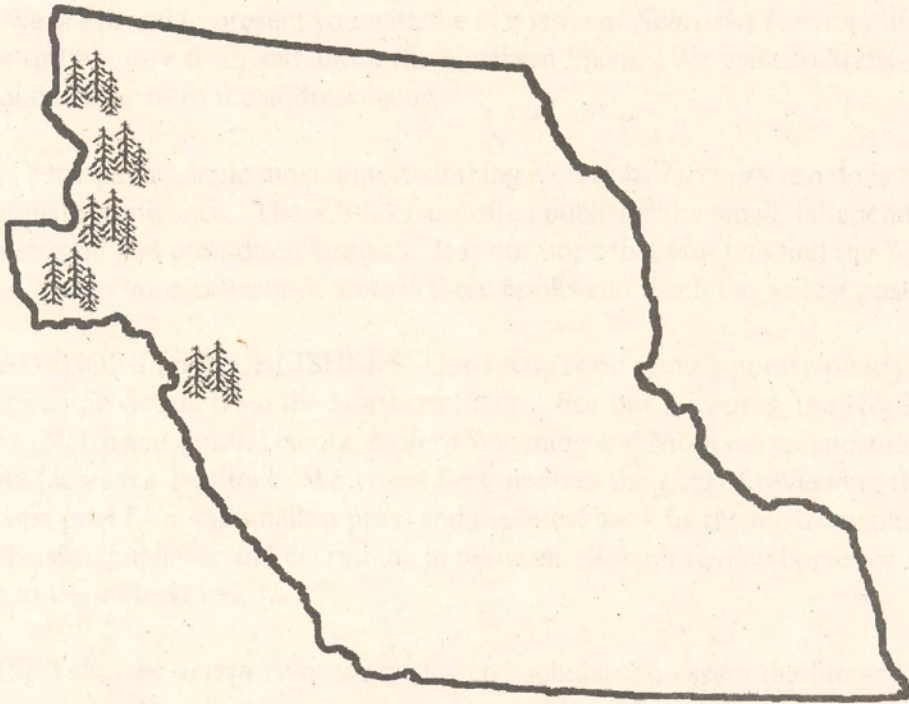




# Nebraska Territory 2000

**READERS:** We are proud to present you with the first issue of *Nebraska Territory* in its new incarnation as a review of literature from and about the Northern Plains. We want to know what you think. Letters or e-mail can be sent to the address below.

**LIBRARIES:** Perhaps the single most important thing *Nebraska Territory* can do is to alert librarians to books of regional significance. These books are often published by small, independent houses with very limited advertising and promotion budgets. It is our hope that you will find the *Territory* an aid in selecting titles to add to your collections so that these books can reach the widest possible readership.

**EDITORS, AUTHORS and PUBLISHERS:** Our focus is on contemporary poetry, short and long fiction and creative non-fiction from the Northern Plains. For our purposes, the Northern Plains consists of Nebraska, North and South Dakota, eastern Wyoming and Montana and northeastern Colorado – roughly the old Nebraska Territory. We've set for ourselves the goal of reviewing the briefest chapbook by the newest poet from the smallest press and the latest book by the most established writer from a New York or Boston publisher and everything in between. Submit review copies or send publication announcements to the address below.

**REVIEWERS:** *Nebraska Territory* needs critics and scholars to assess the literary merits of books and, if possible, place books in a cultural context. We will consider essentially any length review, from a fifty-word blurb to a 5,000-word feature. If you've reviewed a book in another periodical, we'll be happy to arrange to reprint. A list of titles to be reviewed is available upon request.

If you wish your name to be added to our subscription list, let us know at

*Nebraska Territory*  
Department of English  
Wayne State College  
Wayne, Nebraska 68787

Or e-mail to:  
[jbrummels@wscgate.wsc.edu](mailto:jbrummels@wscgate.wsc.edu)



---

**Contents**

|                                                                                                                                                              |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Steve Schneider on <i>In Our Very Bones</i> by Twyla Hansen .....                                                                                            | 1  |
| Jo Taylor on <i>A Time To Sink Her Pretty Little Ship</i> by William Kloefkorn .....                                                                         | 4  |
| Gretchen Ronnow on <i>Plainsong</i> by Kent Haruf .....                                                                                                      | 5  |
| Bill Cosgrove on <i>The Dirty Shame Hotel and Other Stories</i> by Ron Block .....                                                                           | 7  |
| LaRayne Meyer on <i>Leaning Into The Wind: Women Write From The Heart Of The West</i><br>edited by Linda Hasselstrom, Gaydell Collier and Nancy Curtis ..... | 14 |
| Bruce Nelson on <i>As The Lilac Burned The Laurel Grew: Poems and</i><br><i>We Did Not Fear The Father: New And Selected Poems</i> by Charles Fort .....     | 16 |
| Bruce Nelson on <i>Nobody Lives Here Who Saw This Sky</i> by Greg Kosmicki .....                                                                             | 17 |
| Sam Umland on <i>Before We Lost Our Ways</i> by Mark Sanders .....                                                                                           | 18 |
| Eric Hoffman on <i>The Conception Abbey Poems</i> by Fredrick Zydek .....                                                                                    | 20 |
| Jon Martin on <i>Blue Collar Light</i> by Paul Zarzyski .....                                                                                                | 24 |
| Bill Cosgrove on <i>Mark Twain Made Me Do It And Other Plains Adventures</i><br>by Bryan L. Jones .....                                                      | 25 |
| Timothy Black on <i>Goodnight, Nebraska</i> by Thomas McNeal .....                                                                                           | 31 |
| Aaron E. Stueve on <i>The River Warren</i> by Kent Meyers .....                                                                                              | 31 |
| Aaron E. Stueve on <i>The Witness of Combines</i> by Kent Meyers .....                                                                                       | 32 |
| Melissa Beery on <i>The Lives Of The Saints</i> by Barbara Schmitz .....                                                                                     | 32 |
| Gretchen Ronnow on <i>Learning American</i> by Robert King .....                                                                                             | 33 |
| Mary Maas on <i>The Lost Son</i> by Brent Spencer .....                                                                                                      | 34 |
| Bruce Nelson on <i>Desire For More Cows and Old Froggo's Book Of Practical Cows</i><br>by Matt Mason .....                                                   | 35 |
| Aaron E. Stueve on <i>Story</i> by Neil Harrison .....                                                                                                       | 36 |
| Melissa Beery on <i>Disciples Of An Uncertain Season</i> by Larry Holland .....                                                                              | 36 |
| Gretchen Ronnow on <i>Hearts Of Gold</i> by James Magorian .....                                                                                             | 37 |
| Melissa Beery on <i>All These Bullets, Separate As Nuns, Eager As Reynosa Whores</i><br>by Red Shuttleworth .....                                            | 38 |
| Aaron E. Stueve on <i>Angels Devils Lullabies</i> by Timothy Black .....                                                                                     | 38 |
| Trenton Muth on <i>Angels Devils Lullabies</i> by Timothy Black .....                                                                                        | 39 |
| Timothy Black on <i>With The Three-Legged Cat</i><br>edited by Aaron Stueve and Melissa Beery .....                                                          | 40 |
| Trenton Muth on <i>Words From The Highway</i> by Paul Williams .....                                                                                         | 41 |
| Jim Reese on <i>Words From The Highway</i> by Paul Williams .....                                                                                            | 42 |



*In Our Very Bones*

Twyla Hansen

A Slow Tempo Press, 1997

64 pp. \$12.95/paper

In Twyla Hansen's second book, *In Our Very Bones*, the poet pursues her interest in the prairie landscape of Nebraska, its people, and their way of life. Her first book, *How To Live in the Heartland*, introduced readers to many of these same concerns. Hansen is often at her best when drawing upon her knowledge as a horticulturist; since 1982 she has worked as a horticulturist and arboretum curator at Nebraska Wesleyan University. Perhaps more than any other contemporary Nebraska poet, she writes about the landscape and its inhabitants lovingly and with a great sense of precision.

In her second collection, she devotes an entire suite of poems titled "On the Prairie" to such creatures as dragonflies, blue herons, and turkey vultures, along with characteristic attention to prairie flowers and grasses and seasonal changes. In her poem "Nine-Mile Prairie," the poet-as-guide instructs the reader on how to experience a prairie landscape. Note the sun," she writes, "how it has tipped the grasses/ to tangerine." The poem continues to instruct us through a series of imperative verbs: "Step/ lightly aside from the snake;" "Pull at the switch grass;" "Roll/ over and over, a glacial pebble,/ down the west ridge;" "Observe the emerald wheatfield;" "Wait for the ground-/ cherries to swell." A poet so intent upon giving instructions might annoy readers, but Hansen wins our trust in poem after poem by her command of both the language and the intricacies of the territory. We are willing to let her lead us because her vision is both redemptive and revealing.

