

## DOT-TO-DOT, OREGON



# **DOT-TO-DOT, OREGON**

SID MILLER

OOLIGAN PRESS  
PORTLAND STATE UNIVERSITY  
PORTLAND, OREGON

Dot-to-Dot, Oregon  
© 2009 by Sid Miller  
All rights reserved.

ISBN13: 978-1-932010-29-9

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Cover Art and Design by Rebecca “Ruji” Chapnik  
Interior Design by Michele Ford  
Type is set in Adobe Caslon Pro

Ooligan Press  
Department of English  
Portland State University  
P.O. Box 751  
Portland, OR 97207-0751  
[www.ooliganpress.pdx.edu](http://www.ooliganpress.pdx.edu)  
[ooligan@ooliganpress.pdx.edu](mailto:ooligan@ooliganpress.pdx.edu)  
Printed in the United States of America by Lightning Source.

Poems in this book have previously appeared in other publications:

*Portland Review*: Albany, Seaside  
*The Oregonian*: Oregon Dunes  
*Caffeine Destiny*: Veneta, Monmouth  
*High Desert Journal*: Crater Lake  
*Salt River Review*: Pendleton  
*New Works Review*: Astoria  
*Bad Light*: Klamath Falls, Corvallis  
*Softblow*: Bandon, Hermiston, Prineville, Reedsport  
*Two Review*: Philomath  
*Walking Bridges Using Poetry as a Compass*: Portland  
*Pif Magazine*: Umatilla, Grants Pass  
*WritersDojo.org*: The Dalles, McMinnville, Silverton, Molalla

*For Claire and Athene,  
the best traveling companions  
a man could ever have.*



# CONTENTS

## INTRODUCTION

### ROUTE 1

PENDLETON	14
LA GRANDE	15
BAKER CITY	16
NYSSA	17
BURNS	18
JOHN DAY	19
SHOETREE	20
JOHN DAY FOSSIL BEDS	21

### ROUTE 2

SCAPPOOSE	24
ST. HELENS	25
ASTORIA	26
SEASIDE	27
LINCOLN CITY	28
NEWPORT	30

### ROUTE 3

ALBANY	32
CORVALLIS	34
PHILOMATH	35
VENETA	36
EUGENE	37
PORTLAND	38



# INTRODUCTION

Three points aligned at the moment of this book's inception. The first: the absolute doldrums I found my writing to be in at the time. Every new poem seemed to visit the same themes, the same imagery, the same cadences. I hadn't been excited about anything I had written for months, and I couldn't imagine myself being excited about anything in the near future. The second: a conversation I had with one of my parents' friends earlier that evening. I was down in California, visiting my family. A big group of family friends had been over and I was talking with someone about Oregon. They had just traveled around the state, which at the time I had called home for seven years, and when asked my opinions of several of the places he had visited, I had none—simply, because I had not been to most of the places that he mentioned. The third: Keith Richards. Later that night, after everyone had left, the dishes had been done and the dogs were all asleep, I lay in the bed of my childhood reading an article about the iconic guitarist of the Rolling Stones. I discovered that he only wrote songs in the chord of E. The hemming in of one's creativity, he thought, was the best way to ensure achievement.

That was the moment. By the time I fell asleep that night, the idea for this book was formed. While I had used travel in previous work, it had never been a theme; I would go somewhere, I would write something, and then I would go somewhere else and write something else. One poem had little or no relevance to any other. Now I had something with the potential for a unifying theme. It was unclear if I would find one while traveling the state—in fact, now that it's over I'm not sure if I did or did not—but the idea of looking for one was exciting.

When I got back to Portland, I went to Powell's Books and got the biggest and best atlas of Oregon I could find. When I got home and opened it, facing pages of the whole state—all 98,466 square miles of it—I realized that this was going to take some thought. I knew I wanted to travel the state, but the questions became where to go and why to go there.

