ROAD SIGN SUITE
ERIC PAUL SHAFFER
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Across America and Again
Other Titles by Eric Paul Shaffer

kindling: Poems from Two Poets
Longhand Press, 1988; co-author, James Taylor III

RattleSnake Rider
Longhand Press, 1990

How I Read Gertrude Stein by Lew Welch
Grey Fox Press, 1996

Instant Mythology
Backer Editions, 1999

Portable Planet: Poems
Leaping Dog Press, 2000

Living at the Monastery, Working in the Kitchen: Poems
Leaping Dog Press, 2001

You Are Here
Obscure Publications, 2004

Lahaina Noon: Na Mele O Maui
Leaping Dog Press, 2005

The Felony Stick
Leaping Dog Press, 2006

Burn & Learn, or Memoirs of the Cenozoic Era
Leaping Dog Press, forthcoming 2008
“Li vilains dit an son respit
que tel chose a l'an an despit
qui molt vult mialz que l'an ne cuide . . .”

Chretien de Troyes
Erec et Enide

“Not I, not anyone else can travel that road for you,
You must travel it for yourself.”

Walt Whitman
Song of Myself

“Trails go nowhere.
They end exactly
where you stop.”

Lew Welch
“I liking Poem/ High Sierra”
There is a promise here:

an octagonal imperative,
    a portent of fire in a Biblical sky,
    emphatic, but never final.

Followed not by points or punctuation,
    preceded rather
by an indefinite article of faith,

it decrees a motionless moment: one.

Once done, move on.
YIELD

I remember the old golden ones
pointing into the earth:
to get on the highway
you must give--
respect to the speed of the other cars present
courtesy to the other drivers
concentration to the road.

The passenger sometimes reads
or invents the rules of the road aloud:
"Nod to the other drivers.
Learn the right-of-way by granting it.
Signal your direction for turns
or changing lanes . . ."

look:
let the flow of traffic guide you--
letting go is getting in
as when you drift to sleep,
but it's not "highway hypnosis"
ensnaring the driver dulled
by white waves of concrete
drawing head and hand to the shoulder
and down the embankment--

there is a price for the dream; every dreamer remembers
the inexorable price of the dream--
the highway is a vivid waking dream of daylight--
  concrete and speed,
  white lines for three lanes,
  lost hubcaps,
torn twisted tires on the roadside
  (abandoned like the molten skins of snakes),
  multilateral signs in many hues,
  and syntactic mystery

  "... always know your route,
    and watch for signs for your destination."

Remember the last word before the driver
  entering the highway:
    YIELD.
  The new red and white triangles
flank the ramp sloping to the highway
  as you take your first direction.
Headlights reveal all I see

of a tarmac road in Texas--
red eyes glow and go,
rapid into roadside brush.

Rufus asleep pursues a dream beast,
paws twitching on slick upholstery.
I smooth hair on his great chest,
and he settles deeper into sleep.

Alone on the road,

the only way to tell the sky
from the ground is the bounds
of the horizon circling where the stars end.

High-beams from the car
light a sign down the highway.
The reflective little circles
constellate into words in my headlights.

All drivers read these expanding metal rectangles,
yet no other sign would disturb me more.
The shoulder black and bare for an hour
as I followed lines blankly through the dark,
and then the strange imperative to the lone driver:

see the sign,
read the words,
state the law.

The sign darkens as I pass,
and the sun crosses beneath me through the earth
as midnight changes days in the dark:
the only difference is the distance I’ve come.

The dog’s tail curls over his eyes,
and I explore both halves of the night,
a black sign behind me on the concrete line,
making my way as I go.
WATCH FOR FALLING ROCK

No one ever watches or even looks
for rock in the sky.

Gambling that catastrophe visits
only the distant and the deserving,
drivers corner inches from rippling granite.

I can see over the wheel
the summits of rude valleys
hammered into mountains with dynamite blows.

Yellow oil-crusted equipment gobbled the debris
and heaved the rubble over the hill,
smoothing the earth for swifter machines.

I wonder at the other drivers who know only
the sky is suspended
above the moving earth.
BRIDGE FREEZES
BEFORE ROAD

A bridge is a communication:
   an exchange between two opposite
   facing planes of rock.

