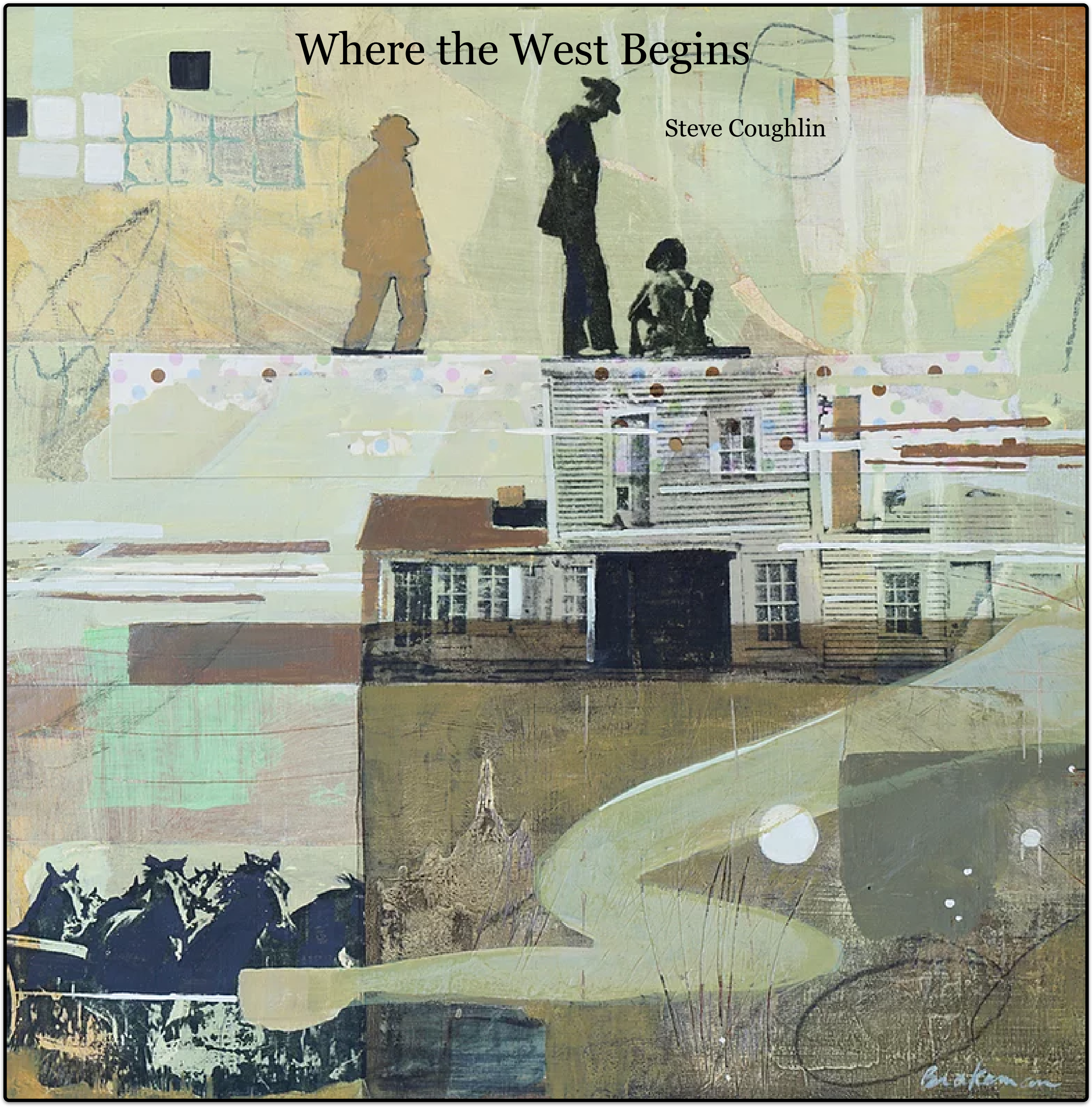
Where the West Begins
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Brakeman

