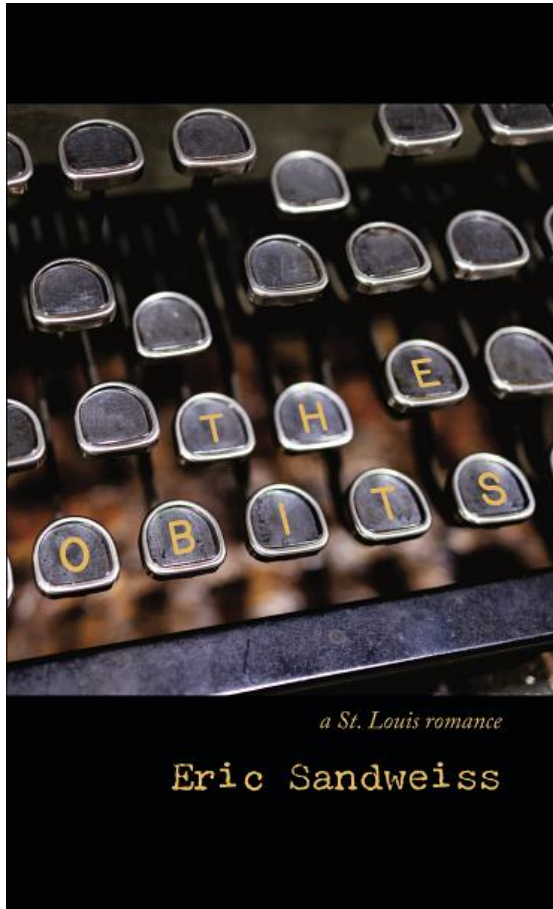




St. Louis, 1976. The city at the nation's heart spirals downward. Gus Alterman's delivery to a local obituary writer reveals past secrets that lead to his own door. Now Gus must choose: What price will he pay to rescue a once-great city?

The Obits: A St. Louis Romance

By Eric Sandweiss

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a St. Louis romance

Eric Sandweiss

Praise for *The Obits*

“Bringing to life an extraordinary cast of characters whose vibrant lives intersect in thrilling ways, Sandweiss takes his place alongside the great chroniclers of St. Louis, that endlessly fascinating city whose social and economic flux tells the complicated story of post-industrial America. *The Obits* is beautiful and wise.”

—Marisa Silver, author of *At Last* and *The Mysteries*

“Eric Sandweiss has crafted a stirring and beautifully written novel set in St. Louis during America’s Bicentennial in 1976. The two central characters in this compelling drama are the city itself, struggling to preserve its heritage, and a young man raised by adopted parents who will stumble upon answers to the mystery of his heritage.”

—Michael A. Kahn, award-winning author of many novels, including 11 in the Rachel Gold mystery series; his latest novel is *The Gourmet Club*

“With the research skills of a historian and the social navigation of a native St. Louisian, Eric Sandweiss has given us a novel that charts the discovery of a man’s search for his own past in the heart of a changing American city. The plot weaves through St. Louis’s web of social connections and racial divisions that still seem evident in the cityscape. Historic properties, business owners, neighbors and even the cars they drive have a voice in the story. If you love this city for its social complexity, or you are baffled by it, *The Obits* will take you on a historic tour of St. Louis neighborhoods that is deeper than the facades of its historic buildings.”

—Dr. Frances Levine, Past President, Missouri Historical Society

Some of the events that inform this story (see the timeline at the end) actually happened. Most did not. Nobody who speaks in the following pages is or ever was a real person, and their actions are likewise imaginary. Any resemblance between these speaking characters and real people, or their real actions, is coincidental.

#

Frontis: "St. Louis Riverfront after Demolition for the Gateway Arch" (1942). Jefferson National Expansion Memorial Archives, V106-4838 (Wikimedia Commons).

Excerpts from Thomas Wolfe, *The Lost Boy: A Novella* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992) originally appeared in Wolfe, *The Hills Beyond* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1941).

