EDITOR'S NOTE

D. Seth Horton

At the Denver Art Museum, there is an installation by Don Stinson entitled *The Necessity for Ruins*. The painting depicts an abandoned drive-in movie theater, and its split panels create the visual impression of looking out onto the landscape through the windows of a car. The viewer is thus implicated in the painting, which Stinson accentuates with a recording of environmental sounds, mostly wind, emanating from actual drive-in speakers. The overall effect of this work is unsettling, for while Stinson's landscape echoes works by generations of previous artists who envisioned the West in mythological terms, *The Necessity for Ruins* nevertheless complicates this tradition, for the land has been deserted; the only indication of human settlement comes in the form of crumbling artifacts serving as a visual reminder that Hollywood movies glorifying the settling of the West by adventurous, independent, and heroic Anglo men no longer bear cultural value.

In "Interstate Imprints," a 2010 editor's note in the *South Dakota Review*, Brian Bedard writes: "When it comes to traveling the Northern Plains or the American West, icons of place loom up in the light like subtle beacons from a landscape that will outlast us all. What materializes in one's line of vision are a combination of the New and Old West in a juxtaposition which counters the vainglorious sense of time contemporary technology promotes and

reinforces.” Stinson shares this interest in interpreting western landscapes through the juxtaposition of the Old and New West. To borrow two terms that can be traced back to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Stinson’s installation “detritorializes” the West in that it weakens the concept of the region as a place to be permanently settled, which is one of the tropes in classic “Old Western” texts such as Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893), Owen Wister’s *The Virginian* (1902), and Harvey Fergusson’s *Wolf Song* (1927). Stinson subsequently “reterritorializes” the region by visualizing it through the windows of a car, thereby emphasizing change, technology, and mobility. Stinson sees the West as a place of travel, migration, and immigration, which supports Patricia Limerick’s famous argument in *The Legacy of Conquest* (1987) that the region is a place of convergence—“The West was not where we escaped each other, but where we all met” (291)—as well as the recent work of Neil Campbell, whose *Rhizomatic West* (2008) builds on the theories of Paul Gilroy and James Clifford, among others, in order to examine “a mobile genealogy of westness, a cultural discourse constructed through both national and transnational mediations, of roots and routes, with its territories defined and redefined (detritorialized) from both inside and outside the United States” (8).

When read together as an assemblage, the stories in *Best of the West 2011: New Stories from the Wide Side of the Missouri* participate in this “route work” by representing a shifting West, a West in transit, a West where borders and meanings conflict and overlap. Interestingly, the trope of the road is ubiquitous throughout the collection. Consider, for example, Aaron Gwyn’s “Drive,” in which a couple rediscovers their passion for each other, at least temporarily, by driving faster than a hundred miles an hour in the wrong lane: “They were going forward, fully forward, faster and faster like the car in which they traveled, on toward the lights which seemed to have stopped moving.” The central question of the story isn’t about why the couple needs to do this, but rather what would happen if they were to stop moving. It is a problem similar to the one taken up by Kate Krautkramer in “Nevada,” whose narrator drives all over the state for her job. The barrenness of the landscape and the long-distance driving mirror the emotional coldness of a relationship that she has trouble ending. Likewise, the protagonist in Rick Bass’s “Coach” is a nomad moving throughout the state of Montana to coach girls’ high school basketball. When he meets his new team for the first time, he thinks, “This is the best part . . . even better than the addiction of the game itself. This is the absolute best. The beginning.” The implication here is that “the journeyman coach” will not put down any roots; rather, he will

eventually move on to a new beginning, a new school, and a new town. In Yiyun Li's "Alone," Suchen drives along the Pacific Coast and heads inland toward the Rockies, and yet she is denied the possibility of a new beginning in the West. Her past will seemingly haunt her forever, allowing her little more than the vague comfort of passing acquaintances.