Amy Brakeman Livezey
Regrets, 12” x 12”
mixed media on panel

Where the West Begins

1. First Love

It begins with a sixth-grade social studies textbook, a map of the United Sates spread between pages seven and eight. Mrs. Brown leans against the chalkboard, her right hand covered in chalk dust, making even ancient Mesopotamia sound boring. Her monotone voice flat as a ruler. Her thick eyelids blink slow in the late morning light. But sitting near the back of my alphabetized row, the greyness of Mrs. Brown's sweater, how she buttons it up each day at the beginning of class, does not matter. I have become absorbed with the thin black lines separating each American state. For the last three weeks I have been fixated with the mystery of northern Idaho pressed against the Canadian border, the ragged edge of Washington's coastline, the pointing panhandle of Oklahoma. As Mrs. Brown drones along the final minutes before lunch, before grilled cheese sandwiches and plastic cups of lime Jell-O, I become lost in small gold stars designating Pierre and Carson City as capitals, in the blue streak of the Missouri River drifting past Bismarck. My finger traces the compact drabness of each Northeastern state — I am disappointed once more by the unbearable smallness of Massachusetts, my hometown of Rockland in the cramped southeastern corner. There's no intrigue in Rhode Island or Connecticut. For me there are only the sprawling possibilities of Montana and Wyoming, the allure of the Mojave and Sonoran Deserts, mountain ranges named Sawtooth and Bitterroot, the perfect angles of Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico. I wonder at Hawaii and Alaska hovering in little squares at the bottom of page seven. I do not count these final seconds before Mrs. Brown returns to her desk; I do not lean over to pass a crudely drawn picture to Tom Carter; I do not stare at the girl whose red hair I noticed in September — lost again in the long, bending arm of California.

2. Ode to a Shitbox, 2002

It begins with a shitbox — a rusted white shitbox only a Ramen-Noodle-eating college student could love.

It begins, always, with the shitbox' engine not turning over. I tap the gas pedal, breathe deep, and look in the cracked rearview mirror. Finally there's a seat-shaking rattle, and the engine groans a plume of black smoke from the tailpipe.

Behind the passenger's seat is a pile of mixed tapes — Pink Lemonade Blues, Sad-Eyed Lady of South Dakota. In the trunk I've tossed my black duffle bag stuffed with too many t-shirts and shorts, too few socks and underwear.

It begins with my mother who never traveled west of New Hampshire, never once consulted a road map during any of our family vacations to North Conway, waving goodbye. I am 22, on the first of over 20 solitary road trips through the West — racing, always, to escape the Northeast's grip.

There's no time to think about the hours of sunflower seeds I'll chew and spit just to stay awake, the monotony of blacktop giving way to blacktop, the relentless rumble of 18-wheelers hauling 20,000 pounds of produce, the steering wheel shaking each time the speedometer rises above 60. I do not think how a few miles east of Erie I'll become so bored with Pink Lemonade Blues — my inspired pairing of Wilco and Roger Miller — I'll consider tossing the mixtape out the driver's-side window. When I pass through the urban sprawl of Chicago traffic, the endless break lights of stop and go, my car begins to overheat.

In a shitbox like this there's no air-conditioning. In a shitbox like this engine coolant leaks from a cracked hose.

Yet I am too young to think of breaking down or the possibility of an accident: my shitbox wrecked by the side of the road, glass blanketing the pavement. For me the highway, the West itself, remains safe as a road atlas. I trace its beginnings to the 100th meridian, the invisible line of longitude I learned about in college that runs from North Dakota to Texas and divides eastern and western America. It's where 19th century explorer John Wesley Powell noted rain stops falling as the landscape fades from lush to arid. It's where the pleasantly boring farms of the Midwest, acres of corn, hay, and soybean, transform into a sea of grazing cattle, where we go from sodbusters to cowboys, tame to wild — it's where the horizon never ends.

At a rest stop outside Hartford, I imagine the 100th meridian intersecting highways on my map: it crosses the thick blueness of Interstate 40 east of Amarillo. It runs parallel to a dirt road in western Kansas, a few miles west of Highway 83. Like all great adventures, the 100th meridian waits at the far edges of Nebraska and Oklahoma. It intersects the thin red line of Highway 50 entering Dodge City, Sodom of the West, alive in my mind, pressed against my finger, delivering me from everything I know.

