We were glad to serve two needy, albeit gorgeous, upperclassmen. We would not run out of gas, stranding ourselves on a romantic overlook on the James River. Nor would we fall in love with these girls any more than we already had. And they would not fall in love with us. If they remembered who we were on Monday at school, we'd call that victory.

My contentment, nevertheless, bordered on serenity. I knew that one day I'd be in the driver's seat. One day I'd get the girl and she'd be sitting up front next to me, drawing lazy circles on my neck with her

warm fingers. “I wasn’t who I would be,” writes Deb Olin Unferth in her memoir *Revolution*. “More of me was coming.” Generally, I am impatient and almost always insecure, but in those moments on Route 10, I was content to wait. I had not arrived, but I was on my way.

My father, a WWII prisoner of war, was on his way, too. He may have always heard the distant blasts from the battle on the Belgium-German border where he was captured in snow along the Schoenberg Road into St. Vith, but he wasn’t always that young man with freezing feet bent under a heavy battle pack. He grew up. He didn’t fight that fear, that cold, that noise every night. There were brighter, warmer dawns. He was freed from captivity on April 13th 1945. Truce had been declared. He got to come home. Every day he got up and looked around. He took stock. He married, raised a family, held jobs, maintained lifelong friendships, paid bills. There were gardens to weed, grandfather clocks to make, footstools to sell, steaks to grill, a son to teach to play tennis and to sail. Merry go rounds. Grandchildren. Friends. Chats with the mailman. Watching the harbor from the waterfront. Listening to the waves. Dad did the bravest thing any man can do: he lived in the moment.

I am Billy Boy’s boy. Sometimes I see him looking at me in the rear-view mirror. He’s in the back seat. I’m driving, watching my speed, taking the bright curves close to the shoulder. Keep it between the ditches, I can hear him saying from the back seat. Keep ‘er on the road. When I was sixteen on the way home from an out-of-town football game, there was more of me coming. Now, halfway to one hundred, there still is.

---

Matt Matthews is from Hampton, Virginia, and lives and writes in Champaign, Illinois. His memoir *One Thousand Miles: Following My Father’s WWII Footsteps* was published by Avenida Books. His novel *Mercy Creek* (Hub City Press: 2011) won the South Carolina First Novel Prize.

# On the Road, So To Speak

by Marjorie Saiser

You wanted to drive to Luigi's  
because, as you said, you were pulling  
down good money, you got paid every  
Friday, and every Friday you liked to eat.  
In the side mirror I saw half my face:  
my earring, my uncared-for hair. I liked it,  
stretched my legs in my black stockings  
straight out in front of me, like my life,  
crossed them, my skirt so very short.  
I've seen half my face in the side mirror  
of each of your cars since that one.  
Take my car, you said. So I eased it  
down into the farmstead of my ex-in-laws  
to pick up my son. Big muscle, big day, big  
hood like the bow of a ship when I  
braked at the fence and got out and  
waved to the house, the porch, the  
disdain. I'm going to indulge for a moment  
right here right now before I get back to  
working on myself. Because, as the trucker  
in the Consolidated Freightways said to me on  
the CB after I blew past him in that marvel of a car:  
Breaker, Breaker, lookee here at mile marker 59,  
Go ahead, Lady, no sense hanging back. His voice  
like the voice of God coming out of the speakers:  
Today I'm not giving points for humble.

---

Marjorie Saiser's novel-in-poems, *Losing the Ring in the River*, tells of three generations of women (and some of their secrets). Clara made of her life the best she could (or did she?), her daughter Emily was in many ways stuck, and her granddaughter Liz has the spirit which might help her to persevere through obstacles. The book (by University of New Mexico Press) won the Willa Award for Poetry in 2014, and is made into a play.