In her poem "Song of the Pasque Flower," the first in her "On the Prairie" sequence, Hansen draws upon Dakota Sioux legend and her own well-earned knowledge of prairie flowers. For the Dakota Sioux, the pasque flower had a special significance because it was the first to bloom in early spring. It was a symbol of nature's awakening. The Sioux believed that all creatures had their own song, and Hansen writes the poem in the voice of the flowers: "Our voices in the wind/ to children of all flowering nations/ a signal to awaken/ to rise from their sleep." Hansen, like the Dakota Sioux, is moved by the cycles of nature, the sun and moon. The pasque flowers with their "purple plumes" are a natural reoccurring signal for "four-legged and winged ones" to begin "stirring over the plains."

In poem after poem (in the section "On The Prairie") Hansen seeks out solitary discoveries. Her literary ancestors, Walt Whitman, Theodore Roethke, and Mary Oliver have taught her that the ways of nature can be read and interpreted as lessons for the inner self, what Whitman dared to call the "soul" in his famous visionary poems, "Song of Myself" and "A Noiseless Patient Spider."

Her poem "Blue Heron" typifies the pattern found in the work of these visionary poets, as it moves from sight ("vision") to insight ("soul"). "All morning I have glimpsed them . . .," she writes, "blue-gray sentinels nearly motionless,/ patient for a meal." The poem's first two stanzas are devoted to observation of the herons out along highway bottomland, but then the poem turns inward, as do so many of Hansen's poems. "And what can we do" she asks, "in these wide-open spaces/ where mud creeks are capable/ of churning out of their banks?" She discovers a parallel between herself and the herons and provides a transcendent answer to the question: "to take inventory of threatened senses,/ to pick ourselves up above the dark water,/ to rise, to rise." Like Whitman, Roethke, and Oliver, Hansen uses her poetry to exercise "threatened senses" and to "inventory" in the texts of her poems' heightened powers of observation. Self-recovery is but one part of the strategic answer to her question; the other is to "to



rise” like the herons themselves, above the dark waters that pull the self and its senses into depression, despair, and stagnation. Indeed, many of Hansen’s poems work toward transcendence, both physically and spiritually.

While she will express wonder often in natural phenomena, she also on occasion will probe in her poems the darker workings of the natural world. The poems “Dragonfly” and “Turkey Vultures” describe winged predators. In “Dragonfly” she asks the reader to consider Nature’s efficiency, “how some worm-like creature/ evolved into her great advantage: four stout wings, compound eyes.” She sees the dragonfly for what it is: “predator of smaller insects,/ patrolling her beat over the wetland.” In “Turkey Vultures,” she reflects on the “terrible red baldness” of this bird that is “fattening on the dead.” Whether Hansen is tracking the flight of blue herons or turkey vultures, she is consistently seeking in her life and poetry a “kind of solitude/ nature offers,” a solitude threatened by the “white noise of television” and other aspects of contemporary life. In her poem “Mid-September” she tells us that silence is a “dying breed,” and she continues to seek it out as the context for personal discovery and illumination.

Although Hansen’s greatest strength as a poet can be found in her solitary observations of nature, she is also a poet of the social world. Many of the poems in her first book, *How To Live in the Heartland*, were inspired by her memories of growing-up in Lyons, Nebraska. Poems like “Headlines: Hometown Weekly,” “Eddie,” and “Friday Night at the Plaza,” all invoke girlhood memories of the peculiar and sometimes mysterious social relations and events in and around this small northeast Nebraska farm town. You will not find as many of this “species” of poem in her second book, yet key poems in both the first and third section of the book – “Distances” and “In Our Very Bones” – are devoted to important figures in Hansen’s family.

In “Going to the Graves” she drives her mother a hundred miles to “the rural cemetery/ with its gnarled red cedars.” There, her mother “carries the pail/ to far corners, family/ history spreading like flowers.” The ritual of returning to visit the dead unites mother and daughter and enables the poet’s aging mother to rediscover a sense of solace among the deceased, for in the cemetery things never seem to change. The stories engraved on the tombstones tell of “cousins dead from the big war,/ Danish in-laws with that/ clumsy Swede spelling,” linking mother and daughter to a remembered past. Yet the tragic irony of this ritual is not lost upon the poet, who muses how peculiar it will be to see her mother’s name carved in stone one day.

Like other Nebraska poets – William Kloefkorn, Don Welch, and Kathleene West – Hansen writes often about family in her poetry. A number of poems in her second collection are devoted to the poet’s father, daughter, and granddaughter. In “If My Father Were Still Alive,” the poet imagines telling her dead father about a reoccurring dream that her daughter has about cows:

how sometimes in her dreams  
they loom massive over her  
with their bulbous eyes  
their bluish leaky udders  
their crushing leaden hooves.

The father inquires as to how his granddaughter could dream of cows when she grew up in the city. The poet imagines her dead father’s incredulous reaction to his granddaughter’s dream: “How’d she come up with cows,/ he’d ask, meaning *city child*.” The granddaughter’s distance from the family farm



– both physical and psychological – may have contributed to the ominous way in which these cows appear in her dream. Hansen uses the dream then to register the distance that separates her daughter from a way of life she and her father once shared on the family farm.

In the latter two stanzas of the poem, the poet recalls an image of her father in his prime, back on the farm, feeding grain to the cattle: “he full of muscle and sweat and grin,/ sleeves of his work shirt rolled up,/ spreading grain in feed bunks.” Hansen’s nostalgia for the past is strong in this poem and in others where she invokes life the way it was in simpler, more pastoral days. Indeed, one of the strongest impulses in her work is the pastoral, a yearning for lost innocence, both in the landscape and in her personal relations. If one can fault her as a poet, it is that sometimes she slips into a sentimentalizing of the past and a pastoral way of life, unwilling at times to confront the harsher realities.

The concluding section of *In Our Very Bones* includes a number of poems in which Hansen’s commitments to both family and the prairie landscape intersect. This occurs most strikingly in the poem “At the Prairie, the Day Before,” a celebration of families on Nine-Mile Prairie outside Lincoln, Nebraska. The occasion is marked by “poetry, fiddling and guitar, nature hikes;” it is particularly memorable for Hansen because the festivities take place the day before the birth of her granddaughter. The gathering celebrates women on the prairies: “voices of celebration and of mothers/ and of earth.” This poem and many others in the collection point to an abiding interest by Hansen in matriarchal power. In matriarchal communities, women drew strength from their attunement with natural rhythms, especially those of the earth and moon. Hansen, throughout her collection, attempts in her very bones “to connect/ with mother earth.” In “At the Prairie, the Day Before” she celebrates the power of women on the prairies and the generative impulse of life that culminates in the birth of her granddaughter. She compares the newborn to the “folded bud of the blue downy gentian,” to a “rare prairie orchid known as nodding ladies’ tresses.” The child, like the prairie flowers Hansen knows so well, is connected to the earth and the generations of women – Grandmother, Mother, Daughter – that have planted love in their homes.

The light of the moon, associated with intuition, emotion, and magic in matriarchal societies, figures prominently in many of the poems in the volume. \* “Blue Moon,” “Full Moon, Partial Eclipse,” “Planting Garden,” and “Full Moon Rising, February” are but a few of the poems in which moonlight is a source of illumination. “The moon,” she says in “Planting the Garden,” “is always female.” She is delighted by the fact that her granddaughter will be born “by the full harvest moon.” Birthing, nurturing, female strength and connectedness in Hansen’s poems are associated with the “wordless moon, always female,/ rising plump.”

It’s “a half moon nesting atop the ash” in the volume’s concluding poem, “Backyard,” that is reminiscent of all the other moon poetry in this collection. Hansen’s backyard is one of her sacred places, a “refuge”:

It’s that place after  
I’ve gone everywhere,  
seen everything,  
I can’t wait to return to.

She has grown, or let grow, a small prairie in her own backyard, with “trumpet creeper and sumac and bluestem.” When she sits out back at dusk to look up at that half moon above the ash, she feels “at home but not contained.” This phrase might be a fitting epigraph for a poet who feels at home on the prairies



but never contained or confined by her landscape. She is, after all, a Romantic poet, one whose deepest desire is to transcend boundaries of place and self, who "in spite of all/ that's so secure" imagines herself in the final lines of the poem being lifted out of her backyard "somehow far,/ far away." "Backyard" connects with the earlier poem "Blue Herons;" both poems conclude with the impulse to rise. Paradoxically, this poet-horticulturist, surveyor of prairie flowers and small-town Nebraska life, seemingly grounded in the earth and its ways, feels a strong urge ("my wild heart beating") to take flight, to rise closer to the moon.

