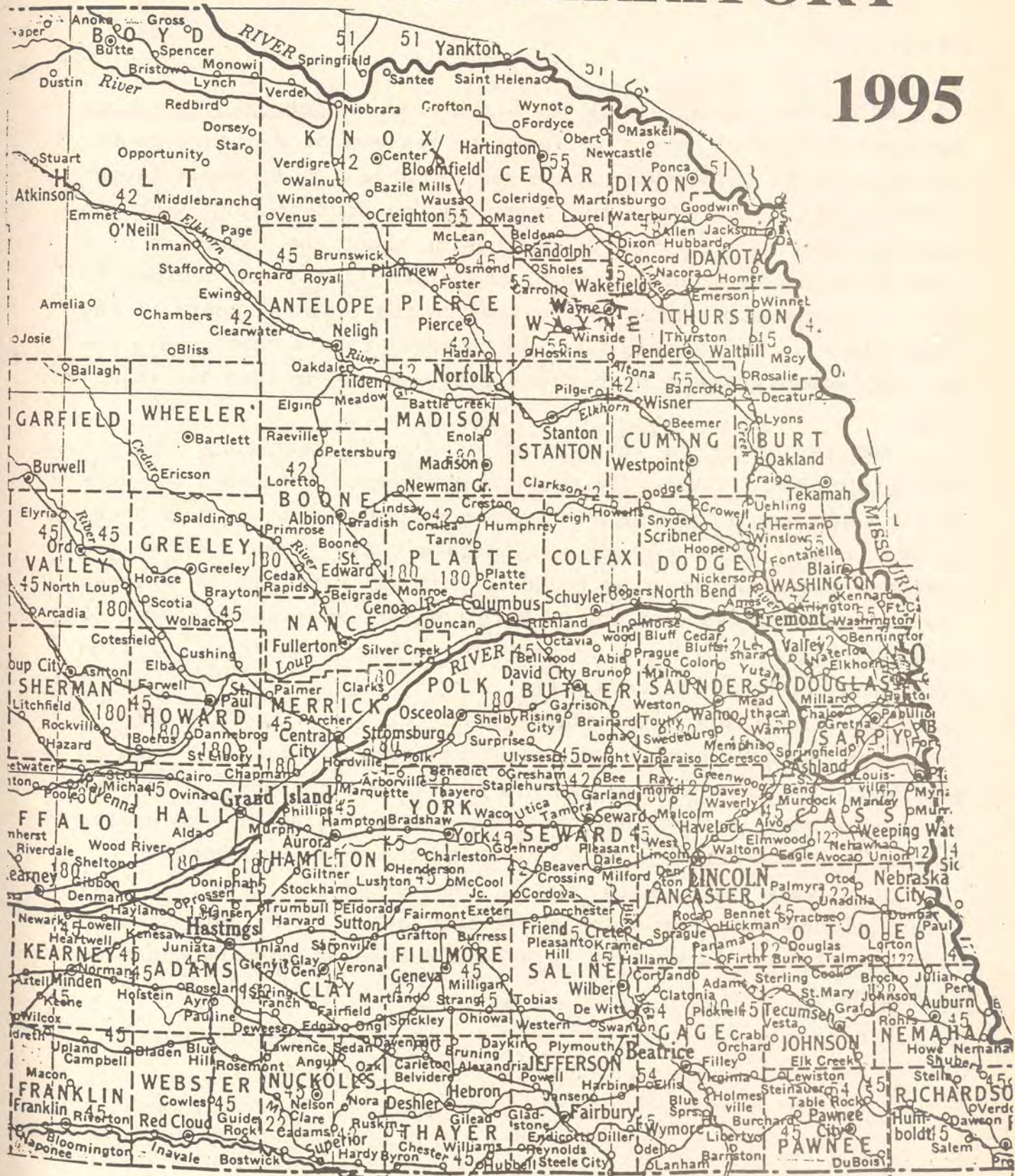


NEBRASKA TERRITORY

1995



Editors Note:

As far as I know this is the first time the Nebraska Territory has ever dedicated an entire issue to reviews of regional poets. The genesis for this review issue was a course J.V. Brummels taught at Wayne State College a few terms ago on Contemporary American Poetry. After a good deal of discussion about the logistics of a term as vague as "contemporary", the class (and J.V.) decided to focus our research papers and reviews on the regional poets of the Great Plains. Very little literary research exists that covers the men and women writers of our prairies, so we decided to change that.

The reviewers in this issue of the NE Territory are all students of WSC. Their varying degrees of experience with the work of our contemporary plains poets bring a freshness to many of these reviews that, in many cases, illuminate these works without the pretense and cynicism often found in critical reviews. So whether you come to this issue of the NE Territory an experienced reader of our plains' poets or as a novice, it is our hope that you find something here you can take home.

This issue was originally slated for the winter of 1995 - well, for the most part, that winter has come and gone. Spring is slumbering on the plains and it's a good time for poetry. The hard shell of winter is cracking; the poets are beginning to sing again. Before long it will be time to plant another crop and hope.

It's like Bill Holm says, "The afterlife must be like this...nights so clear stars count each other." In some strange way I think that is what we have here before us - stars counting each other.

Jeff Smith ed.

Ron Block, Dismal River
New Rivers Press
420 N. 5th St., Suite 910
Minneapolis, MN 55401

But first, are you experienced?

on Ron Block's Dismal River

Ron Block's narrative poem Dismal River is an erratic epijourney through the spirit world of the author. The poem has two authorial persona voices-- Foster and The Other--and additional character voices. These characters are used to show the legacy of rural American culture. The main action of the poem is the author's trip (home again) to Gothenburg, Nebraska and the archetypal canoe trip up and down the Dismal River. The excellence of the poem is the explosive mutation of the archetypal theme into a frenzied contemporary experience. The unifying thread is Block's use of the compelling imagery, to weave a modern vision quest that is disturbing--and humorous-- without being morbid. A quest on which he struggles with the Gods of his geographic culture and those of his inherited one. Block's humor contributes to this sporadic "trip" through his own psyche and the culture that shaped it.

One elusive contemporary element introduced in the poem that facilitates the partial separation of culture and author (in a strictly spiritual sense) is the LSD experience. However, unlike the majority of popular treatments of this element it is not a means for going "out there", in an effort to explore the bounds and limits of perception. Block begins the poem "out there" on the pinnacle of human civilization, and it's course is the meandering one of the Dismal River upon whose banks are the symbols of the author's "in there".

The poem opens with Nebraska which begins, "Bad neighborhoods don't scare me nearly as much/ as the middle of nowhere; the flatlands make me want/ to grab at fences to keep from floating off..." This portrayal of the wide open plains as a boundless and threatening reality, immediately establishes the direction of the poem from the cradle of human evolution to its source.

In the first section of the poem Foster and the Other Block plays with the schizophrenic relationship between the two. The Other is characterized by passive and somewhat academic observance while Foster typically imbues the color of local colloquialisms and the influence of the cowboy and farming traditions of the American frontier. The narrative often shifts without warning from the Other to Foster and this emphasizes the connection between the two as distinct manifestations of the author. Block plays with this in the introduction when, "Foster says, 'For us to be getting down this river/ I'm going to have to invent a bit, but you'll/ never know what I'll be inventing...'"(7) This technique of using the invented character to separate the author from the heritage wraps the narrative tightly around itself.

Foster's heritage is described in the tales about his father and Brady. Suggested in the poems about his father are the instincts of the land. The poem Sioux Lookout, pits the spiritual migration of the Mormons with his father's connection to the land.

His father called, and Foster walked down the slope
from the nape to the shoulder of the hill.

"Look here," his father said. "Ground's broken.
The sod's been broken out and fitted back.
I can't figure it."

On top of the hill,
the monument with half a face and arms
crumbling to the re-bar in its bones
raised a hand to shadow its eyes,
staring at the valley, a river road
where lines of Mormons crawled toward Deseret.

"Looks pretty fresh," his father said.
"Sometimes they bury herbicide out here.
Too small for a calf."

The monument
stared at a distant tractor raising dust.
Evergreen spears of yucca quilled the flanks
of the hill, sticking to the pelts of sod
that feather as they go to seed. Mormons
waded through the valley, the riverbed a map
they called "an angel with a blazing sword"
that led them through the desert wilderness.

"Can't be more than a month old," his father said.

They cheered, mistaking the hill for the crest
that they would cross into another desert,
but the hill stood between them and more sky,
and they dreamed of being buried in the sky.

His father got down on his knees and dug.
He said, "I've got to know what's buried here."

The monument stared at the ghost of dirt
that plows broke and the wind unlocked.

The voice is clearly that of the educated Other, and the poem shows the natural creation of the persona. The conflict between his father's love for the land, and its mysteries, and those who "dreamed of being buried in the sky.", creates a break in the spirit, the identity, of the boy. That eighty was the only piece of ground..., carries this forward by bringing in the adult realities of capitalism and its effect on landmen.

...Still on the Eighty, a chance good yield
was just enough to keep driving him into debt.
A good piece of land, flat river-bottom,
good for gravity irrigation like I say,
and he didn't blame it much that the winds that sometimes
seemed to bring on the smell of distant rivers
hinted at how the Pacific mists would wring
themselves dry before crossing in our direction.
Didn't blame the sky or ground but blamed
himself and worked harder. (18)

His father loses the farm and with it his family. However, "Ballade of the Back Road" closes his father's section with a demonstration of his adaption, and his philosophy.