# Rockers

*by Jaimee Wriston Colbert*

Seems like yesterday when Jeanie and I took the long drive out of Brooklyn in her beat-up Volvo, Vulva she called it, heading wherever she said, which turned out to be down South to her cousin's digs, sultry and green, July heat steaming off the grass like smoke. The next afternoon we were all sprawled on the lawn, sharing a joint on a knoll behind their white house, looked like a toy model of a plantation house, a block-shaped falling-apart thing with columns and a sleeping porch, a doll plantation-house. Made me damn horny, I got to say, our wherever road trip, the heat, music, the weed, which Jeanie said was OK to smoke, me being pregnant and all, because it was natural, she said, grew in the ground, you harvest it like soy beans or corn. Six months gone, belly spooling over unzipped jeans like a popover.

Don't recall the Georgia dude's name or even his face, only that I balled him that night in some smoky little room off a bigger room where the others were partying, the music thumping—Can't you see, oh can't you see? That song, some guy wailing about what a woman did to him. We said ball in those days; fuck is what you say now, the Germanic ficken, meaning "to strike."

Who was he, anyway? Jeanie's friend of a friend of her cousin, or maybe cousin of a friend's friend? This man I pulled into some little room with its little bed, and curtains all around the bed—I don't think there was even a door, just faded paisley curtains the color of cooked shrimp, and our lust separating us from the rest. Why were we so psyched for paisley back then? Looked like creepy little eyeless seahorses. And who was I to get some anonymous babe into this bed that wasn't mine, a stranger's house, my belly thrust out like a beach ball between us so he couldn't climb on top of me or me on him, because it might pop, Jeanie said. So instead we did it spooning, this man behind me ramming, and I rocked and rocked and rocked myself back against him.

I could've rocked the world in those days. It was like I had this ocean in me, waves of it sweeping me one way then the other, made me crazy sometimes, like I could never be still or settled or know what the hell I was feeling from one swell to the next. Like having your own earthquake where the earth underneath you goes liquid all of a sudden, and the ground you believed was solid swells up under and around you in little waves, and you'd rock and rock then rock some more. I figured that's what we'd do, the baby and me, we'd rock, then I'd feed it and we'd rock some more. After that... what? I admit I hadn't thought it through, what happens when you and your baby belong to each other for the rest of your lives. I thought having him would resolve me. Though to be honest that was an afterthought, after the baby was already swimming in my ocean like a tiny turtle who'd hatched on the beach, then scuttled over the sand to the sea in search of home.

We fell asleep together, this stranger and me, and sometime in the pre-dawn hour when it was still dark, I opened my eyes slowly, knowing there was light coming behind this darkness that would grow brighter, the darkness dimmer, thinning like an old man's hair, the sun rising whether we wanted it or not. In those days mostly not, because then we'd have to face whatever it was we slept to forget, our loneliness, our insufficiencies, our regrets, counting on whoever we slept with to hold us tight in the dark, before dissolving in the light like a smoke ring—poof. The music stopped, the dawn bled in and he was gone.

Later that morning Jeanie fired up the Volvo and we headed home to Brooklyn, the little magnolia tree I bought at a roadside stand, to plant for the baby's father in the miniature courtyard behind our apartment, propped up on the backseat. If he ever came around again, he'd see it, flowers from Georgia. I pictured them white and waxy with a heady scent, like a lotus blossom maybe, which symbolizes luck and perseverance. I read that in a fortune cookie once. Somewhere in North Carolina we picked up a hitchhiker who stayed with us through New Jersey, making out with Jeanie in the back beside my tree while I drove.

It never did bloom, that magnolia tree, dried up and died weeks after it was planted. Maybe it was because of our harsh Brooklyn soil? I imagined iron shavings, bits of glass, old needles, the scars of the city in this tiny spitball of a courtyard, where only pigeons and sparrows the color of dirt came now and then, when Jeanie tossed out breadcrumbs to draw them in. But Jeanie said no, that the Southern soil was worse, fouled with the blood of slavery. No pretty tree can atone for that, she said. Of course, Brooklyn then wasn't Brooklyn now. People like us couldn't live there now. Nowadays more Brooklyn residents can afford to sanitize their courtyards, their neighborhoods, renovate old buildings like ours, which is another way of saying tear it down and build it new, extravagant, exclusive, Caucasian.