3. Journey to the Center, 2017

It also begins with me at 38, living now in my own West, the northwest corner of Nebraska, 70 miles from Wyoming, but again returning east to the 100th meridian, following it this time north to south — from the International Peace Garden separating North Dakota from Canada to the Rio Grande's muddy water. The West begins with my back a tight knot as I pull into Rubgy, North Dakota, where a 15-foot stone monument by a four-way intersection declares this small High Plains city to be at the center of North America.

This claim has been renewed annually at Rugby's Miss Geographic Center Beauty Pageant. It's been celebrated by Rugby's chamber of commerce with "Straight Outta the Geographical Center of America" t-shirts and each fall during Rugby's Geographical Center Days. It begins in view of gas stations and fast food restaurants, and even though it's Wednesday afternoon in late July, I wait in traffic as curious travelers pull into a parking lot by the side of the road. According Rugby's chamber of commerce, if travelers stand to one side of the city erected stone monument, they've stepped into the unfailingly familiar East; if they move to the other, they've entered, thankfully, the mystery of West.

After taking photographs and reading business cards hung with thumbtacks in the kiosk, after staring for several minutes at the mess of traffic at Rugby's most popular intersection, the West begins to disappoint — the thrill of adventure diminishes. So I flip to page 77 of my Rand McNally Road Atlas to examine every possibility of North Dakota — the sky-blue thread of the Missouri River passing through Williston and New Town, the long green stretch of Theodore Roosevelt National Park with attractions like Burning Coal Vein and Chateau de Mores, the tiny triangles of Pretty Butte and Bullion Butte — even the brown blob of Sullys Hill National Game Preserve.

Because I'm on a two-week road trip tracing the West's beginnings, and because this road trip could easily be done in five days, I have hours to stare at my road atlas. Even more, I have entire days at my own discretion. So the disappointment of Rugby becomes lunch at Subway and minutes to consider the blob of Sullys Hill. It transforms into grazing bison and a scenic driving loop of basswood and bur oak. It becomes acres of sunbathing prairie dogs.

And this once again is where the West begins.

In this West the geographical center of North America resides 6.7 miles east of Sullys Hill. It's on North Dakota's State Highway 57, paralleling Devils Lake, not too far from the Spirit Lake Reservation. How can the West begin in Rugby when I'm driving with the windows down and Marty Robbins' "El Paso" blaring on the radio?

Its beginnings reside in the city of Devils Lake. They can be found on the Devils Lake strip, past McDonalds and Nellie's Bar, in a Super 8 Hotel. There the West can be purchased for $89 a night. It begins, always, with a broken deadbolt and a bed that smells like cigarette smoke. It can be found in the twenty-minute wait for Applebees takeout, the teenage hostess making sure I have a plastic fork and knife. The West becomes a couple cans of lukewarm beer, mozzarella sticks, and several hours surfing television stations. It's the passing of time watching cars and trucks fill the parking lot — watching truckers stretch their own aching backs.

It begins with me returning to my atlas, again disappointed with the neon glow of barrooms and headlights cruising the strip. Again tired of voices calling to each other in the hallway, suitcases being dragged on the carpet, and the heavy slam of motel doors. It continues as I flip page after page, the air conditioner in my room rattling loud, the television in the room next to mine blaring, wanting to escape the loneliness — the unrelenting loneliness — of all these places that the West begins.

4. Primitive Road, 2008

Then something shatters. There on a primitive road with the passenger's side windshield swinging, glass blanketing the gravel. So far from the familiarity of the interstate — it begins with something dying, a crushed frontend, Dwight Yoakam playing, as a deer drags its battered hind leg through gravel and dust.

The violent West, the one somewhere in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, begins as twilight encroaches. It's in Idaho's panhandle by a cold river, 1,100 miles west of the 100th meridian, as snow melts off the Bitterroot peaks. Here hazard lights flash but police sirens never arrive, never echo through the hills and mountains. There is no cell phone reception, the nearest town 25 miles away.