My first concern was the number of places to visit. In order to assemble a full-length collection I knew I would need at least fifty poems. Once I had that number, I thought about the why. The best reason I had for

doing this project was to explore the state I now called home. I couldn't base my travel, research, and writing solely on population. If I did, I wouldn't have spent much time outside a sixty-mile radius of Portland. But I figured population had to play some part in my thinking. As I pored over the population chart in the atlas I counted sixty-three towns and cities in Oregon with over five thousand inhabitants. If I dismissed most of the suburbs of Portland and Eugene (sorry, suburbs) I would be somewhere around my desired number of poems. I also knew that I couldn't be steadfast about any one rule. I was not going to limit myself. If a place truly piqued my interest and had a population of only one thousand (see "Joseph" and "Cave Junction"), I could bend the rules. Conversely, if I traveled to a bigger town or city and the timing was wrong and I couldn't get a poem out of it, I wouldn't force it (don't see "Brookings").

A majority of the poems take place in the city center of each place. When driving the state, one sees that every town or city has a downtown exit off the freeway. I liked the idea of tying the poems together with yet another theme. This rule, too, was broken occasionally—in places like the Oregon Dunes and the John Day Fossil Beds. But I knew from the start that I didn't want these poems to solely be descriptions of the places I went. Anyone could go to Pendleton, look around, and write down what they saw. I wanted the poems to be more personal. I wanted them to be about my reaction to the places, not the places themselves. I also thought it was important to incorporate what was going on in my life during the time of my visit (see "La Grande").

This last point was mainly affected by the two largest factors of this whole project: money and time. Money: this project was supported by the limited surplus of funds in my checking account. Time: I work full-time, run a press of my own, manage four properties, and am married. Money + Time = Unequal attention for each place.

By the time I figured all this out, I was excited to begin. I started small: a day trip to Silverton and Molalla. It would be hard to find two towns that differed more. One is a quaint little town on a creek with nice restaurants, well-manicured parks, and antique shops; the other is a rural, working-class town with a few bars and a lot of hunting shops. This first trip ended up being a big lesson in what I wanted to achieve with these poems. I saw right away that I could not let my own biases get in the way of the poems, that I had to look for beauty in unexpected places—to focus on the wonder and less obvious details.

I'm not the sort of writer who is instantaneously inspired. I also have strict writing habits that include holing myself away from all human contact. For this project, I had to take a reporter's approach; I took notes and pictures and then spent time in between trips to write first drafts and revisions.

The project became more and more exciting. As each trip ended, plans for the next trip began. It was a joy to pore over the maps, decide on routes, and research the towns. This was especially true for the longer trips that took me to the corners of the state: to Enterprise and Nyssa, to Cave Junction and Ashland. On longer trips, I'd often stop in three or four places a day before spending the night at my final destination. This is where those two big factors, time and money, came into play. If these had not been issues, I would have spent a night in every place I traveled. Evenings often provided the highlights of the trips, as the towns revealed themselves after hours. It was also the best time to talk with locals. At some stops along the way, I couldn't do more than walk around for an hour or so, shooting pictures, stopping for a coffee, and taking as many notes as possible. It's hard for me to judge whether this ended up affecting the poems or not. I'm too close to the project to be able to see that for myself. But as I think back to all the places I went, Baker City—where I spent the night at the Geiser Grand Hotel—will live on as one of the absolute best nights, while the hour I spent walking the streets of Hermiston pales in comparison. I understand that this has very little to do with how great a place Baker City is compared to Hermiston, and everything to do with the amount of time spent in each place.

All in all, it took me about a year and half to do all the travel necessary to complete the research for this book. I was writing all the while, but in the end it took about another year to write the last poem and work on the endless revisions that most of the poems underwent. I hoped to represent most corners of the state, and I think I did a fairly good job. I apologize to the towns and cities that didn't get covered. I wish more than anything that I had the means to make this a collection of one hundred poems.

For the majority of the trips, I was accompanied by my wife, Claire, and my old dog, Athene. We were met with kindness at every stop along the way. We met some wonderful people, stayed in some wonderful old hotels, ate a lot of really great food, and saw an amazing amount of beautiful places. To that point, the eastern part of the state does not get

its due. Before the trip, I had never been east of Bend. But now, having been in the Willowa and Blue Mountains, on the John Day River, and most spots in between, I tell everyone who has not done so to get in their car and drive east. Most everyone has driven through the Gorge or stood on the coast and looked out at Haystack Rock, but until you head the other direction, you're missing some of the best the state has to offer.

