

# Highway Sky

James Brush

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A good number of these poems originated as snapshots, sketches and memories from road trips taken in the early and mid 1990's, and so I dedicate this to my traveling companions from those days: Thaddeus, Eric, Lara, Séamus, Andrea, and of course and as always, Rachel.



## Contents

### Part I: Spark

Spark	11
Early Memory	12
Shotgun	13
Legend of the Wanderer, Part I	14
God Bless Johnny Cash	15
Highway Sky	16
Because	17

### Part II: U.S. Highways

U.S. Highways	21
Night Driving	22
Over a Cliff	24
Toward Cheyenne	25
Why Cars Have Brakes	26
Roadside Attractions	27
A Moment Every Morning	28
East in Winter	29
Sonnet Found in a Road Atlas	30
Down from the Mountains	31
Southwestern Missouri	32

Night at the Interstate Diner	33
The Golden Road	34
Surrender	35

### **Part III: Deeper into Texas**

A Texas Highway in Springtime	39
Highway 73 to Port Arthur	40
I-10 Eastbound	41
Road Stones	43
Deeper into Texas	45
Roadside Artifact #1	47
Since <i>Lonesome Dove</i>	48
North Through Fog	49

### **Part IV: All Roads Lead Here**

Miles (Never Once Imagined)	53
We Talk of Trains	54
Albuquerque	55
Roadside Artifact #2	56
Canyon de Chelly	57
In Navajo Country	58
The Wonder	59
Bright Vegas	60
All Roads Lead Here (L.A. Stones)	61

At Night	62
All the Way	63
<b>Part V: Closer to Home</b>	
Closer to Home	67
Road Stones Around Austin	68
Legend of the Wanderer, Part II	70
Three Prayers for the Dead	71
Chasing Westward	72
Angels	73
Most Beautiful Thing	74
For Gasoline	75
Acknowledgements	76
About the Author	78



Part One

**Spark**



## Spark

gasoline fumes

open highways  
through memory

endless skies  
& stars

asphalt  
& awareness

we'll never be  
this way again

## Early Memory

a bridge rolls  
endless over water

cigarette smoke  
swirling blue  
an open window

## Shotgun

shrieking joy and fire  
hair snaking out the window  
racing parking garage curves  
carbon monoxide fumes  
tires screech pedestrians  
shorebound sailors mostly  
jump from her maniac path  
cursing the captain's  
daughter, her giant car  
the course she charted  
over asphalt and down  
to the drunken shore  
down shore drunken  
stars sailing overhead  
sunrise sunrise bubbling  
up from the Atlantic filling  
her blonde hair with fire  
smoldering laughter spark  
the curves of the road, her  
body shaking joy and flame  
foot on the gas, all the way

## Legend of the Wanderer, Part I

He has been everywhere, man. He walks along the shoulder, holding out his thumb. From the Yucatán to the Yukon, the left shoulder to the right, he has seen it all. On Saturdays he goes honky tonkin'. They write songs about him. Call him *Stranger* in Texas and *Buddy* in Tennessee. He hopes to pull the tire jack from the stone and become the king of the road. When Jesus left Chicago, he followed hoping to elude the hellhound on his trail. He still carries the old guitar he found at a crossroads in Mississippi. He tries to play like Robert Johnson but comes off sounding like Elvis. He's met them both out on the highways and told them he was following the Dead. That was a joke, though, and he thinks they knew it. In Luckenbach he joined other wanderers where they sang songs by the outlaw legends until dawn when the sheriff arrived. He hoped to reach Amarillo by noon, but he was running early. He is on the road again, traveling through every road song worth singing. Yes, he has been everywhere, man. Don't you dream of joining him as you lie in bed and listen to cars traveling the night highway?

## God Bless Johnny Cash

I drove to the river;  
it followed me home.

Sweated the night surrounded  
by lesser freshwater demons.

Sang pelagic chanties  
heard second hand

from deep-gulleted  
birds plucking a thunder bass.

The earth ate the moon,  
broke the fall of morning.

Twisted roads passed tallgrass hills  
that can't remember trees.

In the morning, I prayed  
the dusty pick-up truck petition:

*God bless Johnny Cash.*

## Highway Sky

There was a time when film was too expensive.  
In those days, we used words scrawled  
on fast food wrappers, creased maps and memory.