Space embraces the bridge;
   temperature controls the passage.
   In warm air, a bridge expands to grip the distance
   between elevated separated edges.

   above

Cold, wind chills the surface
   and

below:

frost completes the concrete reach.

Accustomed to clear, civil highway over stone-boned earth,
   the unwarned driver wakes
   on a sudden span of ice.

A conversation stills, cooling: words will no longer do.

A bridge smoothes with silver: a driver tightens on the wheel.
   Four tires no longer grip.

A road may be an escape.
ROAD WORK AHEAD

The passenger says,
    “Anyone can see that.”
Instead, I decide it is not obvious.

Ripping down the highway
    at extra-legal speeds,
road works arrive too suddenly
    without a sign.

I’ve never driven a road
    without finding orange
    every hundred miles:
    flaming color of construction,
hard hats and vinyl vests glowing
    near glowing cones and barrels,

a geometry of building and breaking,
    rising and setting,
    color of destruction,
    always burning
where forms are cast anew,
    color of my old pack of poetry
    and dirty clothes,
    color of the limits of the passage.

Tighten hands on the wheel to guide
    the vehicle through the narrow way:
    it’s done.

Another hundred miles of highway turn before the wheel.
THINK

a big, black, bold warning
   in a huge yellow diamond
poised on one point
   driven into the ground:
    THINK.

a poet designed this sign
   in a gray blank glass building
coagulate in a city's heart:
   his superiors could not read it.

a prisoner painted the steel sheet,
traced the letters as bars of unequal length
   with a yardstick
he returned to the state unread.

a highway worker erected the sign
in the dirt by a two-lane road to Death Valley:
   he read the word backward
in the rear-view mirror of a county truck.

a blaze in black and yellow
   in the sun below sea level:
road and sky dust each other so dry
   the tongue bleeds sympathy.
    Heed the sign.
DANGEROUS INTERSECTION

Roads intersect at random angles:
   degrees depend on terrain.
Topography determines all about the construction
   of a road:
over hills and valleys,
   through mountains and rivers,
roads caper at geography's command;
motors endure the toil.

Every driver must bear the crossroad
   in mind
and watch for traffic more or less than opposite
to his own way.
Often two roads converge suddenly
   in some dark summer wood
where the bold black rubber skid ends
   at the halted heated wheel.

Angry drivers curse each other
   at blind intersections
and averted collisions
while Saint Christopher spins on a silver chain
   pendant from the mirror,
snapping like a road-stone on the windshield.

"Intersections are dangerous," says the passenger,
"only to drivers
   who forget
there are other roads."
HITCH-HIKERS MAY BE ESCAPING INMATES

Each is a prisoner of time or space or both.

Yet Oklahoma warns you.
That smiling man with thumb in sky
may murder, rob, rape you.

He must certainly be your brother.

Prairie wind crosses asphalt in a brown fury.

I drive, unable to restrain my accelerating foot
or explain the extra pressure
smiling blank lifting a finger as a wave
passing a man who expected more.

I apologize to this soul, to my dog, to myself
speaking to the wheel
raving west in my motorized space.

Southern gusts batter the car like time,
and I do not look back.

I fear discovery of my own escape.
So the sign read
where the concrete stopped on Ash Street,
and in the middle of a week of work,
the ragged kids who lived in the slouching houses there
played around the post.

Below the sign, they played,
down the bank of the White River--
white only when clouds covered
the blue--
and gathered green weeds to wedge in the cracks
where the wooden post split in the sun
and circled it with string.

"This is what a sign says when it gets somewhere
someone thinks is nowhere
and wants to tell someone there’s an end
where nothing stops," I say to Rufus
watching the kids create
the mythologies of summer.

The river floats beer cans and old tires away
covering shards of tarmac the rain snaps off,
and the earth uncurls every direction around the pole.
Only cars journey to no end,
stopping at the sign.
DIP

Actually, no warning:
the highway seems even to the edge
where the eye disbelieves
the drop.

Suddenly, the infant slips from mother's knee,
a moment of suspension,
an instant of breath halted in a fall--

four thousand pounds of flight,
plus the passenger,
the dog,
and me,
hover spinning wheels over asphalt.

Baby's weight draws mother's skirt snaptight;
raw breath flies down the reedy throat
and cries out tears:
the song of a sturdy seam.