"BALLADE OF THE BACK ROAD"

"My father's still in business, takes it a day at a time,
'just keeping ahead of the wolves,' he says, and goes
from Gothenburg, looking for a way to find
a deal on irrigation pipes. He knows
the man will give him credit, and he also knows
the farmer he'll deliver it to won't think
it too forward to ask for a check. 'That's how it goes,'
my father says, 'No problem. Everything touches everything

if you take it by steps. If I get to the bank on time,'
he says, 'I'll be able to cover the checks I wrote
to sell this pipe, buy lunch, drive back, not counting the dime

I'll use to call this man who maybe owes me some. Tomorrow I'll pay off what I owe this other guy, but maybe I'll sell something before then, or maybe I'll take out another note,' he says. 'No problem. Everything touches everything. Now if you'll just help me load this load there's time for maybe another delivery for the cash flow to start tomorrow with.' He drives me out to find this farmer's farm, and soon we're lost, driving along rows and rows of corn, and my fathers says, 'I suppose it wouldn't hurt to get to this first thing in the morning. Let's start driving back before the gas stations close.' He says, 'No problem. Everything touches everything.

If you leave out the middle you'll never come close to what you're trying to get at which in this case is gasoline. 'Seems I can't remember where this road goes,' he says, 'No problem. Everything touches everything.'

"Then it hit me that the phrase could come from the Sioux twilight when the whites were confident the Sioux would sell the most of their horses as winter set in, their beef rations halved, them dying liquored to be rubbed out smooth, and they prepared for the end so that the Apache stopped shooting their horses and tearing their arms to death and tried to be glad for death, and among the Crow the women came into the dance circle with the men, some tribes dancing unclothed as in that death where they could be equal and glad, as in the great Ghost Dance that Jack Wilson started by the stockade, foreseeing that the world would be destroyed and recreated a larger space. Then among the Sioux who modestly danced with bits of cloth connecting men's and women's hands, whose last hope of unity with the past and each other was the dance that scared the army so the Hotchkiss guns began to drum the air - they danced until a mass-grave peace was made, the few left starving so that going to see a man about a horse became known to be as easy as pissing."

"Everything touches everything," is the philosophy of the the circle. It is the philosophy of rotation, of nature. The circle is also an integral symbol of Native American spiritual thought. The introduction of this culture occurs early in the poem and is a another source of conflict between the generally passive nature of the protagonist(s). At the local bar Foster encounters "...two Indians keeping play/ at a pool table, winning- it was a

territory/ they could fight for-drunk and winning..." (10) The introduction of the warrior archetype is a malicious opposition to Foster and the Other.

This first occurs in the same section when Foster goes,

...to see a man about a horse, as Brady would say, and in the can I began to think about what the phrase could mean. Maybe some horse-trading turned into a piss-poor deal or maybe traders found agreement by a handshake, smoke, spit a chew, and a friendly piss, standing by the field's edge, putting down their X's in the dirt. (8)

In the next poem the Other creates an alternative meaning,

LANDING

He climbs a hill to sulk as if he could find a still spot, the center of the earth, the navel, and all his feeling would be pressed into a soft was - soft? Maybe like gold or maybe hard like kernel, immutable, never growing yet fully mature, then Foster could draw all his feeling from the world, and - grounded - he could draw the lighting down, his heart beating like rumbling tin sheets - like the sky, he thinks - his heart beating so he can feel it in his feet and thinks the ground's heart is a seed and pounds like his - if this, he would never know what it was he felt, he would only think it was the rain he felt. If I left him standing until morning, let him bury his feet in the ground that feels his heart's beating until I walked up the hill to greet him, he'd say "I am Foster's tree and here I stand. I can do no other."

The result of these conflicting pseudo-realities is the laughter in the next poem, which shows the internal struggle between the differences of two cultures founded on the same vision. These differences are in effect the separate Gods of these cultures. However, the Other finds this amusing because he exists outside both of them.

Block uses the technique of the spirit animal-a jaybird- to represent the intrusion of the warrior archetype on his passivity. The presence of Native American Culture and the narrators meditations on this history "set the stage" for the introduction of the catalyst for the vision quest. This is done by Foster who

CITY
STATE
ZIP

takes from the provisions, "...a metal tin/ with a stage painted on the lid..." and extracts, "...Two/ minute triangular tabs of paper..." (27)

The narrative at this point becomes increasingly sporadic but continues to follow a general progression "from the city to the river's mouth and back." (84) The general conflict between Foster and the Other is represented by these two symbolic locations. The Other is the product of civilization (of the Other world of books), whereas Foster is of the land. The introduction of the Jaybird into this theme points out this difference first in regard to the Other in the poem *A Warning*, in which the Jaybird attacks the sweeping significance of the literate legacy of the modern world.

"Your words all say one thing. 'I'm HERE,' you say.
That's all I get out of you. 'I'm HERE!' As if I CARE?
So what?...You're ugly and crippled as birds without
beaks! And there's other things you LACK..., but I lack
NOTHING! So long as I keep my sense of malice!
Because I need nothing else, not even my own nest! (29)

The jaybird calls into question the Other's identity, but it confirms Foster's in *Lunch*:

as Foster swings his paddle at the branch, surprised to
see the bird swoop down at him, making him duck and
cover up his head, heart-pounding and panicked, but
surprised to be glad, glad that he could fight this
bird for food, glad to curse and have the jaybird
cursing back. This is what he came here for. (31)

The integration of these two themes takes place in the poems *Landing* and *Landless* in which Foster's connection with the land is solidified.

LANDLESS

Foster stands in the rain
and looks across a shadowed valley,
arms out, drenched as the new born.

He is Foster, sans profile in tree
and carries all of Foster with him,
sways and bends,
no ground to hold him -

a jaybird singing in his limbs.

I found in Block's poem all the themes characteristic of what

has been termed the "Regional poetry of the Midwest". What I thankfully did not find is these themes being expressed in the rather mundane descriptions of common rural life. I was not asked to understand the significance of the chores, but of the land for which the chores are performed. The placement of the Other who is a "town boy", (71) as the central narrator also eliminated the exclusion I've felt at reading other rural poetry. *Dismal River* is above everything an adventure. The river's kaleidoscopic geography and landmarks make the poem's images keenly memorable. Block couples with this a meandering but simple philosophy dedicated to the altered perception of the land in which the boundaries are not explored because there are no boundaries.

Keith Humphrey

Shirley Buettner, Walking Out The Dark, 1984
Juniper Press
LaCrosse, WI

Grace in the Face of Harsh Reality

When Venus begins its ride
over the moon, I lift
my father's light bones
to the threshold, to blow them
toward home, before I hear
the voice of my mother,
calling him in
from the dark.

from "The Visit"

Were it not for sorrow, we could not know joy. There exists, in Shirley Buettner's poetry, an element of melancholy as she mirrors the people and places she writes about.

It is obvious that Shirley Buettner is no stranger to pain, suffering, and the harsh realities of life. On the surface, her poetry could be described as depressing. Yet, after reading Walking Out The Dark several times, I do not and have not felt depressed. And each time I finish, I ask myself why, "Why am I not depressed?" Then I pick it up and read it again. Perhaps it is the strength and dignity imbued in those she reflects upon that cause me to reunite with my own powers of endurance and equanimity.

"Farm Sale" tells of an old lady being legally driven from her home. Though she bears her loss with composure, the forces of nature respond:

Now she was
going blind
and the county examiner
said she must leave.

She shuffled between
cramped rooms
choosing knick-knacks
for her favorite neighbors.

On sale day
the sky
shed
buckets.

In this poem, as with many others, Buettner conveys a sense of "a loosening. Then a loss." Perhaps the "loosening" is, in effect, preparation for the inevitable loss, serving as an emotional cushion without sacrificing strong imagery.

Buettner is distinctly imagist. Her language is simple, her approach direct, and her endings poignant. In "Habits," she contemplates this basic human characteristic while observing the spontaneity of nature and the animal world:

...a mound of red
still wet from birth. Watch it
wobble to its knees, then up, up

into the beef-eating greed.
This is, of course, the slobber
of money, this is
the last word.

Though she describes her poetry as being primarily "woman's," "farm" or "regional," and "poetry of place," the above passage reveals her ability to universalizes specific events, common only to those of rural persuasion.

Yet, she is equally capable of pulling a common element from the universe, such as a solitary tree, and spotlighting from the uniqueness:

One small cedar
has chosen
not to follow the row,
stands apart in the windbreak.

One would think
that with more room to grow,...
it would tower over the rest,
but it holds to its smallness,
defying both the rules of the row
and it genes.

from "A Rebel"

Through the majority of Buettner's poetry seems to display the obvious free-verse influence of Walt Whitman, she generally writes complete sentences, often spreading them over more than one stanza, justifies left, with an occasional, but subtle, rhyme or slant-rhyme, or simile. She incorporates all of these in the following:

"The Cottonwood,"

tall twisted father,
guards the square
of the yard,
holds the light
on the undersides
of its leaves
like silver murmurs.

Its center,
split wide
by a sudden fork
of lightening
is burned and bare.

Ask any father
why it stands there,
bent and shaking,
limbs lopped and askew--

Ask any father.

"The Cottonwood" illustrates the eternal interconnectedness between all life within and including the universe. It all falls under the broad theme of family, which encompasses the past as well as the present, reaching into eternity. "HANDS, they are always moving/ in and out of my past..."

Though not religious in content or nature, per se, Buettner conveys an earthly yet spiritual quality to poetry and life, bordering an mysticism. Still, she manages to keep a focus on reality, meeting adversity head-on, without turning away. Perhaps, this was instilled in her as a result of being born in the days of

this country's Depression and witnessing her grandparents' loss of their farm as a small child.

"Before Owls Sleep" tells of stalking a coyote in the pre-dawn hours as it, too, is stalking, then come in contact with a scouring calf. The poem exhibits a combination of slant-rhyme and dark humor as the bead is drawn:

...Before disappearing
behind the trees, he pauses,
turns to consider the feast.
In that revolution
I drop him with one squeeze.

Outside the realm of Hinduism, cattle, in and of themselves, are not deemed sacred, romantic, or dignified. Their value is determined strictly by human greed, a commodity. Concern for their welfare extends no further than money in the pocket or a meal on the table. But they, too, are distinct creatures of the earth, capable of being great teachers for anyone caring to learn. The title poem, "Walking Out The Dark," vividly describes an old cow attempting to give birth to her breached offspring during calving:

We walked the night out waiting for her
to go down with pain, but she never did,
knowing that something was wrong,
that one foot should always follow another.