The cars ran on gasoline and explosions.  
The phones were tethered to wires,  
but we weren't tethered to anything.

The highways stretched forever.  
Nobody knew what was on the other end.

Not the maps of the ancient conquistadors  
nor the atlases of the highway cartographers  
could show us the ten thousand things  
we needed to see for ourselves.

## Because

Because I read Least Heat-Moon, Kerouac and Twain  
Because I grew up on Willie, Waylon, Kris and Cash  
Because of *Smokey and the Bandit* and *The Cannonball Run*  
Because we were learning all the ways you can say love  
Because the Jeep could go off road and nobody was looking  
Because the high desert wind could have knocked us over  
Because the air smelled like pine, and the ground  
    was softer than carpet  
Because we could be in four states at once  
Because you can use a twisted coat hanger to make toast  
    over a campfire  
Because Zappa's "Montana" cracked us up in New Mexico  
Because we knew we'd never be this way again  
Because lightning ripped through the space between  
    the highway and the stars  
Because some roads aren't on the maps  
Because the Burger King in Kayenta had a museum  
    for the code talkers  
Because we saw sunspots through the haze over Houston  
Because the Bronco slid into a snowbank during a blinding  
    panhandle blizzard  
Because the camera fell in the Grand Canyon, and we had  
    to have it back  
Because we were about to go our separate ways,  
    and it broke our hearts to think it  
Because the tape got jammed in the deck and so we listened  
    to *Strange Fire* and *Doolittle* all the way to Maine  
Because the thunderstorms in Denver that summer always  
    rolled in at 4:00  
Because we knew Garcia wouldn't live forever  
Because that guy at Wupatki whispered *Jerry lives*  
Because we didn't have cold weather gear for Mesa Verde

Because the perfect bowl of chili was always  
at some diner in the next town  
Because in the desert you can see time written in the stone  
Because we just left without bothering to make plans  
Because that old Navajo man in Monument Valley  
was selling tacos with green chilies  
Because we never mistook the miles for friendship  
Because a straight line inscribed on a sphere is a circle,  
no matter how fast you drive  
Because a train rumbling through the desert can make you  
forget everything  
Because when we got there, we missed the road  
and headed back out  
Because it can take days to learn the stories inside the car  
Because of wind and endless stars  
Because she had cancer  
Because the sun falls into the sea  
Because you laughed when I kissed you  
Because we were young  
And free

Part Two

## **U.S. Highways**



## **U.S. Highways**

We read lines and studied rest stop signs to  
learn the languages that govern highways.

Electric rivers flowed outward from cities  
in red trails along the eastern highways.

We lived on the salty French fry grease and  
fast food feasts of American highways.

We waited through summer road construction,  
rebuilding and slowing northern highways.

In the mountains, we squinted through the dark,  
studying switchbacks to discern highways.

Green shadows crept across the road through  
endless rolling tree-lined southern highways.

We avoided the rest stop stares of owls  
and meth addicts on nocturnal highways.

In the desert night, lightning played with stars,  
and we found God along western highways.

The engine downshifted, slow to grip the  
road; tires clung like goats to mountain highways.

At night in desert motel rooms we laughed  
and followed love down unspoken highways.

## Night Driving

In a numberless dreamtime past midnight  
on a numbered New Mexican interstate,

tar streaks slithertwist the flowing highway.  
Reflected through bug-spattered glass,

daydream nightdream hypnosis distortions  
vanish beneath the whispering wheels.

Sleep comes with the insistent wind hissing  
poems and country songs through windows.

The moon, falling since Amarillo, descends  
to the rhythm of snores. I could wake

the others. Talk and keep the tar from turning  
into snakes, but I keep my secrets with the moon.

My foot leaves the gas and the Jeep eases along  
the shoulder of Eisenhower's dream connecting

New Orleans bars and Hollywood starlight,  
all the emptiness of days and nights between.

The stars across the Milky Way shiver  
in crystal air, and I spot satellites, good evidence

of dreams traveling their own highways. I listen  
for a coyote's howl to complete my cliché, but

Coltrane's notes, ghosts from the cracked windows,  
played when this road was new are just as good.

I smile when Elvin Jones kicks in on "Summertime."  
Come morning I'll pass the keys, and we'll sit and rest  
awake, together, in the Garden of the Gods.

## Over a Cliff

I left a trail of cigarette butts  
across Oklahoma. All the way  
to Arkansas, I imagined median  
fires burning away the past.