\*My thanks to Dorothy Apley, high school English teacher in Geneva, Nebraska, who pointed out to me in my summer (1999) graduate seminar at UNK on Nebraska Poetry and Culture that the moon imagery in many of Hansen's poems connects her to matriarchal belief systems.

Steve Schneider, University of Nebraska at Kearney

---

### *A Time To Sink Her Pretty Little Ship*

William Kloefkorn

Logan House, 1999

67 pp. \$11.95/paper

The blurbs on the back of *A Time To Sink Her Pretty Little Ship*, a collection of stories by William Kloefkorn, are interesting. The book-contents blurb notes "things have gone awry" with the towns and characters depicted in the four stories. According to the author blurb, Kloefkorn's accomplishments include being the 1978 Nebraska Hog-Calling Champion and the Nebraska State Poet. The former "blurb" refers to, among other things, necrophilia. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot on John Donne, the latter blurb refers to Kloefkorn's calling a hog in the same way he writes a story or a poem – his heart, head, and aesthetic sense are not compartmentalized. Together, the "blurbs" capture the subject and concern of the collection. The stories speak to the human condition, delineating individuals' lives and behavior as influenced by genes, age, religion, and war, with the former being among the inevitable circumstances of life and the latter having their origins in closed minds, carelessness, and arrogance.

These stories, individually and collectively, are in the American tradition of Anderson, Faulkner, and Hawthorne, among others. Like those writers, Kloefkorn takes as his subject and theme small town America and its inhabitants and, more importantly, people's fascination with the seemingly bizarre and the horrifyingly inexplicable. Opening the door into two of the stories may provide a glimpse of Kloefkorn's approach to the American tradition of storytelling.

Better than Anderson and equal to Faulkner, in "Baptizing the Shirt" and "Newberry's Boy" Kloefkorn depicts the bizarre, but, once explained, understandable, if not forgivable, behavior of Cora Hill and a character townspeople refer to as Newberry's Boy. Cora Hill's love for her husband – and a bit of



selfishness and arrogance – lead her to “baptize” her dying husband’s shirt. Kloefkorn’s depiction of Cora makes clear that her heart and love are right, but her head and religious obsession are off-base. She wants to assure that Clarence, who has steadfastly rejected “infernal baptism” and all it represents, will be welcome into that place of “joy inspeakable,” fine. More troubling, she also thinks “she and the Lord might be in cahoots” and is convinced “God was looking favorably upon her and upon her deed”; we recall the protesters at Matthew Shepherd’s funeral. By the conclusion of the story, we have an insight into and understanding of the origins of Cora’s behavior, and the story reminds us of our propensity to measure the world and our relations not by our “blessings” but by our perception of what is lacking. We are also reminded of our arrogance and the harm in “violating the human heart,” even when the motive is love and it appears no real harm is done. Therein, Kloefkorn, in my book, outdoes Anderson and is reminiscent of Hawthorne.

In “Newberry’s Boy,” Kloefkorn’s story-telling is at its best. The narrator and Brant, the local merchant, undertaker and string-kicking champion, are credible because they are a part of and sympathetic to, but distinct from, the “snoopy” and “curious” crowd of “wide eye[d] and slack jaw[ed] townspeople.” Both are responsible, humane men who are proud of their skills in kicking, embalming, carpentry, and story-telling, but both know the source of their gifts. Their realization and their story remind the reader of the importance of humility and of resisting the temptation to seek complex answers when simple ones will do. In this, Kloefkorn is as good as, and maybe better than, Faulkner.

Kloefkorn’s humor (“Brant served in the European theater and brought most of it home. . .”), his ability to delay the narrative (“ . . . which as it turned out was none other than Jack ‘The Ripper’ Thomas, as you will find out directly”), and his mastery of the simile from small town America (“the string from a sack of Bull Durham hanging from a pocket on his red plaid workshirt like the tongue of a small viper,” Sand Creek . . . “was dry as a Presbyterian,” “Accuracy . . . brought the bird dead as yesterday’s issue . . .”) more than meet the expectations of readers familiar with Kloefkorn’s story-telling and serve as one of the bases for recommending his work to new readers.

Buy this book.

Jo Taylor

University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus

---

### *Plainsong*

Kent Haruf

Knopf, 1999

301 pp. \$24.00/cloth

The introductory epigraph to this novel reads: “Plainsong – the unisonous vocal music used in the Christian church from the earliest times; any simple and unadorned melody or air.” And it is the plain, unadorned simplicity of the narration that is the most distinctive feature of the novel. Actions are simple: “Here was this man Tom Guthrie in Holt standing at the back window in the kitchen of his house smoking cigarettes and looking out over the back lot where the sun was just come up.” People’s living quarters are unadorned: “The room was an old sleeping porch with uncurtained windows on three



sides, airy-looking and open, with a pinewood floor." Food is plain: "Guthrie brought two thick crockery plates of steaming eggs and buttered toast to the table and set them down and the boys spread jelly on the toast and began to eat at once . . ." And love is that pure note of one steady sound: "[The boys] were nine and ten, with dark brown hair and unmarked faces, and cheeks that were still as pure and dear as a girl's."

The plot is simple, arche/typical, and timeless. Tom Guthrie teaches high school history (remember, those who know history are as likely to repeat it as those who do not) in the small town of Holt, Colorado, on the High Plains. He has been left with his two boys, Ike and Bobbie, after his wife, Ella, severely depressed, leaves them behind. Victoria Roubideaux – part-Indian, seventeen years old, pregnant, abandoned – is barred from her home by her own mother and needs a safe place to stay while she goes to school and eventually delivers the baby, a little girl. Harold and Raymond McPhersons, two bachelors in their sixties, take care of cows, heifers, calves, hay – and ultimately Victoria. Iva Stearnes – old, discarded, and dying – takes an interest in Ike and Bobbie who deliver her paper, and they in turn bond with her. Maggie Jones takes care of her aging father who has the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease, and she takes care of just about everyone else and subtly helps direct the favorable course of events with her level-headed mediation. And of course, there are assorted small-town villains, brutes, punks, pussies, and pundits.

The story is steadily dictated from a third-person point of view that is less omniscient and omnipotent than reportorial and worldly – slightly bemused, slightly exhausted. Rage, frustration, pain, despair, happiness, relief, love, and joy are recorded in the same straightforward style with no quotation marks to indicate the spoken from the thought from the informational, and no exclamation points mark the potential disaster from the saving grace. For instance, the two young boys go to Denver to visit their mother who is convalescing at her sister's apartment:

At the end of the week they woke one night in the dark and discovered that their mother wasn't in the room . . . Their mother was sitting on the davenport with a blanket wrapped around her.

Though she was awake, so far as they could see, she wasn't doing anything.

Mother?

What is it? she said. What woke you?

We wondered where you were.

I'm just out here, she said. It's all right. Go back to bed.

Can't we sit here with you?

If you want. It's cool out here though.

I'll get a blanket, Ike said.

But you won't like it, their mother said. I'm not very good company.

Mother, can't you come home again? Bobby asked. What good is it here?

No. Not yet, she said.

When?

I don't know, she said. I'm not sure. Here. Slide closer. You're getting cold. I should make you go back to bed. They sat for a long time watching out the window.

The boys were glad the next day when their father returned to pick them up. They wanted to go home again, but they felt confused and uneasy about leaving their mother in Denver . . . Once they were in the house upstairs in their own bedroom it was better. They could look out and see the corral and windmill and horse barn.



These boys are only nine and ten years old, but in this novel they will observe death and birth (animal and human), depression, violence (of man and nature), and the consolations of humor, learned skills, community networks and entanglements, work, and order in the universe; and they will learn to observe without moralizing and accept it all with aplomb.

Ultimately, then, if the narration is simple, the narrative describes the complexity of human existence in any given time and place, no matter how rural. Each of the several central characters is richly textured in spite of the minimalist punctuation and description. Males and females, the youth and the aged, have equal voice. Guthrie, Ike and Bobby, Victoria Roubideaux, Maggie Jones, Ella, McPhersons – these are the headings of chapters that provide the strands of lives being interwoven in a contemporary gestalt. Only the last chapter is called Holt; we are reminded that place has a fundamental say in the lives of the people who remain in that place.