The traveling was the joy, the writing the work. Because Oregon doesn't have the population density of New York or California, I had very little margin with regards to making these poems work. In order to get to my magic number of fifty, I had to revise and revise and revise poems that, in prior mindsets, I would have given up on. I had a lot of help and would like to thank Bill Bogart, Marlys West, Julie Gamberg, Vandana Khanna, Michael Szporluk, and Gabe Adoff for their encouragement and wisdom.

From the onset of the project I had to two goals: to get to know the state of Oregon better and to create a collection of poems that both showed and explained my relationship with it. I know that I succeeded with the first half of my goal. The second part is where you, the reader, come in. I hope as you travel the routes I traveled, stop in the places I stopped, and get out of the car to look around, this collection will both take you there for a moment, and make you want to create your own routes around Oregon.

—Sid Miller

November 2008

# ROUTE 1



## PENDLETON

I've missed the Round-Up by six months  
and now can't find a better way to pass  
the time than to snoop around this old fire,  
kick at the soot and wonder about timing.

She turned on the popcorn maker and forgot.  
Later the half-block was gone—the shoe repair  
and coffee bean shops, the East Oregon  
Symphony's office and the home away  
from home for the Fraternal Order of Eagles.

Fire symbolizes the end, or at best  
the beginning, and here I am,  
smack dab and happy in the middle.  
And I can't think of any better way  
to stay here than to watch  
a man on a bull for eight-point-six seconds,  
so focused on grip and posture,  
relaxed in order to not let go.

## LA GRANDE

For six days I haven't shaved  
and behind me, inside the pharmacy,  
my wife's in line with bubblegum  
and a pregnancy test.

Skilled masonry lines this main road,  
old buildings with details  
now seen only for profit.  
Eighty years ago the population peaked  
and these works of art  
no longer house man's necessities,  
just coffee and dumbbells.

Some years ago my hair ran down  
past my shoulders. Before I met her,  
my wife was pierced in more places  
than one can mention in this town.

We'll stay here longer than we should.  
We understand how easy it is to change,  
yet how hard it is to grow.

## BAKER CITY

All the churches and the mountains to the west  
and the tallest building in Eastern Oregon  
on sale for a cheap price  
and the happiness  
of holding your hand as we walked at sunset  
under the old-fashioned black-and-white street signs  
and past the ten-foot-high wagon wheel  
is all part of it—that dream, that script,  
that in just a moment might change  
in a major way  
when you walk out of the bathroom  
here tonight  
in our room on the third story  
of the one-hundred-and-eighteen-year-old Geiser Grand Hotel,  
where just a bit ago we sat downstairs and drank bourbon  
and listened to horrible smooth jazz,  
and spoke about the black beans  
in the shrimp and lobster sauce  
that we had for dinner  
and about the woman from Hong Kong  
who served it to us,

anything but what was on our minds  
and weighing us down,

that little stick,  
that little modern freight train of knowing,  
that harbinger of the whole shebang,  
the one that's now in your hand,  
under the place where you sit,  
being soaked with our fates,  
the decision of more bourbon or none at all,  
of who and what we'll become,  
of what we can't predict.

## NYSSA

A damsel in metaphysical  
distress, she forever looks  
out from the second story  
of the old Hotel Western  
and stares back past  
the Green Lantern Saloon  
onto Main Street.

If you suppose her place,  
red drapes behind, painted  
brick housing you in, you'd  
crave everything, give anything,  
just to turn right and gaze  
at the water towers, the strip  
of grass and the Fort  
Boise Produce building.

And while it's easy to assume her gaze,  
her thoughts can only be guessed at.  
But one would suspect Saint Gregory,  
his notion of the third and final stage,  
where after the initial darkness of ignorance,  
followed by a spiritual illumination,  
one returns to darkness,  
because of the mind's  
contemplation of a God that cannot  
be comprehended,  
who has stuck her in a window,  
in a nearly forgotten place,  
surrounded by fools  
who point and wonder,  
completely void  
of any cowboy spirit.

## BURNS

Easy to eavesdrop—your window  
    rolled down,  
no engines in earshot,  
the gas station attendant  
and his beer-drinking buddy  
    almost shouted.

At the mention of the movie star's name,  
his face came quickly—anal-retentive  
travel writer, middle-aged drug addict,  
    et al.

Now you've driven for an hour  
and sincerely believe that there can't  
    be anything else.