In the Ozarks, I backed over a cliff,  
spent an hour balanced on the edge  
watching my headlights mingle  
with the stars while the back wheels  
hung over the darkest drop.

Balanced and ready to fall,  
I waited for the state troopers  
and imagined those cigarettes,  
each one a signal fire warning  
of all the drops ahead.

## **Toward Cheyenne**

Roiling clouds, grey as the mountains,  
spill across sky, over the plains.

Farmhouses wrecked by the violence of wind:  
mute warning for those still stuck to earth.

A blizzard's first kiss bends roadside grasses,  
travels through tires and axle to my palms

clutching the wheel. I don't remember cars  
or birds. Every minute the colors bleed

toward an iron uniformity.  
I forget to believe in gravity.

## Why Cars Have Brakes

You wanted to ride horses on the beach.  
All down the PCH it kept coming up.  
You were in no hurry to be back in LA,  
but I was in a rush to see it all even though  
that meant racing through everything  
we saw that long July Pacific afternoon.  
And then you got cancer and survived  
and changed your life and moved away  
but I lost your phone number and email  
was something of a novelty back then.  
And now twenty years later I'd give  
a genie's wish to have ridden those horses  
with you that day that sped so fast I can't even  
remember what it was like to drive the PCH.

## Roadside Attractions

The desert stretches its paws in endless forevers.

Vultures and hawks circle overhead  
eyeing faded billboards advertising  
diners gone since the seventies.

Echoes of the ancient world tumble  
over rock, spill down through time.  
Coyotes call those who never come,  
hang up when no one answers.

This billion-year-old ocean sea still can drown,  
though the water now just floats as clouds.

I walk from my car, leave it unlocked.  
I walk over scrub grass desperate for water.  
I walk toward rocks painted by ancient hands.  
I walk over fish, seaweed, dinosaurs, meteorites.  
I walk into time made visible, layered and worn.  
I walk until sunset when stars begin to burn my skin.

I get in the car, drive to the next town,  
find a motel and watch a ballgame on TV.

## A Moment Every Morning

I hold the Styrofoam cup  
near my face, inhale  
the coffee's warmth.

There's a painted sky,  
seven shades of blue  
that don't exist at home.

The road is out there waiting,  
but I'd rather stay a moment here  
in this lonely motel parking lot,  
in this forest service campground,  
on this broken desert roadside.

If only for a moment,  
I'll savor the highway sky.

Clouds brighten in the morning chill,  
voices call; the road asks, a ribbon  
twisting endless toward the day.

I hold the cup to my lips  
and drink.

## **East in Winter**

The sky is the east  
bound highway. Winter  
trees hold hawks.

How many miles  
can we run  
without radio?

The engine fades,  
the rumble of the road,  
its hypnosis.

Weave in and out  
between trucks.  
There's more freeway

as much ahead  
as behind.

## **Sonnet Found in a Road Atlas**

Austin, Waco, West, San Antonio  
Carlsbad, Aztec, Shiprock, Tucumcari  
Laredo, Lubbock, Winnie, Amarillo  
Cortez, Santa Fe, Vail, Mesa Verde  
Dime Box, Bellville, Waxahatchie, Reno  
Abilene, Dalhart, Nogales, Yuma  
Houston, Dallas, Kayenta, El Paso  
Mexican Hat, Show Low, Heber, Ozona  
Jerome, Sedona, Grants, Truckee, Tahoe  
Chinle, Tuba City, Prescott, Parker  
San Jose, Monterrey, Palm Springs, Pueblo  
Boulder, Tucson, Flagstaff, Port Arthur  
Texas, New Mexico, and then Arizona  
Colorado, Utah, on to California

## Down from the Mountains

sharks circle above  
the sunroof illuminated by  
lightning

skyscrapers like graves  
sprout on the plains  
where there is no water  
only  
cities  
made of dreams

water explores the openings  
sniffing around  
this conquistadors  
paradise mud and rain

blown in from distant  
western deserts fall  
without mercy  
without  
end

the wipers slap it away  
as we race down  
from the mountains  
before  
it  
turns  
to  
snow