This is a nice novel. Every female archetype is represented, every male. It is not overly optimistic; human efforts are only temporary stays against fate and mean coincidence. It is not unduly brutal; human efforts can ameliorate pain and trouble. If the novel is worth a second reading, it will be because its tone and rhythm are calm and steady, its point of view balanced and competent.

Gretchen Ronnow, Wayne State College

---

*The Dirty Shame Hotel and Other Stories*

Ron Block

New Rivers Press, 1998

156 pp. \$14.95/paper

The short story may well be an endangered species. This is due partly to so much of today's literary short fiction being made up of self-indulgent and pretentious ramblings. On the other hand, so-called regional stories are dismissed as celebrating the minutia of ordinary, uneventful lives of unexceptional folks in small towns where little of real consequence happens in relation to the real world of big cities, important people, and earth-changing events. This askew view of regional writing sees small-town America as a source of a kind of nostalgic celebration of insignificance – to borrow from Frank Norris's estimate of late 19th century realism, it is the adventure of a walk around the block, the tragedy of a broken teacup. I would suggest that such details of local color have never gone out of style in fiction-writing America, however, and that life in the small rural towns from which many of us came (though fewer and fewer each decade, it seems) deserves to be a part of our urgent present.

Some modern regional writers who use such details of local color revolt at the limiting distinctions often made by eastern establishment critics, book reviewers, and writers. Lois Hudson was one of the earliest to voice such objections. For many years she had seen her novels and short stories about North Dakota and Minnesota described somewhat condescendingly by critics as "regional." She and other regional writers have decried such depictions as the patronizing judgments of New York critics. Often writing in the *New York Times Book Review* or the *New York Review of Books*, these critics seem to have assumed that significant events and lives take place in big cities and, therefore, literature of consequence



tells their stories. It may be well to recall here what H.L. Mencken has said in another context about the stunted lives of "forlorn corner grocery men" in New York and other big cities where young people journeyed in search of their American Dream of Success in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

All this is to say, then, that regional or local color writing is still very much with us, and deserves to be. The efforts of small publishing houses such as New Rivers Press in Minneapolis have given us many of these works, including recently Ron Block's *The Dirty Shame Hotel and Other Stories*. Some of these stories represent a kind of modern regionalism while others are a throwback to good old-fashioned 19th century local color. In at least one story Block uses details of local color to capture some of the decaying city life at the end of the 20th century the way writers like Alger and Dreiser did at the end of the 19th century. Thus, Block buoys up the traditional use of local color underlying so much of our writing. At the same time he exemplifies newer, urban forms of local color writing. The result is a kind of contemporary urban regionalism.

The stories collected in *The Dirty Shame Hotel* range from short anecdotes to longer rambling narratives, from flat, stereotyped characters to fully developed ones, from the familiar present to retrospectives of the past. What many appear to have in common is a square, often unsparing, look at ordinary people who go about their routine lives until they bump up against unusual, even extraordinary, events or situations. These confrontations often include bizarre characters whose work-a-day routines mysteriously, sometimes confusingly, segue into a kind of magical realism. Or at least that's how the thirteen stories in Block's collection have been described and what seems to come across at first reading. There is a kind of mundane-regionalism-meets-magical-realism tone to the collection. And this is where recognition of contemporary urban regionalism becomes useful.

In the opening story, set early in the century in a farming community on the Plains, an ambitious and enterprising young woman named Vera is surprised to find her name incorporated into one of her typing book lessons: "Zadoc Xenophon cannot view bright new moons. Can Vera Montague?" This puzzling nonsense statement, besides becoming the title of the story, is the source of a kind of magical epiphany for Vera when she is finally able to make sense of it at the end. When she sees the bright new moon on a dark night while standing in a newly plowed field, she is able for the first time to see her own future – indeed, she "could remember the future," we are told. In this slight echo of John Irving's T. S. Garp whose "memory of the future" we get at the end of his novel, Vera's ordinary book of typing lessons becomes a magic book of "spells." The typewriter itself, she realizes, "possessed a terrible power," the power to "transform" herself and her world. The "strange new machine" could "cast spells" and "create worlds" of sense over nonsense by investing them with the "sharp authority of print." In a kind of twisted, postmodern way, by mastering the words of alphabetical spells on the typewriter, Vera gains control of her future, "a future she can compose out of her book of spells, her numbers and letters, and her machine." Vera can view her worlds and create her future but only when her routine life has undergone a kind of transformation engendered by her mastery of the routine details themselves on the typewriter.

Other stories similarly deal with such moments of realization, insight, and determined action for characters exposed to a kind of hyper-regionalism, and for readers as well. Not all, however, are accompanied by bizarre or fantasy events. In "Hideout," for example, which is so short that it apparently was an aborted story that never quite jelled or developed, the unnamed main character plays a game of unacknowledged hide-and-seek with neighborhood boys. Though they seek to torment him, these harmless, small-town boys succeed only in enhancing his declining sense of pleasure in the present. His



realization at the end that “growing old is only make-believe” is intriguing, but like the story itself ultimately asks to be finished and made convincing. Some stories use more bizarre incidents to suggest what is hinted at here: that life is not a series of single incidents occurring separately and successively on a continuum progressing from birth to death. They employ details of local color to show that we live all at once, simultaneously, everywhere at the same time, like the hologram in which the subject photographed is embedded everywhere at once.

In “St. Anthony and the Fish,” Ned, a farmer in Nebraska, takes in a lost nun only to have her confirm his dull, unexceptional, salt-of-the-earth way of life and, ultimately, reject it. The potential existential blank lying at the heart of all of us is depicted unsparingly here in Ned’s kindly nature but plodding, animal-like life. The nada of “nothingness” so often mistakenly imagined to be indigenous to rural small-town life is actual, real, and powerfully though sympathetically portrayed here. There is no fulfillment for the character, the story, or the reader at the end as the nun leaves his farm and Ned pursues her in an attempt to run away from what he cannot, and probably should not, leave behind. What little magic she brought to his solitary rural life is represented by the long-lost wedding ring and wedding dress of his great-grandmother Ned finds in the house – ordinary yet valuable things detailing common life passages he has missed. He is a “good man” locked into the mundane details and trivialities of his present.

There are some things, however, that suggest that Block is looking for more than a kind of shotgun marriage of convenience between mundaneness and magic in many of these stories. Nearly all of them use a first-person narrator who is usually a participant in or close observer of the events. The resulting voice and angle of vision add a kind of postmodern dimension to the stories by requiring consideration of the motives of and effects upon each of the narrators. Some stories give us voices of witty and sardonic narrators who recognize and sympathize with the foibles so often exploited by the bizarre actions in other stories. The tone of some of these voices reveal that Block may not be writing about what some of his readers have called the disenfranchised at all, but rather about you and me. Many of his characters are more or less ordinary people who read collections of short stories, who are reasonably well plugged into the day-to-day exigencies of the work-a-day world. The kind of people that Linda Tripp, for example, tried unconvincingly to hide herself among in that surreal world of politics so far removed from the far more ordinary and believable world of Block’s Midwestern characters. The voices of these narrators are often what tie the balloon of unreality to earth when bizarre events threaten to carry some stories into the seductive and subjective world of magic realism. Many appealing narrative voices speak to us convincingly from the ruddy soil of Midwestern reality that surrounds them.

Some first-person narrators and characters experience this disconnection between local color realities and the myths we create for ourselves. The narrator of “The Stanley Andrews Story” is a distanced insider, an almost dispassionate observer of small-town life where what passes for wit and humor becomes serious and, eventually, deadly. Two brothers resent the success in the larger world of country music of one of their fellow good old boys, Stanley Andrews. They respond to this “young man from the provinces” success myth by repressing recognition of their own inconsequence and insisting on their own small-town importance – “We’re the damn legends” – with fatal results. Such attempts at a second-hand siphoning of significance are common in American culture, from Stephen Crane’s short stories to our assassinations of politicians and prominent people. Indeed, the narrator’s reference to Lee Harvey Oswald gives a standard for measuring the social consequences of the brothers’ actions at the end. It also demonstrates the intimate yoking of victim and victimizer, of prey and predator, of the hater and hated even in, perhaps especially in, small-town Middle America. Good-ol’-boys become dead-ol’-



boys because what gave their lives a vicarious focus and meaning – frustrated envy of Stanley Andrews' legendary success – was suddenly gone. Perhaps such rural "legends" are more readily created because of what this story shows as a kind of oral tradition among people more closely bound to small towns and to each other, in knowledge if not sympathy.