And so, fingering the new light
with cranes and crows, we walked her home,
and in the mud-sucking lot, with chain
and puller, we found the other foot
bent back, and even with the last
wrenching pop, that old cow still stood,
taking the morning's loss without moaning,
without lying down.

After repeated attempts to track Shirley Buettner down a year-and-a-half ago, I finally succeeded and learned that she had suffered a massive stroke in October of '91, which forced her

virtual disappearance from the literary scene. I'd like to know if anyone besides me bothered to ask why. In a recent telephone conversation with her, I have learned that Buettner's career as an esteemed professor at the University of Nebraska at Kearney is over. Yet, within three years of her devastating and permanently disabling misfortune, this remarkable lady has overcome a great deal of her resulting paralysis and is expecting her second book of poetry, Thorns, to be published by Juniper Press, LaCrosse, Wisconsin, in January of '95.

Perhaps it's this "never-say-die" quality in Buettner, herself, that puts the magic in her poetry, the strength, the dignity that is her own. Shirley Buettner is no stranger to pain, suffering, and harsh realities of life. Still, she stands, "taking the morning's loss without moaning, without lying down."

Carol J. McDonald

Twyla Hansen, How To Live In The Heartland, 1992
Flatwater Editions
825 M St. Suit 101
Lincoln, NE 68508

The Fresh Voice Of Twyla Hansen

Twyla Hansen's first book, How To Live In The Heartland, is a potpourri of poems and it's no surprise that the majority of these focus on rural life. The book contains childhood memories, bits of wisdom, and love songs for the plains. On all of these topics she writes with delightful freshness. From her rural childhood, to her urban life in Lincoln, she relates her experience of being a Nebraskan. Praises can be written on the spectrum of her poetry, but I wish to specifically focus on her unique "prairie poems".

Hansen's most compelling poetry unites her feminine voice and her love of the plains. Her background in horticulture combines with her affection for the grasslands, and the poems that grow out of this union bloom. She personifies the prairie beautifully with unique images. In "Love Poem From The Prairie," she writes, "gold-tangled indiagrass/ untamed blue indigo eyes/ coneflower breasts/ thigh-deep in bluestem/ goldenrod legs ...come lie with me/ breathe my purples/ my golds/ taste my rosehips...."

In the following short poem Hansen wonderfully depicts mother nature in provocative feminine apparel. She personifies the prairie as a flirtatious lover that teases the reader:

When the Prairie Speaks
It whispers I'm wearing
my purple dress, my red slip,
now my golden wild underthings;
oh, can you recall, how

on that autumn afternoon in a
slant of sun, the breeze called
you out of that stone life, how
you and your love took flight,
skyward like startled pheasants;

it says I'm the distant hillside,
patient, waiting for you,
discovery in every season;
laid out, it whispers I'm yours;
be listening.

In "Nine-Mile Prairie Mid-Way", Hansen uses powerful images to create the tranquility of dusk. As I read this poem I could feel her passion for the land and sense the land breathing out a sigh of love and affection back to her. Her awareness of detail, like the sounds of "bullfrogs chanting in mud", vividly stirs memories of evening strolls that I have taken. She knows the prairie intimately and writes about it with exquisite charm.

out here on a hilltop
you discover
how brief sunset lasts
watching the red ball
sink into the dust
shadows paling
the flat-chested hills
now knitted in green

down in the gullies
cool willows and elms
thicken with gnats
birds scatter
bedding down the day
the gradual loss of light
slowing all things
to still-life

toward moonrise
deer step out of hiding
owls sweep their prey
bullfrogs chant in mud
in step with the breeze
bluestems rise and fall
cottonwoods rattle
wild indigos bloom

each day the repetition
of sun and wind and sun
you feel it breathe
from the bottom
of it's deepest roots
this tallgrass relict
exhales its stored-up heat
back to the stars

"Nine Mile Prairie Mid-Way"

Twyla Hansen's writing has a musical, liquid quality that I found highly appealing. She makes her debut with How To Live In The Heartland at a time when the most influential writers in the state are men. Her poetry is like the soprano of a musical score that compliments the works of Kloefkorn, Kooser, and others. She

writes with that elusive "women's touch" that is gentle and slightly timid, but it's more than her gender that earns her respect as a Nebraska poet. She excels at capturing the "nuance" of the prairie. She can beautifully embody the solitude of an evening walk in a poem. The combination of her knowledge and love for the prairie, her unassuming manner, and her feminine voice convey her poems with perfection.

Val Christensen

Linda Hasselstrom, Roadkill, 1987
Spoon River Poetry Press
Box 1443
Peoria, IL 61655

Linda Hasselstrom, Land Circle, 1991
Fulcrum, Inc.
Golden, CO

Bill Holm, The Music of Failure, 1985
Plains Press
Southwest State University
Marshall, MN 56258

Bill Holm, The Dead Get By With Everything, 1991
Milkweed Editions
Minneapolis, MN 55424

The View from a Circle

Linda Hasselstrom, a small but sturdy and strong woman-- Bill Holm, a huge and burly man: both are born of the soil, both live with the soil and both will return to the soil. These two poetry and prose writers live and breathe a circular life with the earth, fully aware of the give and take required of nature. These circular lives are deeply integrated with their ancestors, and the land which their ancestors toiled to make it their own. It all adds up to harmony of past, present and future.

Combining prose and poetry in their books, Hasselstrom and Holm, create a unique experience for the reader. Holm's poem "Round Barn, Westerheim" is elaborated upon in the essay "An Icelandic Woman Visits Minnesota". Perhaps the poem elaborates upon the essay. In either case, the reader is exposed to a most important aspect of Holm: his recognition of his ties to the past, and the ancestors which created this past.

...it smells of old hay; wind
slides through the missing shingles
in the high dome; empty iron stalls; hoof prints
on black dirt from cattle long dead and eaten...

becomes "The barn is full of the smell of old hay. Wind whistles through missing shingles in the high dome. Iron stalls are empty now. We see hoofprints on black dirt, made by cattle long since dead and eaten." Although the prose may provide a more complete

picture, poetry and prose need not be compared. The two are different genres, and simply provide a different meal for different tastes or moods. Not all of Holm's essays and poems are as directly connected as the preceding example. The similarities in influence and purpose tie them all together.

In Hasselstrom's Land Circle, however, the poems seem to supplement the essays, and are written for that purpose. They are able to stand alone, but I believe the poems in this particular book are not nearly as strong as those in Roadkill. Hasselstrom currently is concentrating on her prose rather than her poetry.

Holm is more able to move fluidly between the two. He seems to have many different ways of expressing his ideas, whereas Hasselstrom chooses to work with the prose genre in her recent publications. However, my purpose is certainly not to choose between authors, but to illustrate some minor differences and concentrate on their similarities. The books of interest are Holm's The Music of Failure (prose), and The Dead Get By With Everything (primarily poetry); and Hasselstrom's Land Circle (primarily prose), and Roadkill (poetry).

In Hasselstrom we also see the ties to her ancestors. My favorite of hers in this particular area is "Planting Peas:"

...I bare my hand and dole out shriveled peas,
one by one

I see my grandmother's hand,
doing just this, dropping peas
into gray gumbo that clings like clay.
This moist earth is rich and dark
as chocolate cake...

I miss
her smile, her blue eyes, her biscuits and gravy,
but mostly her hands...

Roadkill

All things cycle back to the earth in death. Death is seen as a natural process and progression of the circle of life. Hasselstrom's writing is able to bring us to the heart of what it means to be alive--to appreciate being an amalgamation of all that has existed. The reader can't help but appreciate the feeling of responsibility to the land. She speaks plainly, but what she

echoes is so profound, provocative and dignified in its eloquent simplicity.

One does not have to be a scholarly ecologist to feel the pain of the land. Much of Hasselstrom's prose in Land Circle represents a common sense stand for the environment. "I think recent droughts on the plains, accompanied by horrible wildfires, dust storms, and heat, are nature's way of saying STOP!... Everywhere I see crops that cannot survive without extensive human aid and a massive expenditure of water or other costly medicines--..." ("Lettuce Bouquets for a Dry Country," Land Circle). Here Hasselstrom volunteers a fiercely delicate plea for the life and land she loves. Why such love? Because as it's a part of her in every organic visceral sense, so it is an integral part of the whole. As humans are a small dot upon the sphere, the land provides the form for the sphere.

through their deaths. This whole idea is obvious in Holm's essay "the History of the Land:"

"First the glacier had it, then the buffalo, then the buffalo and Sioux together. I know the facts; I've picked and found arrowheads.

"Then Sveinn Johannesson got it from the Homestead Office which didn't want it."

The prose ends with (concerning the "worth" of the land) "I hold with buffalo guts myself, or maybe five years' work. It's a lot like the history of America, worth both nothing and everything" (The Dead Get By With Everything). The worth of the land circles back to the dead inhabitants with which it had the most interaction.

The mention of America in the preceding passage indicates another aspect of Holm's writing. He uses political irony to question the importance of land ownership. He also wants to know what America is all about. Why does history keep circling back with the same mistakes?

...It's us who fertilize our own
miseries and love them.
We are a human patch of dandelions,
each yellow flower mumbling:
one more war, one more of those
presidents and then we'll stop.

Every drink is the drunk's last one,
then the next one, and the next one,
and we all know it, whatever
public lies we tell each other
while bending our heads to the hoe.