I let the bones of that magnolia tree remain in the ground, a perch for those wayward pigeons and sparrows. In another month my son would be born, and on a warm fall evening with the scent of colder days on the horizon, Jeanie and I will bring him out to our little courtyard, sit side-by-side on the wrought iron bench she picked up at the flea market for such occasions, and rocking them both in my arms we will watch the night come in.

---

Jaimee Wriston Colbert is the author of seven books of fiction. Her new novel, *How Not to Drown*, is forthcoming May 2021. Her books won the 2018 International Book Award, CNY 2017 Fiction Award, Willa Cather Fiction Prize, Zephyr Prize, IPPY Gold Medal, and more. Originally from Hawaii, she lives in upstate New York, where she's Professor of Creative Writing at SUNY, Binghamton University.



# Driving

*by Craig Cotter*

I was driving  
he sat in the passenger seat

I could feel his leg and smell him.

I liked a boy who was silent most of the time.

My Honda lost in a parking lot

we were driving  
my remote out the window

trying to make it beep.

I was OK being lost

as it was more time with Alex.

I knew when we found my car  
he'd be gone

and I'd be awake.

So we walked and drove around places  
we hadn't been,

at one stage a parking lot  
full of people

lighting fireworks.

Walked through stores and towns  
that never existed.

\*

At 19

I drove fast—

except driving Rose home on Sunday nights  
speed limit 65

I'd drive 48 or 52  
holding her hand

back to Geneva.

\*

With Alex this morning  
27 years after our fifth summer

in Western New York

a dream with your smell, presence, silence.

---

Craig Cotter was born in 1960 in New York and has lived in California since 1986. His poems have *California Quarterly*, *Chiron Review*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *Court Green*, *Gay & Lesbian Review*, *Great Lakes Review*, *Hawai'i Review*, & *Tampa Review*. His fourth book of poems, *After Lunch with Frank O'Hara*, is currently available on Amazon. [www.craigcotter.com](http://www.craigcotter.com)

# Travels with Emily

*by Cindy Hunter Morgan*

We internalize the rhythm of travel early. My first road trip was short, and I have no memory of it – a couple of hours in a cardboard box on the back seat of a Ford. No doubt it had some influence on me, though I don't know how many trips I took in the box or where my parents kept the box between trips – if they lifted it out of the car and used it to store newspapers or wet boots, if they took the newspapers out before they put me back in. The box was, in 1968, their version of a car seat. Seven years later, in the summer of 1975, we loaded up a different car, a two-door Pontiac with no air conditioning, hitched it to our pop-up camper, and drove west to a friend's buffalo ranch in South Dakota, into Wyoming and Yellowstone National Park, down to Colorado, over to California.

In other years on other vacations, we drove south. I remember a skittles game in Berea, Kentucky; moss dripping from live oaks in South Carolina; cotton fields in Georgia; Kenny Rogers on the radio. In the backseat, my sister and I sang, "You picked a fine time to leave me Lucille, with four hundred children and a crop in the field." We thought four hundred children was rather a lot. It didn't occur to us we misheard something.

In college and after college, I read *Travels with Charley*, *On the Road*, and *Blue Highways*. I had an S10 Chevy Blazer. I drove it to the beaches of Lake Michigan and to the woods along Lake Superior. I drove it to Indiana to visit my best friend. I took friends. We ate eggs and hash browns at truck stops in the middle of the night. We brushed our teeth in roadside ditches among milkweed and tick clover.

In our early twenties, my sister and I decided late one night in Michigan to leave early the next morning to drive to Cape Cod. I had a rash from poison ivy, a new tent, and twenty dollars. My sister had more resources, as big sisters sometimes do, but we ran out of

money on the way home. I hawked magazines out the passenger side window to other travelers stuck in toll lines.

The wonderful thing about road trips – my own and those chronicled by Steinbeck, Kerouac, and William Least Heat-Moon – is how they are about both expansion and limitation. We travel great distances in tiny spaces, and the tiny spaces are as important to the experience as the mountains, the prairies, the toll lines, the miles.