In contrast, the characters and narrator of "The Gothenburg Marching Band" are sympathetic and understanding of the envy so often at the bottom of our shared sense of personal failure in life. The narrator's voice drips with both sarcasm and sympathy for Mr. Jenke, the high school band director, whose personal demons seem to come out in last minute decisions that turn routine performances of his marching band into disasters. It's the delightful Holden Caulfield-like voice of the youthful narrator that keeps this delightful story grounded: "You should have seen us," "It's like a hundred degrees out," "But the thing of it is . . .," "Mr. Jenke didn't have a clue," "They just about went nuts." There is no drift into magic realism; there is only the narrator's sense of increasingly "weird" misunderstandings and mistakes climaxing in a completely believable episode merging disaster with success. The final scene has the marching band performing in a town so small that their audience consists of "some man" fixing his car, a group of "old folks" in their rockers (the ones who "just about went nuts" when they did their "about-face-and-cut-back-through-the-ranks routine"), a kid, and a dog. When they end up in a pasture outside of town playing and marching for "three bay horses" and some "cows," they high-stepped and "played about as good as we ever did." The tone of the voice here skirts the edges of sympathetic irony with the deft touch of Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye*. As a result, we share the narrator's acceptance of folly, sympathetic understanding of human weakness, and determined efforts to fend off failure.

A few stories, instead of drifting off into magic realism, threaten to open the trap door of Gothicism. "A Bedtime Story," "Bonehead," and "Bookworm" involve various kinds of extreme mental states combined with black humor and strange combinations of almost dream-like characters and narrators. What is further suggested in these stories is not only characters whose quirkiness masks sudden spontaneous outbursts of violence, but some faulty wiring in the narrator's voice and motivation for recollection. In some ways these stories invite comparisons to Poe's narrators and to Faulkner's superficially simple but deeply dangerous poor white trash characters, the Snopes. "A Bedtime Story" may be the only one where the voice becomes inappropriate to the narrator and the story itself seems an ill fit for the situation. A farmer keeps a chimp caged up in a shed after killing his menagerie of other animals, including a llama, a Brahma bull, deer, and elk, leaving only a pile of antlers. The implied subliminal threats of the farmer's reasonless violence weigh rather heavily on the frame story of a grandfather telling his granddaughter a bedtime story about the time he took her "mommy" as a little girl to a farm for a pumpkin at Halloween. Occasionally the grandfather's narrative voice sounds not particularly grandfatherly, or even fatherly for that matter – more like Huck Finn, perhaps, while the chained chimp and pile of antlers as remnants of slaughtered animals seem somehow less than appropriate for a bedtime story for a little girl. Block is requiring us to measure the appropriateness, not to mention the irony, of his details of local color and titles in our estimates of his stories.

"Bookworm" is a short, seemingly simple little story that brings Edgar Allen Poe's brand of Gothic irony explicitly into consideration, indeed, forces it and him upon us at every turn. We should not be surprised, then, to find the formula for this story to be familiar but strange – a small-town Poe meets a local color librarian with a case of realistic roundworm. Or to find an "I" narrator's life of increasing solitude a maddening agent that bores like a worm into more than the books which surround him. The voice itself is Poe-esque in tone, timbre, and diction: "I first started to draw apart from my neighbors as



a child," "strange obsessions . . . I cannot tell you how much I hated that phrase bookworm, which haunted me throughout my childhood." There are also consistent references to Poe's stories, duplications of his theme of madness in character and plot, and even quotations from his poem "The Conquering Worm."

The Poe-like narrator seeks out a seemingly abandoned house (somewhat less grand than the House of Usher) in his small hometown where he finds an old woman ("obviously out of her mind") surrounded by books in rooms smelling musty, dank, and "of something not so recently dead." Like any number of Poe's mad characters, this woman laughs chillingly "like a nail being pulled out of dense wood." Poe's conquering worm is the word made flesh here, as it were, the old woman tells our narrator that a book he has read which took its title from Poe's poem has infected him with a real worm, "the American roundworm, which often lives in the dust of old books. You are most certainly infested." The same worm had infected her years before and she in turn infected three successive husbands. "Their constitutions," she adds, "could not take it. Would you like some toast? You must feed the worm . . . since it's such a long and hungry one." Her powers of ratiocination and her deliciously detailed description of the bookworm's progress "wriggling and conspiring" through his intestines combine two Poe elements: his calculatingly logical yet chillingly insane narrators and his calculatingly logical, coldly rational, Sherlock Holmes-like detective, Monsieur Dupin. Even the ending duplicates the confession-like pride and simultaneous sense of loathing in the narrators of such Poe stories as "The Cask of Amontillado," "The Black Cat," and "The Tell-Tale Heart": "I felt the first wave of nausea. I have felt it every night since. I feel it even now." This looking back with nausea rather than nostalgia is the watermark of Poe that Block has imprinted on his local color details and never quite repeats in other stories.

The surrealism of the ending of a similar story, "Bonehead," is actually more effective as a lead-in to a clearly regional story that follows it, "Land of the Midnight Blonde," than it is as an ending to its own bad dreams and wishful thinking. Both stories sound like the modest indulgences of the author's wishful thinking combined with recollections of actual people and events. The latter story is an intermittently surreal blend of college classes taught and taken, parties planned and unplanned, students blonde and unblonde, and names dropped and undropped of writers and poets in Fargo. Since Ron Block had been a lecturer in English at North Dakota State University in Fargo from 1984 to 1992, and I can attest to his being a very effective and successful one at that, presumably he knows of what he speaks. If this story is in any way less successful than others which are more fully plotted, it manages to develop and celebrate Fargo friends and hangouts of the author who can surely recognize themselves in some of the familiar scenes of hazy drinking parties which nicely play off some of the hazy classroom scenes. The University-Professor-as-Joe-College-I'm-one-of-the-boys-just-call-me-Ron syndrome is nicely evoked here, if not parodied.

If there is any self-indulgence in "Land of the Midnight Blonde," it is rather like that in "Bookworm" where Poe's somewhat mythic reputation for horror is exposed in all its unbloody, goreless, psychological-not-physical, "not of Germany but of the soul" glory. The surreal parties in "Land of the Midnight Blonde" seem to be part of the author's attempts to invest his characters and events with a bit of what he refers to as the "mythos" of the rural Midwest. One version of which is the irony of our salt-of-the-earth reputation for a kind of romanticized, sinewy self-reliance and the actual terrors and dangers underlying our everyday life. The old Appearance-versus-Reality myth. Block uses the then-current story of John Thompson's farm accident as an example of how the "public spectacle" and sentiment about such tragedies are inadequate to the actual physics of farm accidents and the sometime cynicism of our resulting



dreams. The national outpouring of sympathy for John Thompson could exemplify how a nice, enterprising, earnest, deserving young man may have been saved from an otherwise undistinguished life by one of those “private tragedies” we know is always lurking below the surface of everyday rural life. This young man, who had his arms ripped off by a power take-off and acted so courageously and imaginatively to save himself, may well have done for himself what this story attempts to do for the characters and events of “last summer” in “Land of the Midnight Blonde” – salvage ordinary, young adult indulgence from becoming, well, ordinary, young adult indulgence.

Perhaps the two most impressive and successful stories in this collection are “The Dirty Shame Hotel” and “Demon in the Closet.” It may be because they combine compelling, often striking details of local color with domestic and urban situations which drag otherwise ordinary, even mundane, people into moments of puzzling unreality. The title story is more deliberately literary than most of the others in this collection – an official short story. It is also one of the few written in third person omniscient and the only one given a setting generally recognized as a set piece for the introduction and development of eccentric and interesting characters – a seedy hotel with transient and marginal occupants. It is very nearly the archetypal example of a kind of urban regionalism or big city local color – virtually every character could have slipped over from any of the other stories. In effect, the hotel and immediate surroundings constitute a small, Midwestern-like town plunked down in the middle of some large city somewhere. “The Dirty Shame Hotel” is kind of “Hot l Baltimore” with no letters missing, and has the same suggestion of ambiguity and alternative meanings adding to the relatively deliberate literary intentions of the story. Also adding a curious note to the more literary objective here are footnotes purporting to lend authenticity and realism to the theories of the central character, Dr. Orrin.