## Southwestern Missouri

how clear the water flows  
between the sky and stone

imagine a perfect word  
explaining math or love  
whispered years ago

known only now  
as fading echo

ringing off blasted stone  
where hills were  
sliced for highways

the memory of that clarity  
flows along the interstates  
over fossil stones

## Night at the Interstate Diner

I ran in circles that turned into spirals leading me  
back to the same crowds I hoped to escape.  
These crowds gathered around holes in the ground,  
at truck stops and on famous San Francisco street corners  
where they offered drugs and hookups. Did you know  
a straight line inscribed on a sphere is a circle?  
Driving deep into the night chasing headlights  
flickering with bugs, the circles became too much  
and I sought crowds in muddy-tile interstate diners  
offering tired-eyed cigarette and coffee warmth.  
Not conversation, rather a simple acknowledgement  
that we're all of us out here, millions, a crowd  
dispersed along asphalt lines and stretched so thin  
we hardly seem a crowd. But at night, we're  
all in the same place. Tired alone worn out  
and looking for others to remind us that we're  
not the last ones left. Out there, beyond the pooling  
rest stop lights, there is nothing. Nobody  
you'd want to meet. It's warm here. Stay with us.  
Listen to these whispered stories. We'll all be moving on  
come morning, a crowd stretched again to the breaking,  
forgetful and perhaps just a little embarrassed  
that we needed to come together in the long last night.

## The Golden Road

It was Fire on the Mountain. We listened, wrapped in the crackling hiss of some old tape. I imagined the strange highway to that sound.

We almost turned around before Texarkana, the night so dark. In Little Rock, morning cereal and the knowledge that we'd make Knoxville if we didn't stop.

In Arlington we walked among the graves. The dead we didn't come to hear haunted us to the Dead we knew were dying.

Fleeting guitar moments, experience and wisdom gathered into song blew out on the wind, smoke in the air, mountaintop flames. A little bit of music called us east across a country to hear something beautiful and true but fading into darkness.

## Surrender

When the headlights  
struck the stars

and the radio de-tuned  
to static songs,

the highway dropped  
away and clouds

grew shapes across  
the galaxies below my tires.

And though my hands  
still gripped the wheel,

I was now a passenger.



Part Three

## **Deeper into Texas**



## **A Texas Highway in Springtime**

The soaring hawks who patrolled this highway  
through the winter watched as wildflowers grew.  
As if the sky were napping on the earth,  
the fields in spring explode in deepest blue.

Fields mirror sky and fill with the shadows  
of hawks and vultures flying through flowers.  
Bipedal hairless apes swarm through the fields,  
teeth bared, pointing rectangles at each other.

In just a few more weeks, the bluebonnets  
will wither and be swallowed by the grass.  
Then the soaring hawks will get their fields back  
as, ignoring green, the apes just drive on past.

## **Highway 73 to Port Arthur**

salted trees die slow gray  
along the hurricane highway

a black waterline stretches  
miles across lifeless woods

## I-10 Eastbound

chasing a centerline  
yellow and fast  
it splits through our dreams  
but holds us together  
static  
feedback of a punk rock soundtrack  
noise and tears

in that midnight gas station  
we were invisible without cowboy hats

eighty? ninety?  
outrunning even thought  
darkness settles all around  
artificial green cheese moonlit skies  
above the glittering refineries  
seventy miles past Houston  
middle of nowhere  
cold air  
heavy winds  
guitar feedback on the radio  
then a dying country station  
and the whispers of a song

(that first time I wore tie dye)  
this road never ends  
(now I wear a suit and tie)  
it always leads to that same funeral home  
(always tears in all these eyes)  
in the bayous of east Texas

I listen to your stories  
I try to catch your tears

I can't

keep driving

exhale

centerline divides the highway

that makes us one

## Road Stones

the road to Houston  
firewheels and sunflowers sway  
along the shoulder

-

post oak savannah  
a flock of scissor-tails flies  
south down the Brazos

-

wildflowers grow  
thick where the roadside burned  
last summer's flames

just east of Houston  
laughing gulls replace vultures  
this raucous sky

-

grackles rise and fall  
leaves in the wild slipstream  
passing trucks

## Deeper into Texas

On a high plains concrete ribbon  
(there is nothing) north of Amarillo,  
telephone poles stand like crucifixes  
after the condemned have blown away.

*It's like a whole other country*

On the plains of San Jacinto, a story unfolds  
in blood, in oil, where Houston routed Santa Ana.  
Hundred years go by, blood dries,  
and oil gushes forth from Spindletop.