When my son was younger and playing soccer, his team practiced on a field a few miles away off a road always clogged with traffic. Sometimes, instead of driving him and leaving and driving back to pick him up, I stayed. I parked in a far corner of the enormous parking lot. I prepared for this. I brought a pillow and a thermos of tea and a book and a notebook and sometimes a quilt. I got out of the car and climbed into the back seat and positioned my pillow in just the right place and settled into it and hid for two hours.

It is delicious to stretch out in your own back seat on a September evening with the windows down, parked. What preceded or informed this pleasure? Some imagined image of William Least Heat-Moon in his van with *Leaves of Grass* and a camping stove? Steinbeck in his maple-walled hideout in the back of his pickup? His table that could be lowered at night and covered with cushions to become a bed? Yes, though I was primed to respond to Steinbeck and William Least Heat-Moon because of my years sleeping in tents and reading beneath card tables covered with bed sheets. Some longing for a life simplified to a pillow and a few books is innate, I suppose.

Those evenings in the car in the parking lot by the soccer field evade categorization. I was neither home nor away. They were, as Emily Dickinson might have called them, a “going out of sight.” When I stretched out and propped myself up with my pillow, I could look out the window and up at the sky while I listened, in a fuzzy sort of way, to the sounds of soccer. I was invisible except, possibly, for my feet, which were raised, pressed against the door and a little above it. I felt the holiness of privacy. When I heard a whistle, I heard Dickinson’s bird “Afar upon the wind.”

The critic James McIntosh speculated that skies appealed to Dickinson because “they are in motion toward the unknown.” That is also the appeal of the road trip, of course, though, as Dickinson understood, we don’t need to travel to be in motion toward the unknown. The last place she went – Mrs. Bang’s Boardinghouse in Cambridge – felt, for her, like a prison, and as for the sky, she also wrote, “the brain is wider than the sky.” She did not need travel. She did not need to provoke change.

Dickinson wrote of “That polar privacy / A soul admitted to itself.” She called it “Finite Infinity.” She would have loathed traveling with Sal and Dean – too much welter and disquiet, but I think she would have found the holy privacy she valued in a well provisioned car with a thermos of tea, a good pillow, a neat pile of books, a clean towel for sandy feet, and a retractable sunroof through which she might contemplate a hawk gliding on thermals or the stars in a June sky. Would she have preferred the car to her desk? Did she need a car? No. No.

And what about Kerouac, Steinbeck, and William Least Heat-Moon? In their pursuit of America the trio of road writers were all, in various ways, chasing Whitman. They were deer at the salt lick. That they sought intensity might indicate they lacked it.

Dickinson had sufficient inner intensity to reject the kind of restless pursuit we associate with travel. She also had a meadow, an orchard, a greenhouse, and a room of her own. She didn’t need Kenny Rogers or truck-stop hash browns. She didn’t need a retractable sunroof. Still, I take her with me most places I go, an atlas of finite infinity.

---

Cindy Hunter Morgan is the author of a full-length poetry collection and two chapbooks. *Harborless* (Wayne State University Press) is a 2018 Michigan Notable Book and the winner of the 2017 Moveen Prize in Poetry. Her work has appeared in a variety of journals, including *Passages North*, *Tin House Online*, and *West Branch*. She teaches poetry at MSU and heads up communications for Michigan State University Libraries, where she also is part of the MSUL Short Edition team.