These more literary effects are embodied in what Dr. Orrin calls the “Orrin Effect” which Block makes use of as both subject and method here. The good doctor’s theory purports to explain that the “unifying principle of the universe . . . is suction,” and his expounding on it to everyone who will listen as he sits in the lobby of the seedy hotel sucks largely inattentiveness out of them. But then since, in the Orrin Effect, “the very act of defining something alters it into its opposite,” he expects no better. Indeed, in a kind suicidal, self-destructive, deconstructive way, the delightfully preposterous ideas of Dr. Orrin dictate their own lack of acceptance by others, his failure in his own mind, and, strangely, the story’s success for the reader. Toward the end of the story, “switched polarities” reverse characters’ personalities and enable them to get what they’ve been denied before, including Dr. Orrin, understand what they could not before, including the unifying theory of suction. Then the good doctor allows as how “Things never turn out the way you’d expect, so my philosophy – my talisman – is to expect the worst.” These and other delightful, surrealistic reversals of otherwise routine details lead a reader to one inescapable conclusion, however – these are not new ideas. Irony and pessimism are not new and neither is the misjudging of people – their motivations, wishes, needs – or the misreading of reality altogether. But they have been sucked up and stuffed into some compelling new bottles and served with some interesting effects in this story.

If suction and “vacuum” are the polarities in this obvious “allegory” of “The Dirty Shame Hotel,” when a vacuum sucks things into itself successfully it is no longer a vacuum unless it continuously recreates itself. This is what happens here. Each of the numerous characters in this allegory is really a runaway from the small-town Middle America of, say, Sinclair Lewis or Sherwood Anderson – from the thief who steals watches in order to waste time, to the kid who compulsively buys a guitar but cannot sing a lick, to the wife who makes love to her husband because she is so repulsed by him, to the mother



searching the hotel frantically for her runaway son who does not recognize his voice when she hears it in one of the rooms. As much as we may hope them to be more than what they appear to be and to change accordingly, they are actually less than their opposites yoked together. The petty thief who steals watches off cadavers at wakes is being determinedly described by Block:

In the maddening allegory he was playing out, Repulsion and Compulsion met in the same room, exchanged business cards, and discovered that they were twins who had been separated at birth.

We are told immediately that this is one of many examples of the "Orrin Effect." The problem here is that the metaphor is a bit too neat, too self-consciously precious, perhaps a little pretentious and literary. It may be Block himself suffering his own Orrin Effect causing the slightly hyper-instructive style to have the opposite effect intended.

The black humor, ironic insights, and our all-too-human perpetuation of absurdities and contradictions in "The Dirty Shame Hotel" may remind us of *Catch-22* and *Player Piano*, just as the setting recalls "Hot I Baltimore" and the magic events at the end are reminiscent of Cheever's "The Swimmer." This merging of a kind of hybrid, gritty urban regionalism with touches of magic realism is handled quite differently in a story where the straining for insights and truth is considerably less literary and much more domestic and domesticated. In "Demon in the Closet" a rather generic, if not stereotyped, family confronts an unexpected and unwelcome visitor. But while "The Dirty Shame Hotel" ends in a kind of all-encompassing crescendo of escalating unbelievability capping off the largely uneventful lives of unexceptional failures, "Demon" thrusts one lone lump of hyper-realism into the pudding of otherwise ordinary lives in an ordinary family in an ordinary town. In the opening, scene "Mom" finds the unwelcome visitor in the closet ("All I want to know is which of you brought that thing in here") and all the kids deny it ("Not me," "I didn't do it," "Don't blame me," "It wasn't me."). Mom counters with the familiar ("Well, don't try to tell me that it got in there on its own,") and then plays the Dad card cliché ("You wait until your Dad gets home."). Behind this cliché language and ordinary situation, however, is the decidedly unordinary "thing" itself discovered in the closet – "a demon, and a gray one, too." And the story proceeds to develop the family's local color domestic life with that twist in its tail of progress – a literal, inexplicable "demon" which joins the family as a pet to be reckoned with.

Along with all the recognizable details of family life which tie it to familiar Midwestern regional reality, however, are the issues which lie below all such stereotypes of domestic life, in one form or another. There's trouble in this family, as there is in all families, and the demon personifies and voices it. It's important, though, to see that Block, through his first-person narrator "Morgana," one of the children, does not want the obvious metaphorical function of the friendly and sympathetic demon to sweep the story into allegory. Somehow the voice of Morgana keeps our demon in the closet of local color without exceeding the bounds of what a young girl would know about the themes which threaten to break into the song and dance of symbolism: original sin, sex, pregnancy, secret drinking, religious belief, guilt. As the role of the innocent demon as a kind of scapegoat for everyone's sins becomes increasingly obvious, the family seems to elevate its confrontations in ways that border on the surrealistic. But there are no sudden injections of instances of magic realism into the plot, unlike some of the other stories. Here the gradual folding of the friendly demon into the daily events of the family is more like the use of tabulation in, say, *The World According To Garp* where the "Undertoad" is always lurking just beneath the barely rippled surface of life which remains unchanged until it surfaces.



Indeed, at the end the poor demon is rejected but implacable, not unlike the embarrassing new grandchild in the family. Once again he is ignored in the closet where he “doesn’t say nothing or do nothing” and “costs almost nothing to keep, a lot less than a baby does.” But he refuses to leave or even be abandoned by the family. Consequently, the reader is tempted to make of this demon something more than he is at the end, and throughout the story, for that matter – to demonize the demon, if you will. A trap is set for the unwary reader here not unlike that which the demon presents to the family. To make too much of this mouthless, mute, scared, dependent, dog-like demon would be too easy and too academic. Original sin, sex, and guilt could easily be heaped on him. But this confused demon in a closet is not Melville’s Moby Dick, or Poe’s black cat, or even the Big Bear of Arkansas. He is not the white whale of a race’s original sin, or an individual’s black cat of guilt, or a region’s unhuntable symbol of nature – he is the innocent complicating factors which inevitably ratchet up our seemingly mundane, everyday life of going to work, fixing meals, attending church, celebrating Halloween, having babies. He is one of the family, every family, in ways the larger and more mythic white whale and black cat and big bear could never be. They are supernatural; he is “flat, all folded up, and afraid.” They are retributive punishments from Fate while he is the narrator’s adolescent sense of garden-variety “blame that’s been coming my way since the day I was born.”

In a way this story is itself the demon in the closet of this collection of short stories. It invites us to jettison the simple, sensitive humanism of so many of these stories in favor of the big lessons of symbolism; it tempts us to ignore our modest demons which stay with us like the dog that won’t run off and the baby that “screams all night long.” But to do so would be to miss the striking regional details which clearly show the everyday lives of more or less ordinary people who, like us, have their moments (sometimes hours and days) of good and bad, of mute serendipity and even magical achievements.

Bill Cosgrove, North Dakota State University

---

*Leaning Into the Wind: Women Write from the Heart of the West*

Linda Hasselstrom, Gaydell Collier, Nancy Curtis, eds.

Houghton-Mifflin, 1997

388 pp. \$25.00/cloth

Barbara Jessing shares two images of her great-grandmother, Rosa, in the book *Leaning into the Wind*. One is of Rosa in her Sunday finery with her 13 children and her husband – a man to whom she was sold into marriage by her father after a night of drinking and gambling. The other photo “shows Rosa in a farm dress and apron, wind blown, feeding chickens alone, tall as a tree on the rolling prairie where she made a lasting home” (“Given Away”). It’s these kinds of images, outward appearances which are peeled back to show the truth, which fill the pages of the anthology, *Leaning Into The Wind: Women Write from the Heart of the West*. Like seeds broadcast onto a field, the book is scattered with bits of High Plains wisdom, Western lore, homespun humor, and the harsh truths which molded each writer.

The book was edited by three writers: Nancy Curtis, Linda Hasselstrom and Gaydell Collier. All working ranchers, they collected the writings of ordinary women from across the High Plains. Memoirs,



reflections and poems are included.

Cindy French, in "Child of the Land," explains the difference between two kinds of people of the earth: children of the land and children of the sky. The land's children are those with a "spiritual feeling toward the land and a oneness with nature," and the sky's children are those who admire the man-made wonders of the world. *Leaning Into The Wind* can only truly be appreciated by children of the land, and, according to French's explanation, a child of the land would understand this passage from Louise Steneck, a New York City transplant to a hog farm on the Plains. Steneck tells of the day when nature drew her to itself:

Oh, Lord, I felt so tired of work and uncertainty, of every day facing something new. So, so tired.

In that moment something in me gave way; I stretched out in sweet fresh straw, turned my face toward the weak warmth of the lowering sun and cried. I wailed and sobbed and shook, alone among the pigs, until the stone under my heart melted and I slept.