Matthew Field, "The Chouteau House," first appeared in *New Orleans Picayune*; reproduced in J.C. Wild, *The Valley of the Mississippi Illustrated* (St. Louis, 1841).

Excerpts from Carlos F. Hurd, "Post Dispatch Man, an Eye-Witness, Describes Massacre of Negroes," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, July 3rd, 1917.

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POST-GAME SHOW

“How about this?”

“How about this’ what.” Gus couldn’t remember where and when the conversation had left off. A minute ago? An hour? Even the car radio, he realized, had given up, unnoticed, some time after Paul Harvey’s first “Good . . . Day?!”

She lifted one hand from the steering wheel, gestured with an upturned palm toward the view ahead as though she were presenting a game-show prize. “You know,” she said, “‘gone’ enough for you?”

Gus peered through the arcs of smeared windshield fluid and bug carcasses that betrayed the wipers’ flagging success against the high-desert dust. The road before them descended for miles toward its low point in a broad valley. There it wavered uncertainly in a lake of heated air before reassembling itself into a ruler-straight line that narrowed on its rise to a distant notch—little more than a point of light, Gus saw through squinting eyes, cut into a ridgeline quickly fading from the morning’s shadowed pinks to an indifferent midday gray.

“Yeah, pretty gone,” he answered.

Austin 30

Fallon 141

Reno 205

The words and numbers crowded the green-and-white road sign that flashed past on the right. Reno. *Greetings from the Biggest Little City in America*. Gus realized at that moment that he hadn't entertained a memory of life back home since they'd departed. Even his sleep: dreamless nights spent in interchangeable motel rooms. Mornings stepping out onto identical parking pads, his back warmed by a sun whose rising seemed to announce his first day on a strange new earth. But the sight of the sign sparked a forgotten image: postcards from the road, sent home by his Uncle Manny. *Binion's Horseshoe, Las Vegas. Elegant Venetian Room, Fairmont Hotel, San Francisco*. Magic places they'd seemed, taunting him from their perch high up the refrigerator door in the old University City kitchen—as close as the West had come to him.

Until now.

Beyond the ridgeline, Gus figured, rose another, then another and another. Beyond that, perhaps, the Sierra—daring him to scale his way to the point from which he might see a world that lay beyond, and past which he'd lose sight of the one that lay behind. How many days, now, since he had permitted himself a backward glance? How many days yet to come before he couldn't if he'd tried?

"Littlest Big City in America," he said suddenly.

She turned her gaze from the windshield, heedless of the dotted white line's migration from its place along the car's left flank to a path that meandered somewhere under the chassis. "What—you mean for a title?"

"Just . . . an idea."

She returned a long, disapproving look. "My opinion? It's not exactly *Look Homeward, Angel*." The rumble of tires hitting the gravel from the road's left shoulder startled her to awareness; she tipped the wheel with one finger and returned the car to its proper lane.

He slumped back in his seat. "I'm not exactly looking homeward," he answered.

"All the better," she said, surveying the deserted landscape before them. "Empty your mind. Wait 'til it's 'gone,' like you said in St. Louis. Then start putting the pieces together . . . filling in the box score, I don't know, 'connecting the dots,' whatever."

Another sign drew near, this one a yellow diamond: *Open Range*, read the legend beneath the image of a silhouetted cow sprayed with bullet holes.

"Right, the dots," Gus said. "I don't know . . . in real life? Maybe they don't connect." He sighed as the sign whizzed past his line of sight. "Not sure I'd even know where to begin trying."

She shrugged. "Begin at the end; end at the beginning, I don't know." Her voice picked up a trace of excitement. "*The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started . . .*"

"Colliding imaginations,' I remember. Thank you, Professor."

"Huh. Not hardly." She twisted her lips and raised one brow in an effort to stanch the smile provoked by his use of the unearned honorific.

"It's just . . . Yeah." He sighed and stared out through the windshield. "When you can't even say where you started . . ."

What came next? Was it the sound of the screeching tires, the shock in his spine as his head launched abruptly toward the padded dashboard, the sight of the road skewing from its meridian-like straightness toward an oblique angle from the horizon? Moments passed before the sensations in his brain ordered themselves sufficiently for Gus to realize that she'd brought the car to a sudden, crooked halt, leaving them stalled in the middle of the highway.