It's only me and Tamara, the girl I've been dating for a month. There's only Tamara's GMC Jimi I wrecked by driving too fast, the back filled with camping chairs and backpacks, a tent and lantern, a cooler of hotdogs and beer.

In this West the deer's neck slants at an impossible angle. It tries to stand in the middle of the primitive road. Blood trickles from its jaw. Its motor oil eyes blink slowly. In this West Tamara's arms and legs bleed from cuts, tiny shards cover her brown-blonde hair as a pendulum of glass swings above her seat.

There's nothing romantic about wading into frigid river water to wash glass from our skin and hair. There's nothing beautiful about climbing into the glass infested Jimi to retrieve dry t-shirts and shorts.

Here the deer, its brown chest with spots of white, its hind leg still moving, won't stop breathing. I crave the comfort of Interstate 80, the noise and constant motion of Interstate 90. I want to disappear into any of the shitbox cars I have driven though Idaho. I want my road atlas beside me, a Motel 6 ten miles away, the idea of Tamara enough to pass the miles.

I want nothing to do with the realness of this West. This wilderness where the deer never dies.

It only suffers.

5. The Known World

But it's also in the wonder of stars. On cave walls, millennia ago, the West begins with nomadic tribes chronicling the mysteries of small clusters of light burning in the night sky. It continues with the ancient Greeks and the beautiful, misguided imagination of Homer, his flat, spherical Earth surrounded by an ocean stream. My road trips do not begin at 6:00 a.m. — my head fuzzy from too much beer — the highway cool in the early summer heat, but in 1570 when Abraham Ortelius, a trained engraver turned map entrepreneur, compiles a *Theatre of the Round World*, the first atlas.

The hours driving south on Route 83 through Nebraska and Kansas and Oklahoma, each of my afternoon McDonald's iced coffees, become possible with the construction of highways and interstates, with Eisenhower’s Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1957, which make the country pulse like a circulatory system. It can be heard with the endless rush of 18-wheelers. It can be seen in North Dakota, 40 miles from the childhood homestead of famous bandleader Lawrence Welk, when an 18-wheeler grows large in my rearview mirror and passes without breaking.

The West begins with fleets of trucks with loaded trailers. With pallets tightly packed and firmly secured. In California, the West starts with crates of artichokes, avocados, and walnuts. During my first solo road trip, sweating heavily in my shitbox car, Western agribusiness begins when an agent at a California border protection station asks if I am traveling with any undeclared produce.

It starts with me reaching into my backpack — books and t-shirts and baseball caps — to offer him a fruit-filled Fig Newton.

And now along the 100th meridian, parked in the gravel lot of the Lawrence Welk Homestead in the late afternoon heat, where the local high school history teacher gives tours of the dried mud brick house Ludwig Welk built in 1899, I trace my finger along Highway 83: where it intersects with the restaurants and delis surrounding South Dakota's capital building in Pierre; where it passes the secluded ranches in Nebraska's Sand Hills and the 4000-acre ranch of Buffalo Bill Cody, founder of Buffalo Bill's Wild West theatrical show, in North Platte; where it passes the pumpjacks and wind turbines of northern Kansas and enters Dodge City, once an outpost along the Santa Fe Trail, with its meat packing industry and casino resort; where it traverses the vacation land of Texas' Hill Country, featuring the Bending Branch Winery and Newman's Bakery and Castle, complete with turrets and moat and 3000-pound drawbridge. The wonder of the 100th meridian — the mystery of its undulating hills, the red-brown dirt in southwestern Oklahoma, the wind that ceaselessly batters houses, barns, and cattle from Dunseith, North Dakota, to Carrizo Springs, Texas — is that it has been divided, claimed, and settled into a world fixated on profit.

And how can a solitary traveler not be thankful? How can one who prefers the safety of qualified adventure not be grateful for a gas station restroom in Balko, Oklahoma? For a Walmart parking lot in Garden City, Kansas, where the tired traveler can rest for 20 minutes? How can he not feel safer passing fields of flaxseed and alfalfa outside Minot, North Dakota, where farmers wave in his rearview mirror? Let there be a map beside him, let each road — each recorded mile — be freshly paved.