Tires yawp as concrete grips rubber,
springs recoil, shocks jolt,
the frame scrapes the lane,
and the car rocks a mile.

Glancing in the mirror,
even through the glare of the sun setting:
the road's already taut once more,
seamless to the horizon.
THICKLY SETTLED

Vermont mountains rounded like matronly breasts
in the old green sweater,
we cross the heart on the concrete strap,
passing another unexpected sign.

Do these fertile leaves conceal such a fact?
Do people really live in the old lumber
erected into dwellings in a new wood?
Do men really imagine landscapes in the shape
of women they cannot love?

Gravel stuffs the throat of the ditch by the side
of every two-lane highway,
and looking into that vertical flash of drive
discovers nothing but trunks behind trunks
behind leaves.

Trees harbor houses beneath banners of leaves
and trunks later hewn into picnic tables
for the Fourth of July
where women awaiting September 6th
grow pregnant with the food their children waste:
the kids climb their mothers like mountains
to rest on the flowered spandex
making laps of flabby th
"These are verbs," she said.

"A verb," she said, "can be modified by an adverb as an adjective modifies a noun."

She said, "Are there any questions?"

A hand waved in the middle of the row by the window.

"Yes," she said.

"Doesn't a verb kinda modify a noun kinda?"

"No," she said, "Never."

Outside, a car passed along the street cut into diamonds by the chain-link fence.

"Now stop daydreaming," she said, "and listen."
HIDDEN DRIVES

The road is open; the sky is clear,
and yet
this yellow diamond of warning.
Narrowing vision to more cautious sight,
I look twice: observing blue sky, blue road.
blue eye,
a tunnel of sky and earth.

Perhaps
in the bushes, drives to hidden houses
open like green mouths in the dark
stalking the shoulder rolling backward
in the odd elliptical one
mounted mid-windshield
and the circular one
glancing back from outside the door
reflecting the darkening blue.

Only when you look at them are they visible,
blind spots to the driving direction--
blinding at night--
thoughtless bright lights behind,
the mirrors reflect receding everywhere
the car and driver once were,
shaped by the frame of metal mounting
beveled at the edge
to cut the night
to fit the determined shape:
a tunnel into darkness receding
like the barrel of a rifle to an eye.
Maybe
the past is a gear making motion
with your life:
underdrive through the universal joint--
the spinning cylinder beneath
turning that steady hectic thrumming urge
onward:
adjust the mirror as you will,
and you may see your eye,
but then you will no longer see the road.

"The outer eye invents this hue,"
says the passenger
as twilight blooms in the running trees,
"the other eye understands:
the sky must be the source."

Glancing at the mirror to see
the coming and going,
I drive away from both--
as the highway ahead unwinds
from the horizon,
the road lifts gently, bluely as I watch.
Awakening with my head on the wheel,
I rub the night from my eyes,
take my lenses from the dash,
and the early world grows clear:
black figures on the embankment against the stars
and blue fading to lighter blue
as the sun recovers them rising--
one squats by two boxes
assembling a long pole on the ground
winding section into section.
Another stands at a tripod
wiping the lenses of the transit.
A third unfolds a map
and scans it with his hand.

The first crosses the highway before the car
to stand midway between the two
halves of the interstate
holding the pole erect:
Rufus watches him, looks at me, and turns again,
and I remember Rufus running at our rest stops
loping like a wolf through roadside brush,
barking at scents he doesn't know--
red fur flecked with gold,
white chest from chin to belly,
and a black face where brown eyes disappear at night.
"Rufus Ortus," someone said before we left,
but watching the dog run
I forgot to ask.
On top of the hill,
the map man hunches over his chart
flicking silver instruments across contour lines
as he draws or measures or plots positions.
The passenger rolls in his sleep
stretched across his green pack and my old orange one:

how often I forget
him, wondering sometimes if he's there at all,
and I recall not remembering his name
and don't remember what it is.
Turning his face to the crease in the seat,
the passenger speaks in his dream.

Aligning the instrument true to the plumb,
the surveyor squints through the lens
adjusted to the limits of the transit's power,
speaking without turning to the map man.
Pulling a notebook from a breast pocket,
he opens and writes looking down the sight again,
writes not looking away or down,
then stands and waves the pole man back
while the map man shakes his head.