# As It Happens

by Paul Hostovsky

When they told me I was dying, which I wasn't,  
I began to miss the things in the world which I didn't  
even like about the world--the hideous traffic  
on 95, for instance, which I found myself sitting in,  
going nowhere on my way home, in no hurry now  
that I was dying. I will miss this traffic, I thought,  
feeling surrounded--girded--by people and life and  
desire in the lanes. And the truck, the 18-wheeler  
shouldering in, trying to pass on the right (I always  
hated trucks), struck me now as a vessel of human  
kindness, people helping people they don't even know  
by bringing them food from far away. I will miss  
all the trucks, I thought, as I rolled down my window  
and waved him in, and gave him the I-Love-You sign.  
I will miss the waiting, the fuming, the inching  
along, the reductive bumper stickers and cavilling  
crazy drivers with their chutzpah and their daring.  
And the road itself, which is every road, everywhere,  
bending, unfolding, continuing on. Then I turned  
the radio on and the talking heads were talking  
about death--all of the deaths at home and abroad.  
And I thought to myself, the living are talking about  
dying but the dying are talking about living. I am talking  
about all the living I missed already, all the living  
I wanted to do--any kind of living at all--now that I was  
dying, which I wasn't, as it happens, as it turned out.

---

Paul Hostovsky's most recent book of poetry is *Mostly* (FutureCycle Press, 2021). He has won a Pushcart Prize, two Best of the Net Awards, and has been featured on *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, and *The Writer's Almanac*. Website: paulhostovsky.com

# Road Trip

by Anita Skeen

My mother was born with the travel gene. It lay dormant until she was a young married woman, 21 years old, and my father was drafted into military service at the beginning of WWII. My mother, still living with her mother, worked as a secretary in a law firm in Charleston until my father, now an infantryman, received orders to deploy for Camp Adair in Albany, Oregon. My mother decided to make the long train trip across the country to work, again as a secretary, on the military base. She later followed him to Camp Pendleton in Olympia, Washington, and then back to Ft. Leonard Wood in Rolla, Missouri, until he was sent overseas.

When the war was over, I came along. My mother was lucky to have her mother still living with her and my father, so she continued to work after I was born. But the travel gene, activated in those years when she followed my father around the country, refused to go dormant. She wanted the honeymoon trip to Niagara Falls that the war had stolen from them, so the first trip I remember, mostly from photographs taken where I am unrecognizable, looking somewhat like a penguin, in a huge slicker on the deck of a boat, *The Maid of the Mist*, about to go under Niagara Falls and another photo where I am standing in front of the tourist home where we stayed, uncomfortably posed in a sailor hat and short dress holding a Canadian flag. Then, I suppose we went home. But the travel gene had not gone back into hibernation, and my mother, who never liked the mountains and never liked the cold winters, had her heart set on Florida sunshine, fresh-squeezed orange juice, and the beach. Thus, I do remember being wrapped in blankets in the dark of night, placed in the back seat of the green 1949 Ford, and driven off on a non-stop trip to Daytona Beach. I don't remember how long the trip was, but I do remember waking up to an unfamiliar smell, the salt air, watching my father take off my shoes and leave them on the floor of the back seat, and being carried down a series of concrete steps to the beach

where the sand was cold and hard and dark and the waves came rushing in again and again and again. I wasn't afraid; I was amazed.

There were more trips to the ocean in my childhood: Daytona Beach, West Palm Beach, Myrtle Beach. I splashed through the waves, hunted for shells, surfed the waves on the raft, and suffered brilliant sunburns despite the Coppertone (I can still smell it) that was slathered all over me. When my parents were awarded more than a week's vacation after being at their jobs for a number of years, my mother's travel gene went on alert and squawked, "Go west, young woman, go west." So we did, to California, where my mother's sister and her husband now had two sons, one older, one younger than I, and were eager to show us all that California had to offer for vacation.

This trip to California was the longest one we had ever taken. My parents had never had a credit card, and they got one for the trip. They'd never had a gasoline card, and they got one with a big ESSO on the front. They went to AAA and got maps of all the states we would pass through and quilted them together on the living room floor so we could plan the trip. "We" being my mother and I. My father sat on the couch and read the sports page. We discovered all the places we could stop along the way: Brookfield Zoo (after we found a church to go to that Sunday morning), Meramec Caverns, birthplaces of famous people, Red Rock Canyon, the Painted Desert, the Grand Canyon, and on and on. My mother wanted to make a great circle, more like an ellipse, and take the southern route to LA, then come back by a northern route. So, we could see different things, she said, each side of the trip. My father wanted to get there and get back, the same way, because then he'd be sure what route to take to get us home. We would camp, to save money, and my father was in charge of the heavy canvas tent, the 4 army cots, the 4 suitcases, the cooler, the camp stove, the picnic basket, the groceries, and other incidentals, all of which would go in the trunk of the car, though the cooler did end up under my feet in the back seat. There was more anxiety about the freeways when we got to Los Angeles than there was about crossing through small towns on two lane roads, finding campgrounds, crossing the desert, and arriving on time. We traveled