Perpendicular to nowhere and north  
of nothing, this town is dead from the sun.

They said that he lives on the edge  
    of town,  
where you hoped to see him  
with a Rottweiler on a dusty road  
    or just out of the market,  
    like any man  
with a bag of steaks.

But not only have you not seen him,  
you haven't seen much of anything else.  
And the next time his face flickers  
at two in the morning, you'll attempt  
to look past the makeup and lens  
    to get it.

## JOHN DAY

Bourbon should always pour freely.  
So when the chubby little bartender  
trickles ours from the bottle into a jigger  
and then over the ice, it's a bad sign.

Craving a steak for days, we walked up and down  
the main drag, looked and smelled. Blinded by neon  
and unnerved by uniform, we settled here,  
as the big screen TV flickered in the background.

When the osprey touched down on the river's surface,  
grabbed the trout clean and bolted for the trees  
to pick at the still-live meat, we smiled.

Our meat will be out before our second drink,  
even though the first were only two sips long.  
I could describe it now: the lack of flavor,  
the stringy texture, the clump of previously  
frozen vegetables that will cower in the corner.

Not too long ago there were cowboys and miners around here.

They wouldn't have settled for this shit.  
They would've stood up and walked out.

## SHOETREE

To leave home, drive the desolate 20  
and pull off here,  
to do what's been done so often  
isn't so hard to understand.

Never a small town kid,  
Jack soon stares beyond  
the shoes and highway  
toward Monument Peak.

As a new pair takes flight  
he returns again to the shoes.

It would be easy to take a picture,  
much harder to make a list.

As he stands with his back  
to the Malheur River,  
he suspects  
neither choice is right.

But Jack's never been good  
with choices, chiefly those  
concerned with what comes  
and more often goes.

His favorites have new laces  
and worn tread.

## JOHN DAY FOSSIL BEDS

The sequence owes its existence to andesitic, dacitic,  
and rhyolitic eruptions from vents in the Cascade Range.

We haven't seen a person in hours. I do not trust this solitude.

The surface is overlain by drab bluish-green tuffaceous claystones  
and siltstones, fine-grained airfall sediment that altered on land.

The color of the landscape makes us look ill.

Numerous paleosol horizons are indicated by rhyolites, burrows  
and other invertebrate traces.

We stand on the upper edge of a valley,  
behind us are skeletons.

The fossil record includes: rodents, oreorodents, peccaries, horse,  
dicerather rhinoceros, small canids, tapirs and bear dogs.

Our solitude will haunt them.



# ROUTE 2



# SCAPPOOSE

*But the Center! Sometimes it was gigantic,  
painful, raw and false, it extended from one side  
of creation to the other, there was no telling  
where it was, it was everywhere.*  
—Paul Bowles, *The Sheltering Sky*

I can't find the center.

I'd prefer to start there,  
work outwards,

walk along the railroad tracks

and come to a thirty-foot red cylinder  
with a red electric light on top,  
that they called—get this—  
Peace Candle of the World.

It would make no sense.

Further west there'd be torn wrapping  
paper, a doll's head, an insincere  
note inside a birthday card signed "Aunt Rose"  
and four half-burned candles.

I'd put the doll's head  
on my finger,

melt the candles from the bottom,  
place them on the tracks  
and relight the wicks.

We'd call them,  
The Crusade Candles of Vacuity.

## ST. HELENS

The Columbia is gray. Like Jack,  
it too often reflects. Someday  
he hopes to miss the clouds.

But as the wind whips west and the water  
laps up hard up against the marina,  
such a day is hard to imagine.

He needs not to look behind him  
to realize progress. The chop saw  
cuts two-by-fours, drywall's nailed up.

The lot to his right is graded, barbed wire  
keeps it smooth. He might someday stand  
on this same spot and not see the water nearing.

And even though the old courthouse is just  
to his left, he finds no place within him  
to judge. The future also on his mind.

Across the river the sand bar and its dormant  
trees are the most beautiful shade of brown.  
The clouds have assured this.

## ASTORIA

The bridge descends two hundred feet  
to run the top of the water.

Next to it: train tracks  
that crawl for just a few yards,  
then sink to the sea—never  
to reach the opposite shore.  
Maybe they did once, then gave up.  
It's easy to understand.