As Cormac McCarthy's latest novel chillingly reminds us, roads foreground issues of displacement and movement, diasporas and nomadology, but they also function as sites of violent encounters. In K. L. Cook's "Bonnie and Clyde in the Backyard," a young Texas boy meets Clyde Barrow, his father's cousin, and Bonnie Parker just weeks before they are ambushed by police in their death car. Their arrival at the narrator's family farm generates a moral dilemma, but it also represents the crossroad between local culture and international fame, which become blurred when the boy travels to Dallas to attend their funeral. In Peter LaSalle's "Lunch Across the Bridge," the cars in Nuevo Laredo are armored, a necessity for those involved in the drug trade. Antonya Nelson's "iff" is brilliantly framed around a small car accident that occurred shortly before the beginning of the story and the "impending certain crash" that ends it. And in Claire Vaye Watkins's epistolary story "The Last Thing We Need," the narrator stumbles across the detritus of what he believes to be a car accident, which triggers memories of the time he was once held up at a gas station.

But it is perhaps the short shorts of Sam Shepard that focus the most attention on the cultural value of roads and their possible meanings in the twenty-first-century West. The five stories included in this volume were selected from his most recent book, *Day Out of Days* (2010), a book so fragmented that there is hardly any continuity other than the names of highways in the story titles. The roads that Shepard's characters travel upon lead neither to youthful adventures à la Kerouac nor to liberatory new beginnings; instead, his unnamed narrator simply drives, stopping in towns that others mostly pass through (Butte, Montana; Rock Springs, Wyoming; Bonners Ferry, Idaho). These short shorts allow us an intimate glimpse into the vagabond life of loners in the contemporary West.

Whereas roads pass through many of the stories in this year's *Best of the West*, the collection as a whole consists of crossroads, narratives that both converge and diverge, that redraw the cultural map of the contemporary West. It is therefore fitting that a number of people have collaborated to help bring this book into print. I would first like to thank my coeditor, James Thomas, for our many fertile conversations about western fiction. For the 2011 volume, I searched for stories and stand-alone novel chapters originally

published between fall 2009 and fall 2010. More than 270 literary journals, magazines, short-story collections, and newspapers were consulted. My research was augmented by this year's associate editors, all of them graduate students, who read a number of journals that I was unable to access. Their work has made this book better, and I would like to thank Dani Johannesen at the University of South Dakota, Brett Myhren at the University of Southern California, and Liz Stephens at Ohio University. Thanks also to Matt Bell, the editor of Dzanc Books' *Best of the Web*, for links to suitable stories that were originally published online. This year's *Best of the West* volume includes one piece published online, Tim Johnston's "Two Years," and I expect to include more online stories in the future as journals continue to move to electronic formats. Finally, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the thousands of editors of North American literary journals, many of whom have generously provided me with complimentary copies of their publications. Without their often-unacknowledged work, the richness of American and Canadian literature would certainly suffer.

This year's foreword was written by Ana Castillo, an essayist, poet, short-story writer, translator, and novelist. Like many of her characters, Castillo is a transplant to the region, and much of her work deals with the crossing of borders, whether regional, national, linguistic, or cultural. Her writing fuses the imaginative quality of magical realism with the fierce independence celebrated in western American literature, thereby carving out an important place for Chicana identity in the contemporary West. I would like to thank her for agreeing to write this year's foreword.

James and I are privileged to have the opportunity to work with the University of Texas Press. As Charles Bowden told me a couple of years ago in Spearfish, South Dakota, they are the best in the business. My sincerest thanks go to my editor, Casey Kittrell, for all of his advice, encouragement, and support over the years. I would also like to thank Lynne Chapman for making sure that each *Best of the West* volume is copyedited with care.

Several conferences have given *Best of the West* contributors a forum at which to showcase their work. I would like to express my gratitude to the organizers of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs for giving us a panel at their 2011 conference, and I would also like to thank Gioia Woods, the president of the 2010 Western Literature Association conference, who invited three recent *Best of the West* contributors—Aurelie Sheehan, Ron Carlson, and Dagoberto Gilb—to open the conference with readings from their work.

And, of course, a special thanks to this year's twenty contributors. Their writing is exceptional, and I hope that this volume serves to introduce them to a larger audience. As always, my most important thanks are reserved for my parents, for their encouragement over the years; for my friends; and especially for my wife, Catherine Chen. She continues to offer unwavering support for me and also for my work, despite the sacrifices this often entails. Thank you, Cat.