Route 66 with no idea how famous it would become. The trip would take 5 days. We would have a great experience.

As an adult, more than 60 years after making that first cross-country trip, I have to say that the greatest gift my parents gave me as a child was the gift of travel. I had been in 40 states by the time I went to college. I'd hiked in the Grand Canyon, looked at Saturn through the telescope at Mt. Palomar, shopped (but not eaten) in Chinatown, camped in the Black Hills, driven alongside bears in the Smokey Mountains, climbed down and down and down into the World's Largest Hand-Dug Well in Greensburg, Kansas, gathered pecans in South Carolina, wandered through Mark Twain's Hannibal, Missouri, and marveled when we drove down the main drag in Las Vegas, Nevada, at midnight, constellations of bright light surrounding us, neon signs spelling out exotic destinations. I loved passing through the different landscapes, seeing the hills of the Ozarks flatten into the plains rolling out from Tulsa and Oklahoma City, then going up through the mesas of New Mexico and into the deserts of Arizona and California. I loved the curio shops (genuine Indian arrowheads and real leather cowboy boots), Stuckey's and their pecan pralines, the flashing at night motel signs of Tucumcari: The Blue Swallow, The Silver Saddle, The Broken Arrow, and the Pueblo Inn. I loved the wind blowing through the car (this was before air conditioning), the stops at the Esso stations for ice cold Coca Colas pulled from the dinged and dented cooler by the station door, the lunches eaten at picnic tables where, in Kansas, the wind blew so hard and so hot that the bread for our cheese sandwiches was dried before we could get them to our mouths. What did I not love? The sadness of saying goodbye to my cousins. The sense of loss when the trip was over.

I have continued with road trips and camping trips, hikes and bike rides, exploration and discovery throughout my adult life. I have a friend who says, "Open the car door and Anita will get in. It doesn't matter where you're going." It is the journey for me, not necessarily the destination. I drive rather than fly whenever I can (though I may not be alone in that sentiment these days), and I stop for as many quirky side trips along the way that I can. I travel in a 14-year-old kiwi green Honda Element with 250,000 miles, the best car I have ever

owned. It's a great camping car, and I don't know what I'll do when it says, "Sorry. I can't do this anymore. I'm done." Honda has stopped making the Element, hasn't made it for 9 years. My next road trip will come in March when I drive from East Lansing, Michigan, to San Antonio, Texas, with stops in Wichita and Oklahoma City to see family and friends. On the return trip, I'll change course and come back through Iowa City, making an elliptical (somewhat) orbit rather than returning home by the same route. In this sense, I am my mother's daughter, and she did pass the travel gene onto me. Late in life, she chose the Caribbean cruise over the road trip, possibly because her eyesight was failing and she rarely drove. But she returned to the ocean, her love of waves and water and sun maintained. There beside her was my father, reading the options on the menu, glad to be sunburn-free and not behind the wheel of a jam-packed station wagon heading west. Again.

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Anita Skeen is Professor Emerita in the Residential College in the Arts and Humanities at MSU, where she is the Founding Director of The Center for Poetry and the Series Editor for Wheelbarrow Books. She has been the Coordinator of the Creative Arts Program at Ghost Ranch for 41 years and Coordinator of the Fall Writing Festival at Ghost Ranch for 23 years. She is the author of six volumes of poetry. Her poetry, short fiction, and essays have appeared in numerous literary magazines and anthologies. Collaboration is an important aspect of her work and she is currently involved in writing projects with poets Jane Taylor and Cindy Hunter Morgan, and visual artist Laura DeLind. In 2015, she received the William J. Beale Outstanding Faculty Award at Michigan State University.