When no cars pass on the street  
and the gulls quiet and the wind halts  
briefly, traffic can be heard  
from the bridge above. It can also  
be felt, though passengers are never seen.

The train tracks say nothing  
to those who seek answers,  
but blab to the idiots who step  
on the soaked wooden slats.  
They speak in Finnish.  
I am not Finnish,  
nor do I speak the language,  
no matter how quickly I sink.

## SEASIDE

If nothing else reminds you,  
the smell of the air will—when half  
the shops are boarded and the Tilt-A-Whirl  
is under tarp—the salt remains,  
pungent, obnoxious.

Five teenagers play pinball,  
old folk spoon a clam chowder too thick—  
but nobody sits at the horseshoe bar.  
Bare skin barred by cold, the cold  
is far more than you'll care to admit

when you stand in short sleeves on the wet,  
too-wet sand, kicking at the heaps  
of seaweed—watching for the sun  
that will never break through. It won't be  
like your dream, at least not

how you dreamt it—more like that kite  
above you, having drifted so far  
from your hands—at the mercy of the wind's  
discretion, full of color, oddly shaped,  
airborne, yet disappointing.

## LINCOLN CITY

It's too early on a Tuesday  
morning for any movement  
in the smallest divided lot  
of the strip mall,  
otherwise known  
as the Baptist church.  
But at the free-standing  
building next door, where cats  
lick their paws out back  
in the first shafts of sunlight,  
there's already a line.

Their coiffed hair shielded  
from the threat of morning  
drizzle by rain bonnets,  
the old ladies in their matching  
housecoats all have something  
special in mind—a stew  
or chowder, a hunk  
of smoked salmon, or even just  
a quarter pound of bay shrimp  
to dunk into Thousand Island  
and eat by the forkful.

Cars stream behind them,  
while the guy behind the counter  
practices patience—hungover,  
the skin under his new  
barbed wire tattoo  
itches like crazy. Above,  
Barnacle Bill stares blankly.  
His image—neckerchief, pipe  
and sailor's hat—does not quite fit  
that of a holy man, yet it's he  
who they're assembled before.

Oh Bill, provider of tasty  
crustaceans and fish,  
provider of purpose,  
provider of tasteless  
crackers to crumble.  
Oh Bill, provider  
of hope and of salt.  
Oh, Bill.

## NEWPORT

Because men still work hard here,  
she stands in the shade of the old  
tin building whose door is left wide open.

And since she's scared of the other  
and still shoots a Canon AE-1,  
everything goes slower—set  
the F-stop and then focus.

The tuna are dumped on the table  
and the men wield knives  
in gloved hands.  
They slit and pull, toss the fish  
into one bucket, guts in another.

Others take shots of the grumpy  
sea lions or the bay shrimp  
cleaned and dumped into trucks.

The time that she lingers  
makes them uneasy. They're not  
an attraction and tell me so  
with raised eyebrows. I know,  
I nod, but this isn't my shot,  
it's my wife's, talk to her.

# ROUTE 3



## ALBANY

Now that you've hit the streets  
blocked and roped off  
for the antique sale, it's too late.

An hour ago you would've joined them  
and searched for something  
you didn't need,

but wanted on your bookcase  
to help you pretend you  
were somewhere else at some different time.

An hour ago you were twenty blocks  
away, seated on some curb, where  
your stare was divided between

an alley where a hunched man  
picked cigarette butts from broken glass  
and an open window nearly blocked

by beer cans and pizza cardboard.  
The only light came from a television  
that flickered off the aluminum.

And while a '20s hand  
mixer might look good  
on your kitchen shelf,

you've sadly just now begun to realize  
that it's the wrong kind of thing  
to collect. If you were

a little smarter, you would've  
snagged a High Life can  
from the open window,

then turned the corner to fill  
it with glass, to rattle at night  
and fill the quiet.

## CORVALLIS

Favorable wind patterns assure that this will be the state's only city that survives nuclear war.

Currently, there is little comfort in this fact.

And thank God there's little comfort in prayer—this county with the lowest church attendance per capita in the country.

It's said that this is one of the top thirteen cities in America to be a vegetarian, although the numbers seem impossible to quantify.

Any other season would mean vegetables right here, this the spot of the farmers' market.