*Recoiling back to sacred ground*

An obelisk marks the battle field,  
but the great refineries offering smoke, fire,  
filth to heaven hide it from I-10. These are  
the real monuments here: the refineries,

*The highways*

Rolling on to San Antone—overpriced margaritas,  
overdone river walk and Hard Rock Café—once  
Mexico's northern town, we visit the birthplace  
of our finest ghosts. Remember that old Alamo?

*Legends larger than life*

Shrine to Texas heroes and the arrest  
of Ozzy Osbourne, the church still stands—  
tomb of Crockett, Travis, Bowie—besieged  
now by hotels, offices, power lines.

*Sparking into lucid dreams*

They say there's another Alamo near Del Rio,  
made for a John Wayne movie set. More real than  
the real one, the screams of ghosts and musket fire  
still echo, reverberating loudest at the fake Alamo.

*Drowned out by open windows*

Stopping in at Luckenbach, we down a round of beers.  
No one really lives here, but folks come out on Sundays  
singing songs by Willie, Waylon and the boys.  
Throw back a couple beers with passing strangers.

*Let the journey be the story*

Under these stars, above old dinosaur bones and  
Indian camps, traveling interstate lifelines like  
blood through arteries, we find freedom on the  
highways, concrete and legend forever

*Bind this place to myth*

## Roadside Artifact #1

Along a southeast Texas highway, alone in a field, a missile points into a blue sky from behind a screen of trees, their lower trunks blackened in a perfect line by Hurricane Ike's saltwater surge. The missile's joints are rusted and whatever markings may once have identified it and warned away godless commies and damned Yankees are long faded leaving behind a tattered egret-white coat of peeling paint. No identifying information lurks at the base unless it's been swallowed by the grasses of the coastal plain that in a less droughty spring would now be alive with the ten thousand shades of a wildflower revolution.

a rusted missile  
aimed toward the springtime sky  
windblown prairie grass

## Since *Lonesome Dove*

Between prairie fire, buffalo and wind  
few trees could live here, but some  
survived, tall oaken islands over grass.  
And when I drive up 183 toward Abilene  
some old oak might catch my eye, a tree  
hundreds of years old. Settlers might have  
known such a tree, Comanches too.  
And ever since reading *Lonesome Dove*,  
I can't help but wonder at the hard miles  
crossed in eyeblink time and what horse  
rustlers may once have hanged  
from those branches, legs twitching  
in the terrible and lonely space above  
the springtime blooming wildflowers.

## North Through Fog

wheels rumble  
the empty space between  
night and dawn

a grey ocean over the plains  
ghostly signs manifest mysterious  
and vanish

punk rock radio  
sonic wind pushing outward  
a star core against the smothering  
gravity of staying

fog covers escape  
routes and all directions  
are equal

roads disappear into mist  
farm and field, town and school,  
fast food off ramp, neon lights—  
Wichita Falls



Part Four

## **All Roads Lead Here**



## Miles (Never Once Imagined)

And we drove for miles.  
And we watched those miles  
drift away beyond the clouds.

We saw the miles quicken in the purpling sky  
above the mountains, rising like beasts  
from the steam coming off the engine  
outside Albuquerque, again near Palm Springs.

Roofless, without doors, we raced away  
from Vegas with just eighteen dollars,  
leftover pizza and half a cup of quarters  
jingling in the empty back seat.

So we only stayed five hours in L.A.  
In the desert that night, surrounded by the  
hiss of a cooling engine, we both finally saw  
the miles to the stars.

Humbled and freezing in the imagined terror  
of that Mojave midnight, I never considered  
the miles still to come nor the people with whom  
I would travel them.

Just then,  
just there,  
everything was right.

We had mountains to climb  
and never once imagined  
we would change our minds.

## **We Talk of Trains**

Road signs riddled with bullet holes,  
executed for the mathematical precision  
with which they spell out isolation,  
define and witness the desert loneliness.

We talk of oceans, beaches beyond horizons,  
valleys hidden in the mountains, extinct volcanoes,  
ruins and the railroad tracks following the highway.

A crumpled taco wrapper flutters up from the backseat.  
Someone grabs it before it escapes out the window.  
Dust devils swirl outside, wrestling earth and sky,  
spinning proof that everything only wants to escape.

We talk our dreams in circles, always  
winding up at the same rest stop, a teepee-shaped  
gas station, the movie we'll make when we get home.