The three stand in the sun,
repacking equipment as I close my notebook
and start the car
with a strange urge to name myself, and I do,
pulling from the shoulder into the slow lane
as the gravel grates, gaining speed.
Rufus watches the three as we pass, and I imagine crossing the line from the lens as we go.

The passenger sits up in the seat.

"Where are we?" he asks, scratching his head and yawning.

Rufus turns once in a circle and lays down with his head on my leg.

"Nowhere," I say laughing, "Here."
DEER CROSSING

for G.S.
this poem is for deer, too

Would that some god or goddess might bound
strong and well-armed from the brain of some poet
to grant you darkness and cast this spell
on our concrete:

"Fearless, you may await the bright beams,
ready for the mechanical gorgon
the driving of men makes.

Breathe in the silence as we start
to see our light
in your eyes.

Look on us aware and stand
still, steadfast,
to slay us with our own reflections."
DIVIDED HIGHWAY ENDS

This is the way it really happened:

The sun was setting on the road
as I drove through Pennsylvania
   and darkness gathered dust
   in the four corners of my eyes
   squinting westward making time.

On the right, beyond the shoulder,
a high rock face turned before
   to behind us,
split suddenly in a vertical chasm
   that descended beneath the level
the highway ran
revealing a red road
   surfaced by the sun
descending in the other direction.

Speeding by the narrow cut,
my eyes lured from the light of the highway ahead
by the sudden ear-raising nose-pointing
   sight of the dog:
a runner, shirtless with blue shorts,
leaning forward with lightly closed fists,
sinews bunching above the knee
as the reaching toe
   found the ground,
appeared running on the red the other way.
A still moment at 60:
he raised his eyes to mine,
raised an open hand in a single wave simultaneously,
recognizing the touch;
still at 60, the valley closed at once,
and my hand came down of its own accord
and rested on the crest of the dog.

Sun down,
spitting colors like blessings on the bony clouds,
I knew the poise of a moment--
dusk becomes dawn but still dusk,
a twilight as eternal
as the runner poised in air
before his foot descends
to touch the earth for further flight.

At the truck stop,
filling the tank, I told the sleepy passenger
about our wave at sunset.
He kept working his way through his belongings,
seeking something he wanted
but never found that night
in his dusty green pack in the backseat.
The tank was full
when he emerged and stood by the car.
"No one will believe it," he said,
locking the door.
STOP AHEAD

At the intersection in the distance, the four-way stop before the entrance ramp, stands red hair, poise, and a purple pack, arm up with a thumb raised. "What do you think of hitch-hikers?" Says the passenger, "I've been one myself."

I turn the wheel to the pavement's edge, and she bends to look in and speak. Rufus sniffs, and she puts her hand on his crest, petting him lightly: "Where you headed?"

Rufus licks her ear. "West, until I'm out of gas," I say. The passenger laughs in the backseat. "Everybody is," she says, opening the door and throwing the pack in. Rufus jumps over the seat as she slides into the car. "Shall we go?"

Returning to the road, dirt spins from the wheels and dust in through the windows.
She wipes her face with a green bandanna
  as I regain the bright concrete,
       the hitch-hiker, the passenger,
and Rufus scenting rabbits
       hidden in the brush by the road.

  "Are you hungry?
Saw a sign about three miles back.
       A cafe’s coming up.
       Sixty miles, sixty minutes.”

  "I know," she says,
looking at sage and cactus too white
       to be green in the sun.
       "Sure. Let’s go eat."

She glides her hand through the slipstream
       of the car,
       turning up and down and up
a wing in a wave through the wind.
       She smiles.

  "Fine," I say,
  "It’s almost noon anyway."
SLIPPERY WHEN WET

Times like these,
a highway becomes the concrete passage
from one memory to another:
Rufus at rest, his wet muzzle on my thigh
& the car cruises the cement stream
where chrome fins glint changing lanes,
mirror of the other bright to blinding
then dark moving ahead.

Rufus barks at the wind in the passenger window
as he barks into the clear current
of the river by the highway in Vermont,
dips his nose to his eyes
to snatch the little fish,
silver couplets in the stream
bed of stones
flick fins to spin
into green weeds dancing.