But today is cold and almost a new year. There are no students, vegetarians, atheists, or post-apocalyptic soldiers—just this awful wind, unflappable, full of bad news.

## PHILOMATH

You don't mind the wind  
or to walk for that matter,  
but today you wish you had  
someone next to you, a voice  
to override the wind's  
howls and remind you  
to walk in its direction.

A man to explain the flipped car  
on the side of the road—who  
crawled out of it and what he  
drank that night. He might  
confirm the CD&J's claim  
of having “the best bacon in town.”

A woman to describe Speech Camp,  
and how her son spends two hours  
a day there because he stutters.  
You'd not only hear her stories  
about the Meet'n Place Tavern,  
but take her there yourself.

Because of the wind there is dust.  
Because of the dust the sidewalks  
are empty. It's on your skin  
and in your eyes. Eventually  
you'll tear. The women in cars  
will shake their heads, the men  
will mumble the word pansy.

## VENETA

There've been plenty of lists  
like this: mitten, television  
set frame, fireplace,  
one metal wheel from an  
old-fashioned tricycle,  
soot, ash, burnt lumber.

As you shove yours  
into your back pocket, you know  
yours is no different  
from the dozen others  
written by those who stopped here.

You pass the empty  
Laundromat that smells  
of bleach, the tiny park  
where the man swings  
his daughter by her arms.

At the church turned coffee shop,  
the stained glass colors  
the morning light  
colors you know nothing of.

When you sit down  
with your coffee and pull  
out your list, you add  
a couple new words,  
abstract ones.

## EUGENE

My twelve-year-old dog and I, a man of thirty-two,  
sit on the lawn amidst young women who disregard  
me quickly after catching me leering at their taut and tan legs.  
The young men never regard me at all.  
I'm jealous of everyone.

It's the end of summer. Sometimes the end of one thing  
means the beginning of another, but not always.

Soon the students will clear. The professors will start their lectures.

My dog and I will get up and find another place.

My parents had a piano shipped across the country  
when I was five years old. It was set up  
in an unused room. They could not play  
a note, nor did they encourage me to. I never  
even had the interest to sit and bang on the keys.

## PORTLAND

I.

By the bourbon on her breath  
you will understand equations mathematical,  
those involving variables, no value  
ever constant, no number  
itself. By the black bra slung  
over the back of the dining room chair  
you will return, deny the logic  
of calculus, rely on that of the salivary  
glands, the far-off scent of a charring  
porterhouse. Sometime between  
the collapse of sleep and divisor of day,  
you might wake from your own restlessness,  
use the inexact angle of shadows  
to render the sweat from her skin  
and coax the air back down.

II.

Today you walk the bridges of Portland:  
Steel, Burnside, Morrison and Hawthorne,  
east on one, west on another. Naturally  
there is a drizzle and a point in the afternoon  
when you want to stop,  
rest, but—unnaturally—you don't.  
You walk the tightrope of separation,  
find the Willamette below moves at one speed,  
traffic at another, thoughts at one  
totally distinct—without the crutch  
of linear movement. By the time you return  
to your car you are more than damp  
from perspiration, your feet sore, your ideas  
of motion awash. When the engine turns over  
you don't require more thought, home inevitable,  
the route etched in the pavement.

### III.

Dirt stains on the knees of your jeans  
serve as indication, but the ritual dressed  
in slippers that glide across the carpet  
offer little else. You stand, the coffee's  
steam fogs the sliding glass door.  
Beyond, the arugula flowers,  
the tomatoes have split, the roots of the green  
onions—the size of cipollinis, the bed,  
this other kind, the one that nearly broke you—  
has filled in with weed—criminals,  
or more accurately, con-men.

### IV.

You were taught to never go anywhere  
without nouns—abstraction is a blind man  
in the desert. You make a list: long legs,  
oysters, jungle gym, lipstick, on and on,  
each image to evoke memory, each one  
to be slowly crossed off. There's  
a headache that comes from the weight  
of concrete. You let it, put your head  
down on your arms, let the woman next to you  
try to nudge you back up. But already  
it's too late, it has started; you're afloat,  
on some nondescript wave of theory (love,  
hate, etc.) nowhere and everywhere simultaneously.  
For our sake you begin to drool,  
for yours, we let you alone,  
to float on, to the infinite,  
or some other such disallowed place.