Even the wondrous stars above. Let each of them be named. Let each be secured in its place. Let the traveler know — if he chooses to know — how long their light takes to reach the windshield of his car, takes to reflect off the windows of prairie houses, so that he can feel thankful, wonderfully thankful, that so much of the unknown is known.

6. Survival

"*The path that went by our house had become a road*."
— Laura Ingalls Wilder

Then came the homesteaders. The native-born children of Easterners; former slaves freed under the Emancipation Proclamation; the immigrants of Russia, Germany, and Scandinavia who wrote letters — sent savings — for loved ones to sail the Atlantic, cross the Appalachians, and make slow progress through the interior plains. They came because the Homestead Act of 1862 promised 160 acres. They came because the indigenous peoples, those who lived in harmony with the volatile landscape — the sudden winter storms and unyielding droughts — had been massacred and removed. They came because the Homestead Act of 1909 doubled the acreage to 320 acres. They crossed the Mississippi River. They settled upon the red-brown plains of Oklahoma and the rolling grasslands of South Dakota. They settled on the windswept prairie of Nebraska and by the dry riverbeds of Montana. They came when Abraham Lincoln was president, when Theodore Roosevelt was president, and into the closing years of the 20th-century — until Ronald Reagan and the filing of the last homesteading claim in 1988.

The homesteaders tilled land with little knowledge for harvesting dry soil. They built sod houses waiting for rain. They lived without doctors, without seeing neighbors for weeks at a time. They walked the perimeter of their land, stared at the cloudless sky, unable to cultivate the large, empty landscape, unable to develop sustainable farming practices. And when the railroads arrived, more of them came. And more failed. And where else could the homesteaders go but to the growing towns of the West? What options did they have after realizing this was the only way to survive?

In McCook, Nebraska, the West begins with the Museum of the High Plains. Less a cultural history of the region and more a romanticized, disorderly tribute to the endurance of McCook, the Museum of the High Plains could be mistaken for a poorly attended garage sale. Located in a renovated two-story library, the museum features haphazardly arranged displays of what appears to be discarded junk mixed with fascinating relics. This is true of the "Nursery Exhibit" that includes numerous children's dolls — dolls in high chairs, dolls in doll-size beds, dolls with plastic arms forever reaching out — among artifacts of the recent and less recent past: a trundle bed no different from the one in my basement, rocking chairs of various sizes, a Kiddie Koop like a small, portable child-size prison, a vintage wire doll carriage that might be — very well could be — from the 19th-century. It is true of the recreated doctor's office featuring a dental chair from the 1930s that doubled as a barber's chair, popular magazines from the 1970s spread among the tables of a waiting room, a container used to heat hot packs for polio patients next to a doctor's examination table, and an iron lung donated by McCook's local chapter of Girl Scouts.

It's as if visitors have been invited to spend an afternoon wandering through the town's attic, to consider the eclectic mishmash of objects as proof of McCook's perseverance. Look at the photograph of Helen Buhmann, proprietor of Helen's Hats, and at McCook's first gas range stove. Look at the collection of record players from the 1950s to the 80s. Consider the various tools — spoke pointers, tenon cutters, moving fillister and rabbet planes — donated by past residents as confirmation of McCook's enduring work ethic, the yellowed local newspaper headline from 1929 proclaiming McCook pioneered air-delivery mail service, and the standing "permanent wave" hair curling machine with several dangling metal curlers that looks like a medieval torture device. Notice on the walls portraits of renown citizens — William E. Baldwin, McCook's chief of police in 1925; Donovan K. Walters whose B52 was shot down over Hanoi in 1972; and George W. Norris who became a U.S. senator in 1913. Consider why the museum features Richard Nixon's 1973 inauguration flag or Florence Munden's quilt of the Star of Bethlehem or, inexplicably, a toilette from John Bunning on loan since 1970.