Rufus wades to the center.
Water smooths the hair against his chest,
ripples away from splashing paws
as he laps the river dripping,
drinking to drop the level
for skimming minnows.
But I bathe and rise to gently toe the stones,
climb the tangled bank to the car
and call the dog
who splashes the sun to pieces of water
and scrambles up the rocks,
knick-knocking down into the flow
a few small pops and bubbles.

Speed or slow I go alone,
away from a glide of schooling cars
when windshield spots of water slide the dust aside
like now.

The road shines where the rain rides,
my wheels round black tongues
lapping the road flow,
the slip streaming of the tongue,
the sliding on the street.

DETOUR AHEAD
We pause by the local baseball diamond.
    Lights illuminate the field
in the coming darkness,
    but there are no players.

"It actually gleams under that black sky,"
says the hitch-hiker.

"It certainly is bright," I say.
"It's empty," says the passenger.

Laughing, the hitch-hiker says,
    "But I can almost hear the crowd."

The passenger says,
"Somebody should turn out the lights."

"They will," I say.

The traffic light burns green,
    and we drive on.
ROUGH ROAD

Rocking along a gravel road
backwoods in Michigan,
sleeping, I hear
the hitch-hiker
speak to the mirror
to the passenger:

"I was living with a poet--
an older guy with heart trouble--
one night
a thump in the hallway,
and he was gone."

"A heart attack?"
says the passenger.

She glances at him and the dog
backseat in the mirror,
says,

"A stroke. A vessel in his brain
broke. He left me nothing
he said he would.
So I'm out
on the road."

Under the car, stones
rattle and crash in the wells
of the wheels.

Afternoon pulses
through sleep in my ear.
PATROLLED BY AIRCRAFT

Too many thoughts of men with wings
ingender the notion of God or gods
turning great eyes on us
through microscopes focusing down.

The truckers looking up name it
"the eye in the sky,"
and the passenger points
when sun silvers the plane.

Today is bright and blue,
and men who might fly to any height
or any distance they choose
monitor our slow progress on the ground.
POWER LINES OVERHEAD

"How typical," says the hitch-hiker, 
"to suspend lines of power in the sky on poles."

Near the construction site, 
the sign warns operators of heavy equipment 
not to tangle metal claws 
in the vast web of power above the continent.

"I want power closer to earth 
than black lines of public utility allow 
when current flows through old pennies 
and charges for power surge."

"Lines are only channels" says the passenger, 
pointing to white highway lines. 
"Are those close enough to the ground for you?"

"That's not what I mean," she says, 
"power rains down on all of us 
from the sun every day. Look around. 
Plenty for everyone."

In the mirror, she catches my eye 
where I slouch in the back-seat listening 
with my notebook open on my knee, 
dozing with a pen in hand.

"There's the power I want to see," she says, 
"Something we can all understand."
DO NOT THROW
BURNING OBJECTS

This warns the gods
we make ourselves
when we raise signs for each other
as screens against the view,
seeing only
yellow paint on the steel
and not the ground beyond.

Lightning bolts, falling stars,
and balls of fire cast to earth
remind these drivers of little
lives rolling through the country
of California
all the land is brown and gold
--trees, beer bottles, skin, cars, grass--

and the danger of fire rises
beyond our desire
to prevent the flames
harvesting the hot and dry
from earth broken and burning,
even fertile enough
for the dreams of the rest of the world.
NO SHOULDER

Calls to mind
the vision of a severed head
held aloft by the locks and a bloody hand
to petrify heroes
and free virgins from monsters in the sea.

Driving down the road in America,
the meaning is simpler:
the edge of highway falls
too sharply to leave the lane safely
no matter what the emergency.

The sign makes the road severe
and resolutely less
than my favorite childhood phrase implies--
"the whole wide world."

This grim black line through Dakota hills
transforms, becomes
an infinitely narrow beast
upon whose back we ride.
OVERLOOK

Off the highway, at the edge, there is only desert.

Pink, orange, red, and brown plains and buttes
beneath a sky scoured blue.

The horizon is a line and a hard, dry wind
rattling tumbleweeds reluctant to tumble.

"Man, there's nothing here," says the passenger.