A train rumbles alongside us; sharp-edged  
graffiti decorates boxcars. We wonder about people  
who painted their anger on a train in Saint Louis  
only to watch it disappear into the desert.

## Albuquerque

Walking low streets, I breathe mountains, morning  
air steals into my lungs like piñon smoke.  
Soon desert warmth will rule the day. Fiery  
storm clouds burn balloons navigating highways  
in the sky. I walk conquistador paths,  
missionary streets wind past adobe  
homes, pueblo bungalows. I imagine  
living here. This walk starts an audition,  
a yearlong romance with this desert town  
made perfect by the fact it isn't home.  
Between the Sandias and the desert,  
the river and the roads, a place to stop.  
Breakfast in a warm welcoming diner:  
bagel and cream cheese with fresh green chilies.

## Roadside Artifact # 2

Near Meteor Crater, a collision of rusted old cars lies strewn across the high desert plateau. It's very picturesque, those ruined cars with the San Francisco Peaks in the blue haze background. You imagine these cars were ejecta kicked up by that meteor that impacted this same land all those millennia ago. So then these cars are not from our time but perhaps belonged to those ancient humans who surely lived and drove and disappeared long before the Anasazi. These cars speak to us like the statue of Ozymandias: *Look on my wrecks, ye restless, and drive.* We recognize our future in the past. These will be our cars someday when our stories will be as unknowable as the weeds sprouting in the protective shelter of these rusted dreams.

desert weeds  
scratch against rust  
lost freeways

## Canyon de Chelly

Indian drums pounding  
heartbeats for paying tourists  
ripple the fabric of our tent

night falls slow drums fade—  
dreams of bears and annotated  
histories of faded dangers

come sunrise woodsmoke and coffee  
the whooshing collapse of tents  
engines mumbling readiness

we drive the rim and hike  
down to the White House Ruins  
you trail your fingers along the stone

I look through my camera  
search for what Ansel Adams found  
in those Anasazi lines

I struggle to compose his vision  
in my viewfinder while Navajo men  
sell dream catchers chuckling as they watch

## **In Navajo Country**

Cars were rare along the highway  
On that day of dusty miles.  
You came up a ridge behind us to  
Observe our speedy passing.  
Through the rearview, we watched you  
Emerge, then fade back into the desert.

## The Wonder

Against northern Arizona's canyon sky,  
we stare down at the world below.  
Toothpick trees cling to canyon sides;  
a hawk screeches out its call.  
Sunlight catches the Colorado—  
a momentary thread of fire as the  
lights of Bright Angel ignite,  
a beckoning starlight on the farther shore.  
If I hold my breath and hold your hand  
and the clouded sky grows gears to slow  
the hours into eons, we could pause  
erosion and hold the moment grinning  
through all the changes and the years,  
the road to Flagstaff, Vegas, L.A., home.

## Bright Vegas

The day the desert was destroyed, water  
sucked from distant rivers sprayed through the sky,  
and cars bore pilgrims, moths to the flame,  
sedated by slot-machine lullabies.

The stars all tumbled to earth, outshone by  
neon casinos and fountains of light  
while roulette chances to change everything  
spun against the darkest of desert nights.

Now, unheeded prayers to dollars drift down  
from the mouths of those ghostlike survivors,  
mumbling dreams into urns full of quarters  
as taillights depart in night's brightest hours.

Boys with flyers for prostitutes jostle  
the stars, shouted down from celestial heights.  
Barely burning, they stagger slow down the Strip  
cursing this blaze, this apocalypse of light.

## All Roads Lead Here (L.A. Stones)

a hundred miles out  
the glow of Los Angeles  
desert starlight

-

waves and foam  
erasing her name  
from the sand

-

the sun falls to sea  
here at the end of the road  
nothing left to say

## At Night

Three stars pierce the fog  
above this lonely place.  
Waves crash on the tired shore.  
When the sun rises, if ever it does,  
where will we be then?  
...in California?  
...in love?  
Or standing barefoot in the salt foam,  
stilled  
by the wonder of it all.