"Spring Again," *The Dead Get By With Everything*

Many of the poems in this collection reiterate this theme. In *Land Circle*, Hasselstrom, too, asks the government to take responsibility for that which it claims to own. Perhaps even more importantly she requests that each individual take responsibility on her own. For example, at the end of *Land Circle* she challenges the reader "to get through a day without using anything that isn't biodegradable." She also urges us to think about what we really need in the way of material possessions ("*Work Boots and the Sustainable Universe*"). Hasselstrom offers advice in "*Handbook to Ranching*:"

To conserve energy,
when a pickup is not moving ahead
shut the motor off.
Starters and batteries are cheaper
than gasoline these days....
Don't waste feed; know how much
you're feeding to every animal.
A penny saved is a penny earned.
Never call a veterinarian if you can avoid it...

These are common-sense rules in a seemingly complicated world. The message in Hasselstrom's writing is: After a hard day's work, the satisfaction of living a whole (circular) life with the land is the only possession worth having. This is similar to Holm's questioning who owns the land in the first place.

Holm and Hasselstrom are both deeply concerned with the loss of identity of the land, through the "melting" of language, culture, and the past into what looks like a bleak future for the land and its working people. In "*The Music of Failure: Variations on an Idea*," Holm says

"English Puritans who came to build a just and godly order began by trying to exterminate Indian tribes. They tried to revise the English class system of rich landowners and poor yeomen by sharing a common bounty, but this lasted only until somebody realized that true profit lay in landowning, her as in England..."

This piece also illustrates the cycle of history repeating itself.

Holm's ancestry is Icelandic, and much of his writing explores this aspect of himself, as well as his recognition of its melting away. This is seen in "The Icelandic Emigration to Minnesota, Minnesota:"

...In the third generation, all that was left:
Sweet cake, small stories, a few words whose meaning
Slunk away to die under the mental stone
That buries the lost languages of America...
The first tongue lost, did they acquire another?
The language of marketing and deterring
For the language of fish, poverty and poems?

The Dead Get By With Everything

The life of those who work the land is also a motif in both authors' writing. Hasselstrom does this by giving the very details of everyday life on the prairie. She vividly describes "Calving Time," "Fixing Fences" and "Drying Onions." She cycles the land in "Elegy on a Dead Cow." Holm is also in love with the prairie:

"...I like driving late on those roads without
traffic....Unseen sloughs full of muskrat settled in
under their domed wattles, while the beavers were up
gnawing boxelders, thumping to each other as they
tended the water supply. Under it all, woodchucks
and badgers burrowed among the night crawlers, and
above, invisible in the dark, hawks eyed the action
suspiciously like policemen tending the bazaar...
The other sobering thought for humans is how much
joy goes on without us..."

"The Grand Tour," The Music of Failure

This particular essay gripped me with its spirit, love and tinges of sadness. The reader is strong if she can read it without a tear in the eye, or an understanding of nature's song of human failure.

Speaking of songs, another similarity occurring in Holm and Hasselstrom is the influence of Walt Whitman. Both Hasselstrom's "Seven Lessons on the Grass" (Roadkill) and Holm's "A Circle of Pitchforks" (The Dead Get By With Everything) contain elements of Whitman. What identifies these two poets is their view of life from a circle: land forms energy-using matter which is recycled to the land again. A steady give and take means death and rebirth--not in a linear fashion, but as circles which net together into a sphere created by harmony of land, ancestry, and hard work.

Bill Holm The Dead Get By with Everything, 1990
Milkweed Editions
P.O. Box 3226
Minneapolis, MN 55403

Coming Home Holm

Robert Bly says of his fellow Minnesotan, "Bill Holm not only testifies to energy, he is a source of energy." In his collection of poems, *The Dead Get By With Everything*, it is the lack of energy which surrounds him in America which disturbs Holm. The dichotomy between the basic philosophy of "America" and the institution which has developed under that name aggravates Holm. Rather than the fiercely creative energy manifested in the immigrants who formed a country of individualists, many of his poems describe the assimilation which diseases Americans.

Holm's idea of what America and Americans should be is embodied in "Turtle." The turtle has powerful energy not only in life, but even after death. Even though he is captured, the turtle is subject to no one; his species's history of endurance and of "patience of soul" suggests that even the turtle's violent death will not subdue it. The first stanza recounts the turtle's severed, buried head still clamping its jaw, but the image of the turtle's killing is equally as dramatic:

"He'll Be a bastard to Kill," She says.
"I'll hold out a piece of meat
and when he goes for it,
Wally'll get the head in pinchers
and I'll saw it off at the neck.
But he won't die yet!
Damn things live without the head!
We nail him to a tree and bleed him
twelve, fourteen, sixteen hours;
kill him at night--by God!
next morning those claws will
still be grabbing out at you.

The turtle's heartiness acts as Holm's model for his own species--the energy he wishes Americans had. What energy they do have, they use up in routine activities. Contrary to the philosophy of divergence and acceptance on which the immigrants came to the country, modern Americans are conformist, and they fear that the creative will change their comfortable lives. The

hesitance to accept the unknown is evident in "Advice":

Someone dancing inside us
has learned only a few steps:
the "Do-Your-Work" in 4/4 time,
and the "What-Do-You-Expect" waltz.

Holm goes on to warn that if the dancer doesn't invite the mysterious woman with "the rumba / and strange steps in jumpy / rhythms from the mountains of Bulgaria," life will continue to be as predictable as it always has been. People must actively pursue creativity; this, according to Holm, is what many American fail to do.

This lack of creativity, really the loss of uniqueness, is the sad result of Americans' goal of assimilation. "The icelandic Emigration to Minnesota, Minnesota" traces the eventual loss of ethnic identity his family (presumably) underwent when they settled here. At first, the immigrants were the outsiders who "said their R's wrong." They overcame their accent, and during the second generation, they were "Americanized: "the names went wrong in the neighbors' / Mouths." Only two generations removed from the migration, all that is left ethnically are a cake recipe, some stories, and "a few words whose meaning / Slunk away to die under the mental stone / That buries all the lost languages in America." Holm compares the elimination of ethnic identity to a famous B movie:

In *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*,
Seed pods open in your own closet at night,
Metastasizing into a body indistinguishable from your own, but the brain
Is something new, without memory, without
Passion, without you. Is this what it's like
To become a whole American at last?

Holm wants his "species," Americans, to use their energy to go beyond an artificial American standard, and he entreats those surrounding him to be energetic enough to maintain their individualism. This desire is consistent with the reason America exists as a creative haven. The founding citizens of the country, having emigrated for various issues of freedom and independence, created the nation with a philosophy following these needs. But the country has forced their descendants to conform to a standard, which leaves no room for the creativity for which Bill Holm yearns.

William Kloefkorn, A Life Like Mine, 1984
Platte Valley Press
Lincoln, NE

David Lee, Day's Work, 1990
Copper Canyon Press
Port Townsend, WA

Living with the Passion

...the sheer
peril of living with a passion
that shatters all at once
from infinitesimal fractures
in time...

Paul Zarzyski's "All This Way for the
Short Ride"

Each person possesses an inner drive. It forces him to decide how to meet a day's challenge. For some, that passion may be a forceful, deep desire, pushing them to achieve their best; it may destroy others. David Lee's Day's Work and Williams Kloefkorn's A Life Like Mine reveal the passion of two distinct authors and friends. The poetry contained herein roots itself in friendliness and nostalgia. Though the content of the poems differ, both Lee and Kloefkorn utilize similar techniques to display their passion for life. Lee writes of the intensity in a day's work. Kloefkorn revels in blazing emotions of seasoned memories.

David Lee's Day's Work reflects upon his daily surroundings. The trill of familiar conversation enhances those surroundings. Lee's utilization of monologue and dialect in his poems flavors them with the farm and a gritty taste of accomplishment.

In "After an All-Night Farrow" Lee paints a sunrise with "gold lace" and "sun spraying/the pasture." The poem soars above others describing the beauty of new birth:

Rooster: flap your wings!
Scratch up
a breakfast song
for these eight
newborn children.

"September" sketches autumn by briefly glimpsing a sow's sleepy stretch.

Evening:
the red sow
rises from her mud
to wade in
elm shadow.

"August: Midnight Farrow" paints the gilt's magnificence through the impressive and forceful action of a summer storm.

How beautifully brown
and deep
the red gilt's eyes
by lightning.

Lee is an appreciative farmer, and this gratitude is one of the reasons his brief poems are so effective. Farm work consumes him, and through this passion Lee creates glorious yet humorous poetry.

Living on a hog farm is foreign to me. However, Lee captures memories of an old farmer sauntering through a windy story and boldly enlightening his neighbor with his wisdom. This author's work is more than images; Lee displays clever skill and insightful perspective in his writing. His use of dialect and lack of punctuation in the conversational poems were, at first, difficult to master, but this style exists throughout and eventually even a young-un can whip it.

"Castrating Pigs" is one of Lee's finest conversational poems. I think of it as the Huckleberry Finn poem of this selection: old John gets young David to help him castrate his pigs. David realizes "...I knew John was/ going to try to get me/ to cut the

rest of his pigs..." John heaps on the hard luck stories, smothers his partner with sheer laziness, and David finally volunteers to finish the job. During the following story John needles David's sense of humor and his masculine compassion.

...this one time he's setting there
hammering this green piece
he hit the wedge and somehow
it went down but then
popped right back up and out
that popular wood snapped together
closed right up on his privates
that was hanging partly down
in a split part
like a vice slamt shut on him
oh my god below me
he bellered loud as he could

The painfully humorous situation is colored with backwoods jargon; "Monkey Ward," "conniption," "sick and afflicted," "Christian duty" and "wallering." It all contributes to the country flavor Lee so masterfully creates.

This common talk continues in another of my favorite poems, "Edna Mae." Again, Lee masters the tall tale through the creation of two vivid characters, Edna Mae, and Rufus.

...You could tell when somebody died
in town, here's come Edna Mae
down the street wearing her gold
high heeled shoes
she always wore to funerals
and her mink stole rain or sun
cold or hot she wore it
we all called it her evening gown
the whole town would know
somebody's dead before we known
who it was when we seen
Edna Mae's gold high heels...

The combination of an undertaker and his fashion-conscious wife in gold high heels establishes Lee's fantastic imagination and

verifies his ability to make the audience smile. Only a writer with passion for his subject can elicit this personal response.