The cliff plummets to the unseen from the guardrail,
and everything in the world is beyond us.
GUSTY WINDS MAY EXIST

The road silvers and stretches  
in two empty lanes  
to an empty horizon.

Rufus and the passenger sleep  
in the back seat.  
The hitch-hiker is languid in the heat.

The mountains fade into the haze  
behind us,  
and the prairie shimmers  
beneath a heartless blue.

I read the sign aloud, too bored  
to be silent.

Eyes closed, head back, the hitch-hiker  
speaks, plainly.  
simply, she says,  
"Well, yeah, they may."

END DETOUR
UNDULATIONS

Adam thought the Earth flat
as he slunk through the circular walls
of warm green Eden,
and so did his sons
who paved the road from the garden,
rolling the surface level,
even to the horizon:
constellations of the broken bones of the Earth
crushed into the sticky sap from underground
glinting like stars in sunlight
or headlights.

Still on the surface of the old road by the zoo,
there are waves,
solid chassis-rattling waves.
Cars braking make them,
for cars brake unevenly,
and the varying pressure buckles macadam,
even the most densely crushed against the dirt;
soon the street rolls like breakers to a beach.

“A true straight line exists only in geometry,” I say,
raising my head to look into the backseat
where the passenger lies.
The tarmac waves jolt the car rolling too quickly
over the imaginary level of the street.
The voice of the passenger jerks as the seat pounds his back:
“Waves are the two-dimensional
representation of a spiral.
An extra dimension proves that.”
Braking for the light only builds the waves
   and jars the car, waking the dog
   who hangs his head from the window
yawning at a street rippling with heat.
   I remember when the Earth was flat
   and God modeled the universe
from the head of a man
   wondering at a new dimension.
Rufus raises his nose and ears
   as we pass the zoo, snatching the scent
of a rare beast from a distant continent.
NOT A THROUGH STREET

The Red Monk was asked by a traveler, "What is the ring of bone?" The Red Monk replied, "Inside the burger is beef; inside the bottle is beer."

But not even to my eye
does the concrete,
edged by the huge trunks of trees
wavering in shadows and bright leaves above my head
down to the minute distance
of limbs spinning from one tree to another
as we pass and disappearing under a thumb
raised red and bone before my eye
and growing larger again as I reverse my gaze,
end:
the road goes on until it fades from me,
and I pity drivers turning from the sign
never to explore
the passage where a rare driver emerges
with souvenirs of the curving distance
the road really reaches--
leaves of an autumn oak,
   petals found near a sunlit stone,
specimens of days spent
   in the system of the sun I live in,
looking closely at the great
in the small in the great,
reading pages in pebbles and leaves
opened at random
to the lines in the human hand.
A question of the soul:
We assume there is one right way.

Perhaps it's as clear
as it looks in black and white
but such extremes ignore the extremes
implied,
and after all, each extreme is one way.

When I mentioned this question to the passenger,
he pronounced,
"If there is one, there are two.
If there are two, there are many."
And I added,
"If there are many, each is one."

In my mirror, I saw all drivers faced
with two words on a rectangular instruction
and a clear direction--
each signals his turn.

Turning the wheel, I see there is one way:
one way is the way I always go.
Drivers dazed by the road all around me
check reflections in their rear-view mirrors:
the horizon creeps to the edge of the hood
and slips beneath the car:
a wave sliding out under
a wave curling in above.

The sign rocks on a portable stand--
yet even dayglow orange
can’t catch
the eye cast back
wanting to see the world appear from nowhere
from beneath the wheels.

Concrete walls the highway
sprawls into the slow lane
verges into the cruising
crossing to the fast edge:
red signals crowded force a hectic merge.

Slow drivers slow drivers
driving the flow
as fast as the road appears when watched:
the horizon leads the steady eye driving
on the edge.
The sign is far beyond where one can see
   the highway is open:
   narrowing the eye fixes the point
   connecting road and sky.

Making monuments is a physical business,
   and we have built enough
   to challenge time--
   still we expect dust.

Proclaim an end to this task,
   a time for celebration
   and admiration of effort.
Work is done: there is a new form.

*Amen.* These words, as they are, complete.
Believe other means of construction
   exist.
Seize them: build the intangible.
DANGEROUS CURVES

"What's so dangerous about curves?"
says the passenger.