When I woke, dozens of piglets were curled about me, nestled against my hips, tucked under my outspread arms, piled like a halo about my head. I lay still in the whisper of sleeping pigs and let new life flow into the place beneath my heart that those tears had left behind

"Sleeping With Pigs"

Understanding the pull of the land inspired Kathleene West's story in which West grapples with the Plains legacy of dust and mud:

Did they choose this place or did the land choose them? The Mormons gone to greener pastures, the Skidi and the rest of the Pawnee pushed away, the trading post and the old grist mill closed down, but the Union Pacific inspired a town and people to farm the land. These plains people are descendents of Scandinavian fisherfolk and peasants who followed no glamorous dream to America but hoped for something to live on, something to own. The surveyed acres hold them in the cycles of plants, growth, and harvest. This is the land of farmers and their children. Let us begin with a woman born a hundred miles from the center of the country, so close to the heart she will always feel its beat within her skin

"Martin Luther's Children"

Other must-reads are stories of loss by Lori Hale and Shannon Dyer. Hale came to know Nancy Christensen Hendrickson, not through personal contact, but by the things she'd left behind in a North Dakota farmhouse they shared. Hale came to love Hendrickson and felt the loss for both of them when the home was razed ("Nancy, Heaven-Sent"). Dyer tells of loss when she is separated from a three-generation Nebraska farm: "This family tragedy still affects, and 'The Auction' is about leaving the place we all loved."

*Leaning Into The Wind* is not, nor is it meant to be, a quick read. Instead, it is meant to be absorbed in bits, ruminated, digested, and savored like cookies in a sack, one by one, story by story.

LaRayne Meyer  
Pilger, Nebraska



*As the Lilac Burned the Laurel Grew: Poems*  
*We Did Not Fear the Father: New and Selected Poems*

Charles Fort

University of Nebraska at Kearney Press, 1999, 1998

20 pp. \$10/paper

68 pp. \$25/paper

Reprinted from *Grassroots*

Charles Fort is part of a rare breed in contemporary poetry. He is a modern poet keen on new trends, but with an eye firmly on the classics. In his latest book of poems, *As the Lilac Burned the Laurel Grew*, Fort quotes Milton and Baudelaire and includes an Index of First Lines recalling Emily Dickinson. But the most touching poems in *Lilac* are about his life: his family.

In "Father Time," Fort writes how he and his siblings used their father's coming and going to mark the passage of time.

We saw the world in father time  
in the worn boot heels ahead of us  
as his charred hands opened the door  
in the morning after his night shift.

Perhaps the strongest asset of Fort's writing is his ability to slide an idea into readers' heads without them knowing he did. At first read a poem may appear superficial. However, a few minutes later, the poem comes creeping back stronger, full of life and meaning. *Lilac* is a slim volume rich in emotion, tempered with tender remembrance.

The poems in Fort's longer 1998 release, *We Did Not Fear the Father*, are more diverse. The poems are at turns brash and jazzy, sentimental and sweeping, subdued and understated. Many of Fort's poems are uplifting and bubbling, waiting to escape.

In writing "How Old Are the People of the Word," Fort seems to wonder when the cycle of violence on this planet will end.

Blue fog cuts the tops of the trees,  
dispersed, October, still moving  
unrelenting as eyes searching out food  
as the man to first raise his fist for blood  
kicking the locust for its very idea.

Fort holds the Reynolds Chair in Poetry at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. In his prologue to *Lilac* the Connecticut native writes of his time in Nebraska: "I am in seclusion, nearly in exile here where the evenings are longer and the horizon longer still." However, Fort needs that extra time because as he writes in his prologue to "Father," he intends "to revive the neglected form of the long poem."

Bruce Nelson, Omaha



*Nobody Lives Here Who Saw This Sky*

Greg Kosmicki

Missing Spoke Press, 1998

113 pp. \$12/paper

Reprinted from *Grassroots*

Once limited to aristocrats and recluse spinsters, poetry has gained a recent wave of acceptability as a medium for the working class. In the post-World War II era, fueled by writers such as Charles Bukowski and more recently David Lee, poetry by and about people with grease on their hands, flat feet and a late mortgage payment – in short, people like you and me – has inspired a new breed of readers.

An emerging master of this genre, Greg Kosmicki contrasts the tender emotions he feels for his family with the contempt holds (or held) for his job with UPS in his latest book *Nobody Lives Here Who Saw This Sky*.

Kosmicki takes the ordinary, small things in life (wildlife, gardening, and tumbleweeds) and transforms them into something magical, even electric.

In his most tender moments Kosmicki refers to his daughter's "cornsilk hair" ("5-5-83") and mourns the death of a bird he hit while driving, "little bird soul, please don't go with me" ("South of Smith Lake").

At the book's climax his rage seeps out: "They didn't just want your body for work/ they wanted every bit of you they could tear away/ from whatever is was inside yourself/ you thought of as yourself/ they wanted UPS to never be out of your mind" ("Quitting"). But Kosmicki's rage is not blinded by excess, but clear-headed and well-focused, and honed razor-sharp.

Born in Alliance and educated at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, Kosmicki keeps Nebraska in his mind. It inspires his poems; witness titles such as "On The Hays Spring Cutoff," "Northeast of Alliance," and "20 Miles East of Pleasant Point Church."

In the Foreword, Greg Kuzma calls Kosmicki's poems, "... brief declarations of humanity amidst lives made mean and joyless."

*Nobody Lives Here* ... also reveals a man quite sure of himself, a man who feels he had "... wasted two-thirds of his life" ("April 16th"). Furthermore, we see a man who ponders the unknowable and grapples with faith.

Kosmicki is a survivor, though. When the dog dies ("Heartworm"), he sucks it up, realizing there's nothing he can do. And when the chips are down, when he's at his lowest, he takes the future in his own hands.

Published by Missing Spoke Press, *Nobody Lives Here Who Saw This Sky* is Kosmicki's second book of poetry. He also edits and publishes The Backwaters Press.

Bruce R. Nelson, Omaha



*Before We Lost our Ways*

Mark Sanders

Sandhills Press, 1997

120 pp. \$9.00/paper

Reprinted from *The Midwest Quarterly*

Mark Sanders' latest collection of poetry, *Before We Lost Our Ways*, is sad and personal, filled with loss, doubt, failed dreams, and what Sanders calls "ongoing extinctions." Its literal setting is the plains world of the flatlander (this is in turn the title of one of the poems in the collection) in which "Yearbooks and trophies pass on to attics" and "Ghosts of elm trees . . . spook the emerald lawns with shade." Yet, *Before We Lost Our Ways* is also the work of a poet who never loses sight of the ordinary or quotidian, which is where he'd prefer to live – if he could. Wordsworth called life a birth that "is but a sleep and a forgetting" which seems to me to be Sanders' virtual subject.

Sanders reveals much of himself in this collection, opting for a direct, confessional approach, unafraid to reveal both the darkness and the pain of his soul. The poems represent pieces of himself hanging from the sharp edges he has found there. Like Sanders, what we desire is the world of "The Cricket Twilight." It is vaguely utopian and certainly midwestern, a figure for the world of youth, but that world is his (implicit) object of mourning; we leave it behind almost instantly, as does the writer in his poems of memory, representing the first section of the collection: "Before We Lost Our Ways," "For My Sister, 1961" (a beautiful poem exhibiting great emotional restraint), "The Old School," and others. The midwestern, inland world of his memory is recovered fondly, and we see it in all its rich variety, the small towns in which "Life to all is a slow waltz/around short blocks," but the poet, perhaps like all of us, has aged much too fast.

In "My Father's Years," for instance, he looks at his father and sees only himself, his double:

I cannot open myself to those  
I am closest to. I hide much guilt.  
When I look at my father, his skin stained with age,  
I can only imagine how much he hides.

This insight cuts both ways, of course, and Sanders makes sure we understand that: At times the mirror is literal rather than figurative. In "Self-Portrait" he tells us he's "a man bearing great weight," that "his beard is dirty water, / and just beneath / the white trough along the curb. / His hair, loose, runs all directions. / It can't get far enough away." Sanders feels older than his years; he is, as he suggests in an epigraph to one of the book's divisions, Wallace Stevens' "man of autumn" with "its melancholy mask," but unlike Stevens' "man of autumn," Sanders' figure has aged prematurely and uncomfortably and certainly not gracefully. He is certainly willing to admit all this. In "These Children" we learn that his children

who meet incomprehensible terror  
in their dreams and run,  
take comfort in my snoring  
that erasure of my day-rooted rage.



They find a kind of dark peace in my covers.  
But what can they know? Not death, debt,  
and the heart's bankruptcy.

Not that old man who stands in the mirror, mocking me.