And then there are the mannequins. Mannequins upon mannequins throughout the Museum of the High Plains. It's as if the entire chain of Macy's department stores has gone out of business. Mannequins dressed in railroad and military uniforms; mannequins in ball gowns with red neck scarves, in finely tailored business suits prepared for a day at the office. Mannequins with parasols on their shoulders out for an afternoon stroll, mannequin children running beside them. They are on the first floor serving ice cream, they are on the second floor praying in the "Chapel." There are Mannequins in the "Political Room," in the "Agriculture Exhibit"; they are dressed for work at the McCook Depot, they are preparing dinner on a Fireless Cooker. These mannequins in fancy hats designed by Helen Buhmann. These mannequins unaware of the declining populations of the Great Plains, or their own town of McCook. These mannequins that have never walked down the Main Streets of dying towns of the High Plains or heard discussion of the desperation of homesteaders, how they destroyed the prairie believing rain follows the plow; how the dustbowl — 35 million acres made useless for farming — brought environmental and economic devastation. These mannequins presenting an idea of the McCook, of the West itself, that ignores so much of the struggle. How they pass the hours, pass the decades, undeterred by wind or dry soil.

7. Western Intermezzo

Out where the handclasp's a little stronger,
Out where the smile dwells a little longer,
That's where the West begins;
out where the sun is a little brighter,
Where the snows that fall are a trifle whiter,
Where the bonds of home are a wee bit tighter,
That's where the West begins.

— Arthur Chapman

8. Primitive Road, Continued

And still it doesn't die.

I walk circles around the deer, its eyes following me, its hind leg continuing to draw lines in the gravel. I kneel beside its chest, look at the gash in its broken neck, the streams of blood soaking into the ground.

As the sky fades to dark purple I move to the side of the road. There's no choice but to search the underbrush for a large rock, to brush aside sticks and leaves and dig my fingers into the hard dirt. I cannot look at Tamara or the car of hers I've ruined — its windshield cracked and shattered, its frontend scrunched like an accordion. I cannot look at the deer, its coal-black eyes, but move slow — even slower — desperate for the deer to die on its own.

There is no safe passage here. My imagined West, Tamara beside me at a campfire, the two of us bundled in sweatshirts, has faded to nothing. There's only a river much too cold in the early spring. There's only logging roads without road signs, without passing lanes or street lights, climbing further and further into the mountains. There's a wilderness of trees that know nothing about 70 miles per hour, the radio blaring.

I do not notice Tamara beside me.

After a month together, I do not feel the warmth of Tamara's hand upon my shoulder or look at her brown-blonde hair in the final moments of twilight. I do not respond when she says my name to offer help. The map of our dating has led to this. I hear the sound of water. I choose my rock and walk toward the deer.