...She helped Rufus out
with the funerals and dead bodies
putting on their clothes
pinning on the corsages and
getting them right
her and Rufus was artists they sed
and I spoze so
didn't matter how mashed up
they was when them two could get them natural
so they just looked dead
and the coffin lid could be opened
at the churchhouse to see
even Edgar Turner and his head
was half shot off...

Finally, Lee utilizes monologue in several poems of reflection. My favorite was "Morning Coffeebreak" which parallels the explosive impulses of a youngster with the balance of a seasoned man. While the child chooses adventure, the man opts for serenity. Lee concludes:

...I set down...
watching a chipmunk go down a hole
and one of us goes to sleep
and the other one don't care
whether he dreams about him or not.

"Morning Coffeebreak" ends on a peaceful note; however, I believe this poem best describes the underlying heartbeat of this poetry. While David Lee invests in hard work and long days, it is the serenity of the day's work that seeps through his writing, creating a powerful well of emotion and humor. Just as Lee's "morning Coffeebreak" parallels boyhood and manhood, so begins William Kloefkorn's A Life Like Mine.

This collection of poems is similar to Day's Work, yet Kloefkorn's style and attitude toward his subjects differs. William Kloefkorn writes of a multitude of lifetime memories, some

humorous, most familiar to the audience. After savoring these mementoes from his past I did not feel like an intruder as I have with other poetry; instead, I felt Kloefkorn spoke directly to me as if we were seated at a fireside with a hot cup of tea.

He began by telling me of the value of the great values of his childhood and work. Kloefkorn grew up during the Great Depression, and the first few poems transport his reader. "Onion Soup" draws the picture of an ill child being tormented by a sickness only home remedies can cure. The frustration of the child is intensified by "Satan, the croup." "In my throat he reaches/ far down to turn me/ wrong side out. I cannot endure/ the snakebite, cannot swallow/ the cure." Kloefkorn captures the defeat we have each felt. He ends the poem with a glorious swell of daybreak.

After a long spasm
I push back the last
quilt. In the silence
I can almost hear my body
cooling, losing its weight,
detaching itself from the drag
of rock-heavy bones. Mother
with the flat of one hand
holds me down. By and by, she
sings, when the morning comes.

This serenity is typical of Kloefkorn's peaceful style. He takes his reader to the scene and lifts him from it as easily as a bird.

Humor plays an important role in this author's poetry.

"Trading Comic Books" and "Prove It" mix the logic of a young boy with his repetitious phraseology to create two masterpieces of boyhood conversation as well as my favorites of the collection.

William Kloefkorn's writings turn a wide circle from boyhood to manhood. "First Time" uncovers the private exhilaration of

being near a young girl gently and kindly, without cheap descriptions.

Kloefkorn not only includes emotions from his past, but he also paints a great canvas of memories. "Kicking Leaves" and "October" describe nature's beauty and the realization of his love for his wife. Says he during a walk in the leaves, "I can't get enough of you behind me." The ambiguity of the remark directs attention to the beauty around him or his lover; the choice of interpretation is kindly left to the reader.

Kloefkorn shares the precise thoughts and feelings of a wise man. He revels in his past and shares those memories as an old friend would. "At Nineteen Months My Grandson William Joseph Plays the Harmonica" begins;

Not a miracle, not
talent, least of all
luck: just an al-
together natural
impulse to make some-
thing further of that
which we breathe out
to breathe in....

Simplicity is the crux of the passion Kloefkorn experiences and writes about. This encompassing desire to encounter life sweetens as Kloefkorn ages. As a youngerster, impulses are quick and lack reflection; as a grandfather, his hindsight creates richer memories.

Both David Lee and William Kloefkorn are writers of passion. The wallowing and frolicking augment each writer's world. Today, trust lies in material objects and artificial feelings, but these authors furnish us with old-fashioned morals and values. A laugh cheers; a tear cleanses; a vivid memory entertains. In David Lee's

Day's Work and William Kloefkorn's A Life Like Mine, we find humor and peace and wisdom. Books validating such truths can only be deemed masterpieces.

Kathy J. Fuchser

William Kloefkorn, Dragging Sand Creek for Minnows
Spoon River Poetry Press
P.O. Box 6
Granite Falls, MN 56241

William Kloefkorn and Ted Kooser, Cottonwood County
Windflower Press
P.O. Box 82213
Lincoln, NE 68501

William Kloefkorn, Going Out, Coming Back
White Pine Press
10 Village Square, Suite 28
Fredonia, New York 14063

LOOKING FOR A HERO

William Kloefkorn is a man who identifies with a hero. As a poet he tells about his heroes in a creative manner within the pages of his books Dragging Sand Creek for Minnows, Cottonwood County, and Going Out, Coming Back.

Kloefkorn is curious about life in the poem "In a Motel Room Somewhere in Western Nebraska," printed in Dragging Sand Creek for Minnows. The poet remembers many nights lying sleepless, trying to "sort out to understand / what can neither be sorted out / nor understood." He knows from years of experience that there are no definite answers or solutions to the questions that plague him. As he sits alone, with his thoughts, his mind focuses upon the tv.

Nolan Ryan with the Rangers
registers his seventh career no-hitter.
At 44 he is proof that hero is something more
than concept - he is the star with flesh on its bone,
though the nerve-ends in his arm remain
elusive as the wink in the eye of Venus.

Nolan Ryan is a hero. He winds up for a fast ball, his leg kicking out behind him, and then releases. He makes it look easy, putting away batters who are half his age. Nolan Ryan is the picture of endurance, the old man on the hill with all the answers. William Kloefkorn and thousands others see Ryan as a hero. He is a shining example of a person's capabilities.

The poem's end reveals no new answers for the poet.

Except to wonder, as tonight I wonder,
about the backdrop that makes the glory possible;
the darkness beyond the stars,
the batter in the bottom of the beautiful ninth,
two gone, the count at two and two,
going, as they say the earth and heavens go,
around, around.

Kloefkorn knows there are no answers, but there will always be questions.

Kloefkorn sees another hero in Crazy Horse. The poem, "Crazy Horse; Final Reflection No. 7", is printed in Cottonwood County. Though his body has been dead for over 100 years, Crazy Horse's spirit lives. He is a hero for his people.

The heart of Crazy Horse
lies throbbing in a box
that was not long enough.

So they cut him in half,
and on a pony drag delivered him
to somewhere just this side of Pepper Creek.

No one knows the precise spot,
they say. They say,
where ever it is,

that place must now be covered
high with prairie brome
whose roots reach down,

they say,
to catch the throbbing
of the heart of Crazy Horse,

to send the drumtap
up and out and over
all the earth:

it does not matter where this body lies,
for it is grass;
but where this spirit is, there
it will be good for all of us to be.

There isn't a known grave to place a marker to remember Crazy Horse. A granite tombstone would be an inappropriate way to remember this man known for his spirituality, his wildness, his love of freedom and the open prairie. The tombstone is a white man's method to remember the dead, with a few words chipped out for

future generations to read and wonder about. Instead what Crazy Horse has is wild grass. It lives from water and minerals pulled from the prairie, into its roots, to feed the blades that blow in the wind. The grass is wild like him. The waving blades are his hair, or the mane of his horse as they thunder across the land revelling in their freedom.

Kloefkorn's use of the metaphor of the heart beating out drumtaps is what clinches the poem. The drums pound under an open sky, calling the people together. They are united by the spirit of Crazy Horse, who is a hero to them.

Kloefkorn's most recent book of poems has another hero of a ballgame. "Fastpitch Finals" takes a close look at "the clean-up kid" who proves that good things come to those who wait. He has:

... spent most of his days
and many of his early evenings
aboard a John Deere
eating dust and making up songs
to pass the time that wasn't passing,
lyrics like when the moon comes up
and the stars shine bright
I'll be dancing with my steady
under blue neon light,

At home, in the fields, he works at his own pace. To pass the time he improvises songs to go with the rhythms of the tractor's motor. On the ball field the kid takes his time, waiting for the pitch with his name on it.

so he holds back until the last instant,
then with quick lean wrists
tomahawks that floating melon
into far right center,
and before the ball touches grass
already he is rounding first.

Kloefkorn makes this more than a game. The "clean-up kid from Bloomfield" has a reason for playing ball like he does. It's his way to put into action some of the latent thoughts he experiences during his work week:

and when he sees the coach's right arm
spinning like the prop of a windmill
he hightails it for home,
arriving there on his bell,
yet another helping of dust
sweet as topsoil in his mouth, and

instantly he is on his feet,
brushing himself and touching his teammates' hands,
the game over and his girl
having come all that way to watch him
watching him from
high on toes
that can't stop their own mad dancing
high in the blue neon stands.

Everyone needs a hero. William Kloefkorn's vision allows him to identify with a hero from many walks of life. He has a unique ability to show his audience a different view of these heroes. Kloefkorn's use of powerful imagery enables his readers to see a new dimension of these heroes. We can see how and why they operate as they do, thus we too can identify with Kloefkorn's heroes.

C Barnes

Greg Kuzma, Of China and of Greece, 1984
SUN
New York, NY

Words From a Best Cellar

I was told by the poet David Lee that at one time Greg Kuzma was the most popular poet in the world, that at one time there wasn't a publisher with the courage to reject a poem with the name Kuzma signed to it. I did not ask when, the question sounding hostile in my head before leaving my lips. I will assume, though, around the mid to late seventies, just before "Sentence" appears in Best Poems of 1976 and after "For My Brother". This aside, I would bet anyone (except Kuzma himself), that given a list of everything Greg Kuzma has written, published, and edited, if a higher form of life were to magically create this list and a person were to go on an exaggerated scavenger hunt, it could not all be found.