## All the Way

Asphalt miles vanish beneath ever-thinning treads.  
Sometimes a truck passes and the car trembles.  
The truck fades, a memory in the rearview mirror,  
and in that distance behind us, we see freedom.  
In the miles between radio stations, voices crackle  
from Mexico from Flagstaff, islands in a static soundtrack.  
The lines on the map folded on the dash become  
highways through the desert, the smile on your lips.  
From pine-shrouded campgrounds to painted ruins,  
roadside motels to cars wrecked and rusting in the desert,  
and in the night-crashing waves of the western shore,  
we learn the meaning of these secret messages:  
rhythm of wheels, music of static, your hand on my knee,  
the elegant whisper of trucks traveling the other way.



Part Five

## **Closer to Home**



## **Closer to Home**

I drag my tired sweating body high up Enchanted Rock, stare out through the wind at what surely thrilled the Comanche in their day. From this rock in the near sky, I can see the ancient highway stretching gray to the horizons. I remember oceans on each end, all the stories written in the asphalt and the sky between. Civilization seems so long gone only the old man in the ranger's hat remembers anything but vultures, yet home lies just over that hill, down that endless road.

## Road Stones Around Austin

highway overpass  
the city becomes geometry  
resisting the fog

-

black birds huddle  
against the leeward sides  
of highway signs

-

the sky throws hailstones  
pinging and cracking my car  
lightning rips the clouds

a red-tailed hawk sits  
on the traffic camera  
eyes on the highway

-

windshield wipers  
slap the gray curtain  
taillights fade

-

rain snicks the windshield  
a monolog of keyboard clicks  
books I'm not writing

## Legend of the Wanderer, Part II

The wanderer prays for all the roadkilled animals at least once a day. He's done this for a long time, and it's his habit now. He bums smokes when he can. He sees (and sometimes sets with a careless flick of the butt) summer wildfires that scorch the shoulder or the median. Coming around again in springtime, he sees the wildflowers growing best where the roadside had burned. This makes him feel important. In the summertime he rests among the roadside prairie grasses and huddles under bridges in winter. Someday he will get where he's going. He hopes he'll know it when he gets there. But he has been on the highway for years. You've seen him on your errands around town and kept on driving. He doesn't mind. Loneliness and solitude are his beans and beer. He knows this is how songs are made, where they come from. Maybe he wants to find a home and forsake the road, or maybe these are his wandering years, and he is in no hurry. I see him and offer some food and water and wish him well.

## Three Prayers for the Dead

baby bird  
struggles for the sky  
wheels crunch bone

-

windshield rain  
roadside deer skeleton  
in lush grass

-

black vulture  
a squirrel's wet fur  
rain-slick road

## Chasing Westward

The vultures are heading west, their slow flying  
shadow grace just an illusion of the blank sky.

Clock them. They're racing away fast as thought.  
Faster than often-repeated certainties and fears.

They escape with gizzards full, hurtling toward the sun,  
shuttling some soul's nourishing remains westward.

Out there, I hope, they'll catch the day that never ends,  
the place, I believe, night will never fall.

After sunset, I hear the rumbling highway, cars  
chasing westward, chasing dreams, the fading light.

## Angels

if there are angels  
they must be egrets

brilliant  
through the morning  
highway sky

## Most Beautiful Thing

highway, the highway, oh beautiful thing  
flowing under a circling sky  
our son asleep, eastbound  
wildflower spring, old prairie towns

flowing under a circling sky  
blackland prairie, gnarled oaks  
wildflower spring, old prairie towns  
cedar along barbed wire fence rows

blackland prairie, gnarled oaks  
long rolling hills, windblown grass  
cedar along barbed wire fence rows  
speeding trucks, dusty roads

long rolling hills, windblown grass  
our son asleep, eastbound  
speeding trucks, dusty roads  
highway, the highway, oh beautiful road

## For Gasoline

Her name was Gasoline;  
she was my goddess.

I chased her down highways  
and through years.

Driven mad by her  
perfume and shimmer,

her invitation to ride,  
whispers of adventure.

She ran me a twisted road  
to strange cities until

somewhere in the traffic,  
the heat of endless delay,

I stopped  
and forgot the road.

But she's still out there and  
though her name is cursed,

she still smells like freedom  
and wild younger days.

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## **About the Author**

James Brush lives in Austin, TX where he teaches high school English. He can be found online at *Coyote Mercury* (coyotemercury.com) and Twitter @jdbrush. He also edits the online literary journal *Gnarled Oak*.

Also by James Brush:

*A Place Without a Postcard*

*Birds Nobody Loves*

*The Corner of Ghost & Hope*