"Hmm. Eighty to zero in what . . . like five seconds." She had shifted into park, unbuckled her seatbelt, opened her door, and stood barefoot on the asphalt, arms stretching lazily, before he could open his mouth.

"What the hell . . ." he gasped. Gus looked around, suddenly aware that his life might reach its unexpected conclusion in this place that he didn't know, and for reasons that he couldn't fathom. *So this is how it ends?*

He scanned for traffic as she rummaged the suitcases, boxes, and trash that cluttered the back seat. Gus weighed his alternatives: slide over and take control of the wheel, get the car out of the roadway; leap out the open door and pull her to the shoulder, out of danger; exit his own side and run for his life. Before one impulse could gain traction over another, he heard the click of the back door and saw her slide into the driver's seat.

"Here." She tossed a faded blue felt Cardinals cap onto his lap. "For your head." Then, more deliberately, she handed him a shallow box, the size of a ream of typing paper. "And for whatever's left inside it."

"What . . ."

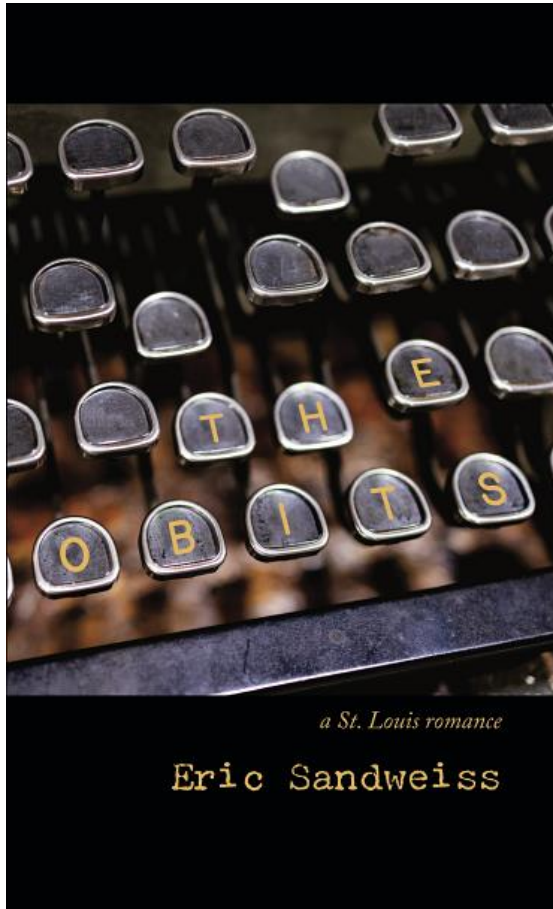
"That," she answered, nodding to the box that he now eyed as if a stray cat had dropped onto his lap. "Somewhere in there's your beginning. After that . . ." she smiled. "I mean it's your story, right?" She shut her door, adjusted her seat belt, shifted into drive, and, without another glance toward her shaken passenger, pressed her foot on the gas pedal.

No one spoke until the car had reached the valley floor. Gus pulled the cap down over his sweaty hair and stared through the windshield. "You trying to kill us both?" he said at last.

“Me? Save us, more like.” She tilted her head in the direction of the box, now resting on Gus’s lap. “Believe me: nobody wants to read your obituary.”

They crested the next hill in silence. Ahead lay another valley, empty as the ones that had come before. This time Gus willed his memory to fill the vacant space; the fleeting image of Manny’s postcards expanded into a collage of old newspaper clippings, recipes, souvenir magnets crowding the fridge. From there he pictured a kitchen; then a house, a street, a neighborhood, a city—dots of memory, experience, hearsay aligning themselves into patterns; patterns resolving into the outline of a familiar silhouette—thin, slump-shouldered—painted, he might have sworn, on a yellow sign that flashed past his window. Gus gave a long, disbelieving look back.

Then he turned, took a breath, opened the box.



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