Greg Kuzma has turned poetry into a career. Would this seem possible to those whose brains emanate an aura of relief after leaving literature class in high school never to strain with words again? Until one night caught alone in a nightclub without a pick-up line, finding a way to convince the manager of McDonald's a raise is deserved after being promoted to drive through windows, or a way to express heated words to the rippling construction worker laying the new expressway through the front lawn? Is it then cliched to say that Kuzma's success has come from hard work? It is, and it is the truth; and maybe after a few years of hard work I will find a better way to decide how he has had the courage to make a career out of something most fear to acknowledge as usable art. He is a heroic call to those who write more poetry than they read.

Greg Kuzma words were the first to inspire to write and not to write at the same time. His observations extend far beyond conscious revelation. Senses are exaggerated almost to the grotesque, surrounding and seizing the mood within and around him, somehow outside the trap of flesh and hair intertwined with the music of life which we can, but will not hear. Who then, after experiencing the thrill of discovery, will find themselves inspired to find their own

words and yet, would be unable to follow for fear of finding an answer to a question they did not wish to ask? I for one.

I have become callous to the land I have chosen to live upon. Each morning I wake to see the flat, unprotected landscape the north wind chooses to thrust itself upon. The small masses of human litter tossed from wagon trains of real civilization somehow landing with their heads on backward. The large and clumsy phallic symbol we designate as our state capitol building. The slow-driving, yet fast-to-lay-blame farmers who seem to raise nothing on their homesteads but dust.

The poem "Nebraska" published as a chapbook in 1977 by Kuzma's own Best Cellar Press, has for now, regenerated the faith I had lost for my home. Mr. Kuzma has beamed light into the hole showing me protection and comfort I am harbored in, the childlike innocence (not ignorance) of the people, the ease of choice I reserve to discover my own meaning to life, and a place to return should I find my decision was wrong.

One could assume Kuzma's clear observation of Nebraska is due to new perspective given his coming here from the state of New York. This reasoning was used to force him to withdraw from the nomination of laureate after the death of John Neihardt. Kuzma touches on this event at the end of "Nebraska". He seems to accept the part of good loser with his words when he writes his thoughts of leaving, but yet remaining in the place "they" are not sure he is "of". Another reading shows a hurt expressed by a person involved and abandoned. "Nebraska" changes from a place he "likes" to a place that's "fair enough." But is it fair? Kuzma's thoughts in "Adirondacks", some of which were first published in Prairie Schooner, are as sharp or even more so than in "Nebraska". These poems are not of a place, but of the feelings a place or object can project back into a person. Surely his talent outreaches the borders of this state; and here where no one can be too good, his outside talents were considered a mark against him. Are we defined by where we were born or where we choose to live? I surely hope neither; I was born, raised and live in Nebraska.

The height of Kuzma's writing is contained between the covers of "For My Brother". Feelings are strongly placed, attacked and placed

again. The pure careless, yet careful placement raises in the reader a frightening tingle up the spine. The power of each phrase puts the reader into a trance; and, catching him or her off guard, will smash the meaning of each sentence into the reader's head. The words, ironically, and sadly placed this way play out for readers the death of Jeff Kuzma in a car accident.

There are reminders each day that existence is temporary. Being spared my entire life the feeling of losing someone close to me, my personal reaction to this poem was shock. We must ask ourselves daily if we are ready to feel the loss of a friend, of a family member, or of our own life. Greg Kuzma has stepped in to show me a part of life that has up until now eluded my attention. The end.

Of China and of Greece has become a powerhouse of poetry. This book I put down after the second poem entitled "Sometimes", a scare of insanity entering the core of my brain. Yes, he has made it that touchable, yet so understandable. The doom and gloom are evenly balanced with the joy and struggle within the home, nature, and (dare I say it) the job of teaching. These words are a novel's worth; but Kuzma, not being the novel type has condensed for us a strong potion to sip a little at a time.

I've learned from Greg Kuzma the feeling of emotion towards things alive without actually having to live through these emotions. He has shown and prepared me for what is ahead more than any advice-giver ever has. There is a marriage, if not to someone, then to something; we have that choice and maybe we have both. There is disappointment, but only if there is lack of joy. There is grief and memory. There is a knowledge that we are not immortal but what we do lasts forever. There is breakdown, despair, and there is a redemption.

Curtis Meyer

Barton Sutter, Pine Creek Parish Hall and Other Poems, 1985
Greysolon Press
4621 Jay Street
Duluth, Minnesota 55804

Nostalgia: Barton Sutter's Tool For Survival

A Review Of

Pine Creek Parish Hall And Other Poems

I am very famous in my family
For the way I wallow in nostalgia,
But I didn't save my comic books
Or baseball cards or any of the relics of my
youth
That now might be quite valuable. Besides,
My boyhood's not for sale, though I am always
eager
To swap with anyone who knows enough
To keep some favorite memories
Reserved like silver bullets, the super
special ammo
We fire when surrounded by depression and
fatigue.
I am proud of my nostalgia,...
The present isn't bad, but the past is more
believable,

These lines of the poem "My Parents Bought Me Comic Books" by Barton Sutter reflect the mood and personality of Sutter's book Pine Creek Parish Hall And Other Poems. Sutter speaks about a variety of subjects in this book. He uses strong imagery to describe the places and people of his childhood. In the later part of the book he takes the reader to the city and again draws word pictures that let the reader see the sights and feel the emotions that Sutter feels. The something to fill an emptiness that is not clearly defined.

The one thing that seems to ease the frustration and fill the void for Sutter is his willingness to use his past as a guide for surviving the present. Sutter is comfortable with nostalgic thoughts. However, he is not content to simply treat nostalgia as a sentimental remembrance of the past. Sutter uses his memories of people, places, and experiences as a base to which he can always return in his thoughts. The nostalgia with which he remembers his past provides the strength for finding meaning in the present. Sutter speaks in uncomplicated descriptions and in many of his poems he speaks of the

past as if it were almost as close to him as the present. I can identify with Sutter. The idea of "My Parents Bought Me Comic Books" is that in his past he had heroes to remember, but now, so many things have changed that he depends on memories of the past to overcome feeling completely bewildered.

Or I go home and find my father not himself
But someone else, some stranger, bald and thin,
And my mother dead and gone, a ghost, and the ghost
gone too...
What I feel is not some gooey kind of grief,
But utter disbelief. Or, rather, the stupid kind
of wonder
Baby Huey must have felt when that dumbbunny stood
Bewildered, with his finger in his mouth,
And the big cartoon balloon above his head said:
'Duh!'"

Sutter shows how his past affects his present by sharing with his reader people, places, and experiences from years past. He makes no attempt to mask his meaning. I appreciated Sutter because he seemed to want me to see and feel images and emotions with him.

Sutter's poem "Beaverhouse Downriver" reveals a childhood experience in which he links the past with the present in a way that makes me know that the thoughts Sutter has in the present are partially formed from the events of an earlier time.

In the old forever-never days
When I was blond and ten,
A beaver clan claimed the bend
Across the river.
They badgered holes
And rumpus room, adobe dens
And chimney flues, spiral ramps and hatchways:
Everything the beavers did
They did without the help of men.
And so we loved them...

The beaver dam becomes a major part of the boys' winter adventures, providing a place for thinking and talking about forbidden subjects. "We went there daily. That hideaway/Was just what we wanted,/ A wild retreat where we were free/ To practice our religion:/ Tobacco and women." Happenings surrounding the beaver dam were part of their growing up ritual. The conclusion of the poem expresses a kind of regret that the days of the hideaway are gone, and it suggests that the questions he was left with remain in his mind as

an adult. "What happened?...We never/ Saw the beavers again./ And we moved away forever,/ And all the grown-ups died."

Some of Sutter's poems reveal that there are certain special places from his younger life to which he mentally returns. These trips back to familiar stops of his past show that the places he loved as a child have played a part in molding who he has become as a man. In "Pine Creek Parish Hall" he reflects on how his religious beliefs have changed. Yet the Parish Hall still has a special hold on him whenever he returns. "If what we remember is what we are,/ Then I'm the Pine Creek Parish Hall.../ The place is/ All that remains of my old-time religion:.../ My dreams will often take me there,/ And just as I enter, the music starts."

Some of Sutter's poems in Pine Creek Parish Hall reveal that he is disillusioned and somewhat disappointed with the changes brought by the passage of time. In the Poem "Migrants" he takes us back to a farm that has been sold by the original owner because of financial failure. Still, the woman who was forced to sell is hurting as she watches the new owner change the farm she loves.

First he sold the horses--...
Last month he cut down the grove
While the woman who planted those trees
Watched everything through the window,
Wishing she'd never sold.
He keeps fixing things that aren't broken...
What can we do? It's a free country,
And we haven't got the money.

In several poems Sutter introduces his readers to some of the people who have influenced his early life, and who still remain with him either when he visits them, or simply thinks of what they mean to his life. Sutter's descriptions of these people were vivid, and I felt he wanted me to know them as he did. "The Visitor" tells of the writer's return to his former home to visit a man and his wife who he knows well, but who he has not seen for a long time.

The man whose muscles I once admired
Answers my knock with a vague smile,...
My name brings a laugh and a handshake...
This man's giving way to gravity.
He slumps. He's grey.
Something broke and gentled him.
I like him even more than I did then...
I have to run. John hands me a gift...

And I'm gone...
Beside me: a glowing hunk of honeycomb...
Tonight, in my room in the city,
I will sample those delicate spaces
And imagine other lives, other places.

Sutter's description of "Geneva" says it all, about how the people who helped him grow up also help him survive the present and even allow him to feel they will be there in his future.

She was famous for kindness, Geneva.
And yet she could run down a hen
And chop off its head just like that...
Geneva giggled and taught me to piss
In the dark in a thunder jug...
She taught me itchweed and outhouse...
She was always baking, Geneva.
She taught me the stars, Geneva.
So I thank the stars for Geneva,
All of her muscles and fat, that
Quick chicken-killer,...
She taught me the mud and the stars,
And when I am ready to die
She will come with her hatchet in hand
And her face like a kerosene lamp
And her dress all feathers and blood.