# Mass Transit Epistle to Monica Valenzuela

*by Gregory Moore*

Monica, I'm sitting on this train, on the Red Line from Union Station, and I've just left you. The kiss was quick when the train came because it doesn't wait around, and I took a seat at the back of the car. I've been riding with my head down, elbows on my knees, smiling, trying to hold back tears of joy. At Civic Center this couple boards, the woman's pushing this big baby carriage. They must be under thirty, but hard living makes them look older. They're in the middle of an argument, although it's just the man who's talking. His face shows anger, disgust, and he's speaking to her in clipped phrases, gesturing. My Spanish isn't good enough to comprehend the details, but he's talking about respect, about her attitude, about something she was supposed to do but didn't. The child appears vacuous. He looks at me without seeing, his eyes are watery glass, unreal, switched off. The woman is wearing a black T-shirt with a lot of words. Most of them are too small to read from where I sit, but some are larger. I AM A MEXICAN! it proclaims. I AM NOT HISPANIC. I AM NOT AN AZTEC. ¡YO SOY MEXICANO! The man is standing above her in a sleeveless undershirt and drooping jeans, talking down, his anger flowing steadily, and again I hear something respect, respeto, about her responsibility to him. He is becoming louder, gesturing more violently, and other passengers are noticing. I am afraid he is about to hit her, and I'll have to do something.

Monica, I'm a coward, I've never been in a fight and never wanted to be in one, but I'm the closest to them and clearly the most physically able to intervene. The man is almost yelling now; the woman has yet to say a word. She shifts in her seat and turns the carriage, and now I see it is a double, with a sleeping infant behind the benumbed boy, and again I'm about to cry.

And then it's over, they exit at Westlake/MacArthur Park, and I realize I've ridden one stop too far. I duck between the closing doors

and out onto the platform. I catch sight of the receding family, and there's nothing to be done. And so I'm waiting for the eastbound train while feeling the world as a loveless place of strangers and the unknown, a place where I can do so little.

But Monica, *mi corazón*, I can speak to you, I can tell you of the miracle, *mujer de mi corazón*, I can tell of how my inner world sometimes seems so safely sealed from the cruelties of life, sealed off from the inside by this miracle that in precious moments seems to heal my wounds and fill up the places of emptiness, this miracle of you.

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Greggory Moore lives in a historical landmark in Long Beach, CA, where he dances and does things with words, including working on his second novel. For more, including info about his debut, *The Use of Regret*, go to [greggorymoore.com](http://greggorymoore.com).

# Call for Submissions

*Exploring the theme of The American Road*

Michigan State University Libraries Short Edition, an innovative publishing platform affiliated with the international publisher Short Edition, seeks short work (8,000 character max, about 1,500 words) exploring the theme of The American Road. Submission deadline extended to May 14, 2021.

Selected work will appear online and in MSU Short Edition machines, and will be considered for publication internationally. Work may also be considered for inclusion in the Broad Art Museum's exhibit, Interstates of Mind.

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MSU Libraries Short Édition, a platform that provides free on-demand printing of flash prose and poetry, is now accepting submissions. Submissions are open to new, emerging, and established writers. Accepted work will be included in all four MSU Libraries Short Édition machines and considered for national and international publication through Short Édition machines located throughout the world. All work should be less than 8,000 characters (about 1,500 words). Full guidelines are posted at: [lib.msu.edu/shortedition/submit/](http://lib.msu.edu/shortedition/submit/).

The machines are currently located at the MSU Library (Main), the Broad Art Lab, the East Lansing Public Library, and the Capital Region International Airport. Writers do not need to be affiliated with MSU to submit work.

A collection of short works  
exploring the theme of  
The American Road with  
contributions by

CRAIG COTTER

DOLORES HAYDEN

PAUL HOSTOVSKY

CINDY HUNTER MORGAN

MATT MATTHEWS

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