9. Where the West Ends

It begins 15,000 years ago with the Bering Land Bridge, waves of tribes, families and children, migrating east from Central Asia. It begins with the hunting of mammoths and giant bison, remnants of a peoples presence — shards of pottery, drawings of constellations — excavated centuries later. It begins with glaciers retreating and paths of migration down the Pacific coast — with the Oglala Sioux, Crazy Horse and Red Cloud, roaming an ocean of grasslands. I back my shitbox out of my parents' driveway at 21, my mother waving goodbye, my father beside her. I need to escape the choking familiarity of the East — the suburban strip malls and hours of traffic on Interstate 93. I watch the odometer and celebrate the passing of 100 miles, 200 miles. Outside of Buffalo, the West begins at a gas station on the New York Turnpike. I look at my road atlas wondering how much further to Sandusky. I consider the possibilities of Toledo. Time passes slow — centuries of bison graze on the prairie. Centuries of blue stem grow and beard grass and gray wild rye. It begins with torrid heat and endless drought. In 1700 Spanish colonists introduce horses to the Comanche, and the West begins with the Comanche hunting and fighting and dominating the southern plains. I'm getting older, say 25, 26, driving another shitbox that overheats like my first shitbox as I again slow for traffic in Chicago. There's no need to shave on the road, no need to eat anything but terrible fast food, to veer onto the exit ramp toward the familiar golden arches. I drive through the heat of countless afternoons and imagine the lives I'll never live — the dying prairie towns in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. It begins as a boy watching John Wayne. The West is a caravan of travelers, the pretty lady dressed in white, trying to make it through hostile land. It begins with me hunting Indians with a plastic gun in my backyard. Somewhere in Nebraska my 21-year-old self driving to California intersects with my 38-year-old self driving the 100th meridian. We do not wave or take interest in each other. My 21-year-old self stares at the bowl of the western sky. He desires highway giving way to highway, pulling over in rest stops to consider the miles of Interstate 90 — the pure mystery of motel rooms in Billings and Butte. My 38-year-old self feels a stiff ache in his lower back — he has tired of the miles. He has tired of a West that begins with Trump-Pence signs dotting the horizon. He has lost interest in the 100th meridian marker separating Oklahoma from Texas and the Roger Miller Museum at the intersection of the 100th meridian and Route 66. 15,000 years later, after the near-decimation of the Coahuiltecan who once fished the deep waters of the Rio Grande River, it begins with a desk clerk asking for my credit card. I carry a duffle bag into an elevator, walk the familiar worn carpet of a hotel hallway, stretch out on a queen size bed. It begins in Laredo, Texas, four miles from Mexico, the sound of the highway filling my room. It begins with the sluggish trickle of the Rio Grande, now dammed and diverted, and me taking a picture of the pedestrian border bridge separating America from Mexico. The path to the West has become security cameras and barbed-wire fences and me returning to the loneliness of my hotel room. I pick up the phone to call Tamara, my wife of several years. I tell her I'm tired and want to come home.

10. Beginnings

Without a map the car somehow starts.

Without a map, with a broken headlight, Tamara's Jimi limps a quarter of a mile to a camp site. As we brush glass off our sleeping bags, my finger does not follow the thin red line of a state highway. There's no way to measure distance, to count mile markers to the next exit.

In the quiet of the wilderness the river flows.

So far from an interstate, from survey crews and road construction, we sit by the campfire. Cans of beer crack open, Tamara offers me a bag of potato chips — and maybe there's an exhale, a few moments where the deer feels 100 miles away. I do not think of parking lot lights shining through motel room windows, the sound of an ice machine in the hallway, or my own car speeding endlessly, my trusted atlas for a companion.

Under a world of stars the moon drifts above us. I feel the warmth of Tamara beside me. Her hand wrapped in mine.

I have no idea where I am.

11. Somewhere

So many years from Mrs. Brown's classroom, from Friday spelling quizzes and Mrs. Brown's knitted sweaters, I still stare at my atlas, at the jigsaw possibilities of western America — how the western slope of Nevada slides perfectly into the eastern slope of California, how the panhandle of Oklahoma cuts right through the northern reach of Texas' panhandle. I still obsess over the wilderness of Idaho, the remote mountain ranges in Alaska, Denali National Park, always searching for the West's beginnings.

130 miles west of the 100th meridian, in our northwest Nebraska house on the High Plains, Tamara and I sit at the kitchen table to plan a trip into the desert. We trace Interstate 25 on the atlas through Denver, through Colorado Springs, and consider Route 160 into Alamosa and Monte Vista. We want to follow the spine of the Rocky Mountains, down through Colorado’s South Fork and Pagosa Springs, into the high desert of New Mexico. We want to sleep in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, spend three days in the mountain town of Taos. There's a West that begins somewhere more West than anything we have known. It's somewhere just north of Santa Fe, in the wild, sandstone splendor of Georgia O'Keefe's 5,000-acre Ghost Ranch; or maybe it's in the stratified layers, the red, pink, and yellow, of Arizona's Painted Desert; or let it be — yes, please, let it be — in the backcountry of Utah's Canyon Lands, in a landscape so large, so still, we can hear the pulse of our own blood.

How Tamara and I wake early. How I back the car out slowly, sleeping bags in the trunk, a cup of coffee in my hand.

How Tamara turns the radio on and we keep searching.

Steve Coughlin teaches creative writing at Chadron State College in northwest Nebraska. He recently published a short collection of poetry, *Driving at Twilight* (Main Street Rag).