I enjoyed Sutter's book from beginning to end. He is a poet who uses experiences from both his childhood and his adult life to introduce his reader to a variety of places and events. One characteristic that makes Sutter unique and very appealing is his use of nostalgia as a tool for surviving the present. His attention to nostalgia gave me assurance that past experiences provide valuable memories which should not be forgotten.

Theola Peck

Barton Sutter, Pine Creek Parish Hall and Other Poems, 1985
Greysolon Press
4621 Jay Street
Duluth, MN 55804

**The Contrast Between the Rural and the Urban In Barton Sutter's
Pine Creek Parish Hall and Other Poems**

Barton Sutter is a contemporary poet with one foot planted firmly in the soil of rural America and the other placed pensively on the metropolitan concrete. The affinities to and estrangements from the two form the an interesting set of contrasts in his collection Pine Creek Parish Hall and Other Poems.

The country is the place of Sutter's childhood and his memories. It is associated with tranquility, stasis, and fulfillment. It is a place of refuge and solace, of family and stability. It is the voice of reason that clarifies the complexities of life in the city. In Sutter's rural poems, there is a sense of the innocence of childhood coupled with an affirmation of rural values.

Sutter's urban poems often deal with the grotesque and unknowable, and occasionally the absurd. They are chaotic, disjointed fragments that reflect a sense of moral decay often found in large urban areas. The city offers little solace and fewer answers for someone seeking comfort. These urban poems express a sense of urgency and a feeling of entrapment that can only be reconciled with a return to his firmly planted roots in nature and the small town life he grew up with.

A primary example of Sutter's return to the comfort of a rural atmosphere from the city is "The Visitor." In this poem, the speaker has returned from the city to visit a friend in the

country. He finds the stability he has been seeking in two maple trees grown huge and solid. When the speaker tells his friend that many young people, himself included, would be jealous of the life he has made, his friend replies, "Just plant and stay put. Things grow."

The advice is simple. Yet after choosing a life in the city, the poet realizes his inability to depend on this way of life. He asks, "But where do you get the patience, the faith?/ My life's more like water than trees." He then returns not to a home, but to his "room in the city" where he will contemplate his sequestered life "and imagine other lives, other places"; he is "The Visitor" in both settings.

"The Visitor" is the only poem in the collection where the poet's two lives meet directly. In the rest of the poems, there is a distinct separation between rural and urban life. Rural poems like "The Beaverhouse Downriver" and "My Parents Bought Me Comic Books" focus primarily with childhood memories. Others deal with his Swedish ancestry and the lessons to be learned from growing up with an immigrant background. "Geneva," "Swedish Lesson," and "Old Mrs. Court and Her Quilt" are confident, secure poems in which the poet finds guidance in the lives of his ancestors.

The familiarity and closeness of these poems are immediately contrasted with the unpredictability and distance of modern life in the city. In "At the End of the Night," the poet discusses the futility of searching for meaning in his city life. "What am I Missing? Not limbs./ not a finger, but something." He doesn't find an answer to this question and is left with an identity

crisis. Looking into the glass of a shop window he comments, "I notice what I guess must be my face." He has lost sight of himself in the confusion of metropolitan life.

The two urban poems that mostly clearly reflect a sense of being lost and disillusioned are "Halloween on Hennepin" and "I Would Like to Live." "Halloween on Hennepin" describes a macabre, surreal bus ride to work the night shift amidst the absurd spectacle of Halloween night on Hennepin Avenue in downtown Minneapolis. The poet describes the scene as, "A regular cakewalk of whores." Gone is the simple, safe life of the poet's childhood and rustic origins. It has been replaced by the frantic absurdity of All Hallow's Eve in the big city. His fear of the strangeness of the evening turns to a sort of fearful skepticism when he laments toward the end of the poem:

Tomorrow
I'll be more than half afraid
Of this grim carnival
This motley masquerade.
All this fellow feeling will sour
Into lonesome fury, sure
As I'll be sitting here.

As sure as he'll be sitting there, going through the same routine with no hope of fellow feeling, only the "lonesome fury" that accompanies his life in the city.

Even more surrealistic and absurd is "I Would Like to Live", a poem reminiscent of Lawrence Ferlinghetti's "I Am Waiting" in its seemingly undisciplined flow of thoughts and images. The poem opens "I would like to live/ Like a suicide/ But just the opposite/ And all the time." From this desperate opening the poet goes on to request "Marinated peacock. peacock/ Like my mother used to make", "hummingbird hors d'oeuvres", "grilled gazelle", "pickled woodpecker", and "petunia salad" before commanding "Indians/ to paint the White House red" and "the blacks to finish/ What they

started in Detroit." A scatological build up of bizarre images continues and culminates in the request, "I want some hot homosexual/ To offer to show me/ The walrus he keeps in his bathtub." The poem ends in a plea to find the perfect word to explain the importance of the fleeting moments and emotions in our lives.

Although Sutter's rural and urban poems are diametrically opposed in theme, content, and structure, he deftly maneuvers through each with the confidence and security of a man who has been on both sides of every situation, of a man who has been able to empathize with and adjust to every circumstance and has been able to accept his role as a visitor in both worlds by depending on each -- the city for its uncertainty, the country for its simple lessons -- with the vigor of a man in search of something that cannot be found in one or the other, but in the tension created by the two.

Jeff Smith

Kathleen West, The Farmer's Daughter, 1988
The Plains River Poetry Series, Vol. 7
Sandhills Press
Ord, NE 68862

West Echoes Ancestral Voices

This farmer's daughter grew up on a farm three miles west of Genoa, Nebraska, attended a one-room schoolhouse 'til grade eight, and became the first person to receive two consecutive Fulbright Scholarships to Iceland--a journey which began as a quest to discover her Nebraska heritage. It was here that West studied the Icelandic language and the poet-warriors of the medieval sagas which she weaves into lines of verse that echo ancestral voices and which occasionally, powerfully portray Iceland's Norse god, Odin.

Internationally West has received acclaim because she captures a third generation Nebraska experience that, woven with her ancestral voices, transforms The Farmer's Daughter into more than a collection of poems, but rather a collection of voices. These voices record, throughout the five sections, Farewell to Odin, Corn Land, To a Bearded Muse, Sonnets from Omaha, and Nebraska Hide-Out, a fragmented autobiographical sketch of West.

The first section, Farewell to Odin, highlights, briefly, this farmer's daughter's early background and experiences. In the poem, "Progression," a voice addresses West: "You are the farmer's daughter,/ corn-fed, apple-checked,/ a local yokel from a jerkwater town." As the narrative voice continues, a life unfolds. "You are the round little Swede/snub-nosed, tongue-tied" who is the "first to go to college" but "not the first to divorce and that's OK because "'Grandma did and she was good!" This is the daughter who progresses beyond the farm, beyond the small town, and beyond college to experience life, gather knowledge, and return "home again, wiser of course." Here the sights are familiar with "The same old cornfield east of the house," and here the sounds are familiar when Mom and Dad issue the parting words, "Always glad to see you come--always glad to see you go."

In "Second Generation," West addresses her ancestors as "those who delight not in ancient glories/who put language and legend to lie

fallow in the past/and take their pride in the keel that parts the prairie/and treasure the metal of a sun-gleaming plow." Spiritually, this generation may "fear God--but less than the weather--" which is impartial and unpredictable. Their voices sing "to a Lutheran sky." Yet, "rain falls on the deserving and the unworthy./They are equally burned under the sun." Therefore, the voice proclaims, "Work with--or against--the whim of the universe/Nothing remains to tame--but yourself." Although we have little control over natural elements, we do have control over the self.

West speaks to the Norse god, Odin, who has endured pain and suffering and who has deceived a woman in order to taste the mead of poetry, in the poem "Farewell to Odin." This poem recreates the tradition of a medieval saga with "All the gods and those who hymn to the gods/rejoiced/and drinking deep" while reciting the runes. Odin swaps stories "with giants and hillfolk." This wanderer travels to the land of ice where he is worshipped, but then sets out for "another shore/to strengthen the runes." Here Odin weeps to see "the labor to carve lines in the dust." West addresses Odin when she writes "this land,/this weather replaced you/And your displacement lingers in the prairie's wise music,/wordless and practical as air." The final voice is "the song of a woman who keeps her own counsel." She is the woman deceived.

West experiences "A North Atlantic Meeting, Unorganized" where "she appreciates the tradition/and acknowledges the paltry comparison/of a bare century of weather-weary duty/to tap the milk and honey of the Promised Land." This is the Iceland of today--the same Iceland which says "We have been cold for a thousand years." And a voice says, "Now! Let the day begin."

"Of Viking Stock" praises the people "Descended from ancient glories" and the poets who "To live for art meant a two-edged labor--" as they fight and write "in skaldic verse composed in sword measure." West creatively balances the verses between weapons and words as she records the life led by these poets who "break the half-line before the ax broke bone/continue the stanza unchecked by the arrow/that alliterates the vowels with allusions to blood." Their life and verse conclude when "A dying gasp gave a moment's punctuation."

The voice of the farmer, who works on ground "cursed for Adam's sake," speaks in "Genesis" for all to hear: "Have we not done well?/Does sin lie at the doors of our granaries?" There are those who "Will wait here for a better year" and "those who believe to wait is to suffer." They are the ones, who, driven from the land, become wanderers searching for another place, "for another chance/to keep their sons and daughters." And, "The voices cry 'Good-by good-by.'"

Wanting to understand her mother's past, West listens to her mother in "Mother, Mother, Tell About Olden Times." And, to her oldest, Mother talks about the issues facing a woman of her generation on the farm. West's mother says, "But if I'd known what women of her generation on the farm. West's mother says, "But if I'd known what women know today--/things would be different./Not to say better,/just different." In this story retold, Mother honestly recreates the dialogue of Dad and Neva, who appear immune to the real happenings of this woman's life. With a voice of desperation, Mother concludes with "Never do I tell this story."