Rising and banked for the multi-mile-per-hour force
leaning on my wheels in the turn,
rubber/concrete friction
draws me like gravity around an imaginary center
against a sudden loss of traction
that might send me screeching centrifugally
from the circling curve.

Even at 75, the car glides around the edge,
not even shifting on the springs.
On curves so carefully constructed,
there is no danger
when one trusts the road.

Ascending through the twist of the highway
reveals more of the road,
shows the interchange ahead,
and from here, I see the road becomes the sky
under the sun in the west.

As the curve completes its coil,
returns to the line of concrete
straight to the horizon,
the highway continues beyond,
intimating greater curves
turning past the line of sight,
tracing a greater circle
through the curve of the Earth
in orbit around the sun
revolving round a galaxy
turning around no center at all
and curving anyway.
BUMP

a warning far in advance:
the centrifugal fist of earth visible for miles,
rock fingers fold in a solid punch
beneath the asphalt--

seeing so much so far away,
speed remains even
until the blow lands in your stomach,
and the bumper grazes sparks in the lane,

slaps the frame up blue from black,
teeth closing on your tongue,
jaw stiffening:
eyes narrow and tears blur in the corners:

car still on the road,
states passing into days on the shoulder,
a sudden ascent told in sleeves wiping your eyes,
and the taste of blood on your tongue.
"How many wheels does a car need anyway?" asks the passenger.

"More than three," I say, jacking up the car on the sandy shoulder of Arizona. "Five," says the hitch-hiker.

One drives on four, yet the presence of the unseen fifth wheel, that spare in the trunk, assures the journey goes on.

The right front tire sliced by the rim hangs in black rubber strands of gorgon hair around the blank silver face of the hub cap.

Rufus pants in the shadow of the car near a hub cap filled with water the hitch-hiker set in the dust.

The passenger grapples with the atlas. "Might as well walk straight to the next exit," he says, pointing into the morning.

Seeking a wheel on foot through the general heat, I raise my thumb to the hum behind me, welcoming even the warm breeze of continuing cars.

I count and recount the wheels turning by. "How many wheels does a car need?" I say, wishing the dog was beside me to ask. "Four," I tell the desert. "At least four."
MERGE

with the highway,
the concrete way of getting somewhere,
a path of neutral color going everywhere
at once
here and then and there
beneath the wheel
a million revolutions
and ten thousand revelations
a thousand turns away.

No matter where the road goes,
my wheels take me round
the bulk of the provident planet
to where I may arrive
to see where I’ve been:
passages recorded in the passing,
changing through the passage,
as leaves turn stem to edge
in the wild windy wake of the car.

A destination distracts one
from the driving--
not driving without direction,
for to drive is to direct
your four wheels with a single wheel
in your hands,
where all is before one,
behind everywhere I’ve ever been,
but going somewhere without getting somewhere
is getting nowhere,
and drives you to the here and now--
heat rippling the road
over the engine,
bugs bashed against the glass.
arm crooked through the window
reddened,
wind rippling the hair
cooling the skin,
here and now,
right where you are.

"Once you're on the road
you're on the road always,"
says the passenger back there,
and the hitch-hiker smiles.

You are the road,
mapping concrete constellations
where each of us creates
the figure of a self
by driving lines across,
around the continent,
an atlas with an index
beneath the weight
of all the concrete
you've ever driven,
and getting there is getting nowhere
because getting there
you find an end no end,
knowing that you've been here
and now before
always anyway.
END

No road can do this.

Try it: follow the pavement to this sign.

Can you still turn
right,
left,
around?

The road is gray infinity
around the turning
and returning wheel.
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Paul Shaffer is the author of five books of poetry, most recently Lahaina Noon: Na Mele O Maui, which received an “Award of Excellence” in the 2006 Ka Palapala Po‘okela Book Awards of the Hawai‘i Book Publishers Association.

Shaffer received the 2002 Elliot Cades Award for Literature, an endowed literary prize given yearly to an established local writer in Hawai‘i, and he won a fellowship to the 2006 Fishtrap Workshop and Retreat at Wallowa Lake, Oregon.


He lives with Veronica and a constantly shifting menagerie of companions on the sunset slope of Haleakala, among mockingbirds, cardinal, pueo, cactus and kiawe.
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