Throughout the section, Corn Land, the voices echo the poet's life in Genoa, the people she knew, and the goddess, a corn.

Mom and Dad's conversation, over a cup of coffee, collectively recreates "The Shanleys." "Dad says you can tell the Shanleys/the way they talk." One memory triggers another as the tale of Shanleys grows honestly and believably as the conversational voices advance the narration--"More coffee?"

This country is the "Proving Ground" West writes. "This is the country of gold." But, voices question, "Who controls? How do we petition?" The answer becomes immediate: "We must trust the design of earth and sky./May the roots be strong, the leaves supple./May our luck provide if our labor fail." The farmer is at the mercy of nature.

"Mother Corn" is "Pagan, and new as the world"--she is the universal force that is indifferent "dispensing her equal bread to worshippers/and usurpers." She nurtures all. Voices are heard, and they are "Thin voices to invoke a starveling god,/his flesh diminished to a wafer." This becomes the spiritual nourishment. A voice says:

"This is my body and this is my blood/Do ye this in commemoration of me."

The voices become stronger and the message louder. "Corn, Peas, Beans, and Women Grow" focuses on women. West writes, "We lament our incompetent selves." When "Doubt moves in like fog" it is the "deep voices lull, powerful and promising" that are heard. These are the voices of men and they say:

Go back.
Go back.
You strive for a harsh world
Where hungry creatures devour
 thoughtless feet trample
 and weather parch or freeze--you.
Save your delicate souls.
Fold you limbs, close your desires.
Be pure.
Rest.
We will watch the world
For you,
Over you.
We will watch.

West concludes with a feeling of helplessness: "Who was not tempted?/We tried our answering voice--small and shrill. The men are good and the women are good, but some of the women "gave their ghosts to the voices."

"Cornland" is filled with "high voices" the "make a joyful noise" to "the glorious pleasure/of corn on a cob." It is this jubilation of "It's tasseling!" or "I see a silk!" that makes the commitment to the land even stronger. This is the faith the people kept on the farm, and this is the faith that "We raised our country churches,/raised the roof with hymns in the old tongue/or the new.

"Zea Mays" recounts the "advent of harvest" which is presented as similar to a ceremony or rite. "The rites of autumn begin/with a parade of massive machines." Immersed in tradition, the voice questions: "Shall we say there is nothing strict/nor sacred in this observance of harvest?"

To a Bearded Muse narrates the personal feelings of a woman. In an almost poetic diary, West reveals bits and pieces of her past.

The sterile, mechanical voice of a doctor speaks to the patient in the poem "Saf-T-Coil." "'This is going to feel a little weird.'"

"'This is going to hurt a little'" "'This.'" Only the doctor speaks. The patient is speechless, helpless.

"Not to Forget" reflects a personal search. "Why do I seek souvenirs of love/like a tourist coveting towels/in a motel bathroom?" In being used the speaker gives up a part of herself, but from the experience "see how I retain/my original shape,/resilient, flexible/and tough."

The title of the poem "To the Sonofabitch Who Refused Me Dinner Because I Refused My Body" captures the voice of the speaker who is disillusioned by marriage. Accusingly she says, "When you invited me to share food,/I smelled charcoal and garlic,/...[instead] I left hungry."

"Down There on a Visit" travels with the poet through a condensed summary of experiences. "Where the gates are barricaded/on both sides, where the only toll/is taken from the heart."

Each poem in this section concludes with a feeling of emptiness. Each experience seems to drain the participant. The concluding poem, "Pantoum to a Bearded Muse on Lines by Robert Graves," disqualifies the bearded muse West has been addressing. She concludes with, "A Muse does not wear whiskers."

Sonnets from Omaha can easily be summed up by the woman's voice (Colette, The Vagabond). "Except for this sorrow, have I not become again what/I was, that is to say free, horribly alone and free." This is the atmosphere of this section, and it provides a release from the previous section.

"Woman Against the Landscape" places the woman in a unique position, that of being "prized by those who nurture/exotica displaced; a cactus under glass." Therefore "Her ecstasy is earthly."

"Aerobic Love" offers a surprising prescription for heartbreak or rejection. The poet writes that "She would alter each experience/to keep her heart in shape with exercise. The voice says, "'Let there be fortune, let there be new loves.'"

Nebraska Hide-Out returns the reader to Genoa, Nebraska, with the first poem, "Three Miles West of Genoa, Nebraska." We return to the familiar kitchen table and the conversations of "'Yep, and Well.'"

There is a weariness in the air, and we are suddenly aware of the time that has passed.

"Nebraska Hide-Out" is a retreat where "The moon lights a path through the homeless air." It is a sanctuary for the weary traveler. The voice is at peace.

"Autumn Equinox, Northeast Nebraska" rustles the spirit of life and the peacefulness of nature. The poet is refreshed and meditative. "Who speaks to quiet the trees?...Hush!/I speak to quiet myself."

"Then listen/follow your own voice. Listen/and cross the water." This voice speaks to a young woman in the poem "Advice to a Young Woman who Hesitates to Cross the River on a Fallen Log."

The final poem, "Transition: Villanelle for the Road," concludes on a confessional note. To the "kind friends [who] wonder if I have a lover," the poet responds, "I find I've lost the skill to love." There is no hurt or bitterness, just a confession or acceptance that what was once so important is no longer.

Through her poetry, West echoes voices--the voices of those she knows best and the voices of those who have become a part of her heritage.

Marcella A. Bstandig

Paul Zarzyski The Make-up of Ice
University of Georgia Press
Athens, Georgia 30602

Paul Zarzyski Roughstock Sonnets
Lowell Press of
Kansas City, Missouri

The Make-up of Paul Zarzyski's Sonnets

I first came into contact with Paul Zarzyski's poetry in the winter of 1986. I had limited experience with poetry, let alone "Cowboy Poetry," and I must admit I was not partial to either. The book was *The Make-Up of Ice*. It would become the first book of poetry that I owned. The first poem I read immediately changed my attitude about "Cowboy Poetry." The poem is Hurrah for the Stock

In Roundup, Montana
toothless rodeo cowboys with bowed legs
dig spurs deep into horsehide,
twisted the bug-eyed steer's head 180 degrees,
and hog-tie snared whiteface calves.

Is it any wonder
cattle boo the national anthem?

The respect I gained for cowboys in this short space of time was unbelievable. It struck me that if one cowboy could be so eloquent, then maybe I was narrow-minded and judgmental. I came to the conclusion that I was. The style in which Zarzyski writes is of a man who has experienced all the ups and downs that a bronc rider can. He had been a bronc rider for 13 years, and when he writes of a ride, he speaks from his heart.

..What went wrong-
too much heart behind a high kick,
both horns hooking earth, the bull vaulting...
"All This Way for the Short Ride"

Zarzyski transcends time and space and slows the eight second ride down so that everyone can see and understand what is going on. But Zarzyski does not just speak of rodeos in Make-Up he also speaks of life on the farm.

In "Hard Red Wheat," he brings to life the dreams and love of one man, wheat. Zarzyski picks up his paintbrush and puts to canvas the colors of the sky, the wheat and one man's hopes for a crop that makes a shovel ring.

In *Roughstock Sonnets*, Zarzyski continues the tradition that he began in *The Make-Up of Ice*, and it should be noted that a great many poems that in *Roughstock Sonnets* had appeared earlier in *Make-Up*. It is a tradition that encompasses all Zarzyski is made of. It is being a cowboy. An added dimension to his poems are the photographs of Barbara Van Cleve.

Van Cleve's photos are a perfect addition to Zarzyski's poetry. What he says in words, she says in pictures. These are pictures that only someone with the knowledge of rodeos can take. The angles that she uses for these shots capture not only what the rider, but also the animal is going through. Like Zarzyski's poetry, you don't need any experience to be able to understand and respect the sport that these men and women live for.

The pictures pull you in and take you along for the ride of a lifetime. A bronc ride lasts eight seconds--Van Cleve's photo captures those eight seconds forever. If you have never been to a rodeo all you need to do is look at "Scratchin' High" and you feel the excitement and thrill of sitting on the back of a bronc. "Toppin' off a green one" is not only a beautiful photo, but it conveys the energy and power of a young bronc. In the photo "Holts," she captures pure energy in motion, and it is worthy of respect.

My favorite photo is "Polly's Dally." It is a simple shot of a saddle horn with a rosary wrapped around it. Van Cleve juxtaposes this idyllic image with the roughness of being a cowboy and the faith that is needed to be one. Van Cleve's photos take the viewer into the world of rodeo and beyond. She takes you from the open plains to the sprawling mountains of Montana. She lets you glimpse into the chute before a ride and then, for the hell of it, takes you along for the ride itself. Look at the photos and count to eight. If you're lucky, you'll be able to hang on long enough. Enjoy the ride.

Roughstock Sonnets is not much of a departure for Zarzyski, his subject is still rodeo and more rodeo. I read "Zarzyski Meets the Copenhagen Angel" and found myself thinking back to the days

when I was single and wondering if I knew any girl, "Her Levis, so tight I can read the dates on dimes in her hip pocket."

Zarzyski poems pull you into his world and wrap around you like a cocoon. They give you something that you could almost live off of and give you back something in return. They provide you a view of the world that wouldn't be available anywhere else.

Rodeo is a sport of roughnecks, of men and women that get such a thrill from getting on the bronc or bull or riding around barrels for 16 seconds, that they don't know any other world. They live for the ride and sometimes they die for it. It is in their pain that we find entertainment, and it is in our entertainment that they find life.

Zarzyski's poetry speaks to the reader. It is like Zarzyski is sitting beside you and telling stories of Bronc rides and Barrel racers as you share an ice cold pitcher of beer at the local Bar and Grill. He speaks from his heart, and he lets the movement of the rider and animal create a dance that twirls, jumps, and skips in your mind. It is a dance that anyone would enjoy.

J.B. Tyson