The "old man . . . in the mirror" is a synecdoche for age, of course. While Stevens' man of autumn swears to "laugh in the brown grass" and "shout from the tower's rim," Sanders the poet isn't quite so sure about the possibility. "Let there be no pain in these old bones," he writes in "Prayer Before Sleep," "but the body-canoe afloat/on a pond of quiet desire." Is his prayer to allow himself to have grief transformed into desire? Most likely, but unlike Stevens, Sanders does not seem to want imaginative compensation – that "laugh" and that "shout" – but death. At the conclusion of "Prayer Before Sleep" he writes:

If quiet defies me, if desire is drought,  
if woman's cradle and her lung-lullaby stop,

do not give me day nor dreams.  
Nor anything.

Really? What about the laugh and the shout? His hard-earned insight is that it is only in memory? He looks back or he looks at the mirror (in whatever figuration), but rarely if ever ahead, at the future, the place of nothing but "Ongoing Extinctions."

I, for one, want him to get beyond the "Nor anything." A strong collection consisting of several previously published poems, the book's sole weakness is its final pages. While it certainly doesn't end with a whimper and certainly does not need a bang, the book's evasion is Sanders' evasion or displacement of his anger. Ostensibly seeking imaginative reconciliations on several fronts, for instance, with life's negation of desire, with ex-wives, or perhaps most importantly, with his own inner uprootedness (this uprootedness a result of his being a "flatlander" – or being "inland" in the Wordsworthian, imaginative sense), he concludes adopting the voice of a sort of saloon or barroom singer. In one of the collection's final poems, "The World," he observes, "The World is a dance hall and saloon," concluding that, "Sometimes, when you're lucky, / you leave The World with someone clutching / you. And sometimes you just get drunk."

Does he really want us to close the book thinking in terms of lounge-lizard aphorisms? I don't think so. There are poems in this collection that reveal Sanders' powers of colossal sublimation, especially those that speak of his often tortured relationship to his family – his parents and his children and his lost lovers, for instance. When he becomes that "man of autumn" which he believes he is but is not, a poetic figure which he understands thoroughly in his art but not in his life, and when his loss is entirely sublimated into art, I believe that that moment will be a collection to behold. To be sure, this is a strong collection of poems, but it is not the volume that one might expect – a clear expression of his peculiar gift.

Samuel J. Umland, University of Nebraska at Kearney



*The Conception Abbey Poems*, 2nd edition

Fredrick Zydek

Lone Willow Press, 1999

36 pp. \$7.95/paper

Ah, whom can we ever turn to  
in our need? Not angels, not humans,  
and already knowing animals are aware  
that we are not really at home in  
our interpreted world.

– Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, trans. Stephen Mitchell

What is it God expects from prayer?  
Even my old dog understands more  
about yelping than I'll ever know.

– Fredrick Zydek, "A Prayer for Contradictions"

In the title poem of Fredrick Zydek's revised and expanded edition of 1995's *The Abbey Poems*, the speaker contemplates:

I'm a product of the world's  
bewildering hardware,  
searching for a great quiet thing

So begins a collection of poems, searching, walking their own distinctive paths at their own distinctive paces, asking for both the universe's understanding and to be understood. Put simply, these poems are essentially about the many facets of man's relationship with God both in his mind and in the physical world, centering here at Conception Abbey, a Benedictine monastery and seminary located in northwest Missouri (though it might as well be a mountain peak in Tibet, or the Vatican itself), and how the places within that place reflect his various spiritual relationships. Granted, these poems of place are considerably different from his contemporary Richard Hugo's, whose were instilled with imaginary events that places had inspired him to see – in some instances, Zydek's abbey is not so much about the desire to see God, but the desire of God to be seen.

I watch the votive flicker  
lean and lacy in the night.  
He is here now – in the stillness,  
in the little light,  
in the space that waits between us.  
He knows my name.  
We eye each other until dawn.

"Retreat at Conception Abbey"



Mostly, though, Zydek's book centers on the speaker's many spiritual feelings – joy, frustration, confusion, sorrow and doubt – so much a part of the religious life.

There is also humor. In one poem, "Praying for Stuff," the speaker contemplates his materialistic nature, how the acquisition of "stuff" stands in the way of his religion:

Once I had a dream. I stepped before  
the throne of God. He asked only  
one question: "Did you become  
who you were supposed to be?"  
"I'm not sure," I told Him.  
"But when I died, I had so much stuff  
it took them three days to find me."

Or in "Song of the Dreamer:"

You were a joker jumping  
from planet to planet,  
  
giggling to see your footprints  
sparkle through the Milky Way

The portrait that Zydek paints is achingly human. At one moment, we find the speaker praying the midst of doubt:

But how do I deal with all this doubt  
when what I want is wonder?  
"Praying to Remove Doubt"

and the next instructing the reader on the correct way of praying:

You must let your mind float  
in the vocabulary of wordlessness.  
"Getting to the Still Center"

It must be easy for a Catholic to become a poet, for their relation is one that has invested a great deal in metaphor – Zydek himself uses many of the faith's traditions as metaphor in bracingly eloquent ways – however, these are lyric poems inspired by exteriors. To the uninformed reader, some images, or, indeed entire poems, might seem extravagant – much like witnessing the beauty of a Buddhist temple, unable to grasp the deeper meaning of its architecture – the gaze becomes one of the tourist – one who sees always at a distance, even when up close, snapshot ready. Among these external eccentricities, however, there exist many interior subtleties.

Even the softest of clouds



make shadows crawl  
across the landscape  
of our lives  
“Easter Mass”

At the same time, Zydek does not attempt a kind of scholarly elitism with his predominantly Catholic allusions. One gets the feeling that these allusions are intrinsic to him as breathing, they sound so natural. One of his inexplicable talents is getting to the center of spiritual conversation with the world, the “celestial machinery” he so eloquently states time and time again in these poems.

I’m a complicated  
amoeba brazen enough  
to believe the great  
I Am has time to set  
aside the celestial  
machinery and chat.  
“What I Am In Prayer”

While he occasionally falls into the “club” of Catholic imagery, sometimes overwhelming the poems (understandably, considering the subject matter – religious intuition, spiritual fulfillment, morality, the human experience, God – not at all light, breezy subjects, and perfect for poems written by a poet who seems to understand a poet to be a philosopher who should avoid philosophizing), Zydek is able to acknowledge that dogma and religious gowns are merely different garments for the same body, different expressions for essentially the same face. Metaphors merely seek to bring us closer to thoughts that, arriving naked, we may not be able to comprehend without.

Richard Eberhardt has said of Zydek that he “has a delicacy with words. He has lived and worked to master them, has uncovered their unavailable intricacies . . . he pleases by distinctive phrasing and by control of the language.” I think it was also Eberhardt who said that all his poems are “religious poems.” At any rate, these are fair assumptions. What essentially makes these poems work is that they are poems. Aside from the occasional embarrassing abstractions (“what I praise are the mysteries/of sorrow, joy, and adoration,” “Rosary”) and theatrics (“The Ancient of Days are on the journey to now,” “High Altar: Conception Abbey”), Zydek is reminiscent of Stevens in his capability of making even the most grandiose of philosophies sing the same as the most simple:

I’ve seen trees  
insane with green,  
turn gaunt and gray  
in the dark slid wild.  
“Easter Mass”

His use of syntax, and his meditative tone, all own the elements of prayer. His subject matter consistently reaches far beyond his contemporaries’ struggles with marriage, children, love and death, nature, responsibility – what Zydek is attempting with his *Abbey* poems is to revitalize the essence of under-



standing, between a God and a man, but especially between man and himself – no small task. One begins to understand how he publishes so prolifically in such a vast array of journals with so different spiritual inclinations. Zydek is a practitioner of words.

Above, I included the quote from Rilke's first elegy of the *Duino Elegies*, translated by Stephen Mitchell, because of the almost direct correlation of subject matter between the two authors. In his introduction to *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, Robert Hass wrote that "what makes [Rilke's *Elegies*] so seductive is that they speak to the reader so intimately." And I realized the same could be said of Zydek's *Abbey Poems*. Haas also wrote that "[Rilke] peels off layers of the apparent richness of the self, arguing us back to the poverty of a great, raw, objectless longing." This, too, could also describe Zydek's book. In "Praying for Stuff," Zydek writes:

I scan the want ads for stuff.  
Cheap stuff. Stuff for nothing.

Stuff enough to crowd out  
the emptiness I know it brings.  
Why can I never read a book  
unless I know I own it?

Zydek, too, is yearning, throughout the *Abbey Poems*, for the same "objectless longing." And, like Rilke, who maintained that the world of details held universals as well ("under an open window, a violin/ yielded itself to your hearing. All this was a mission.") In Zydek's didactic "Praying Into The Mystery," he writes:

Don't be afraid  
to look in your own backyard. The secret  
waits in ordinary things. In yellow roses,  
the sweet fragrance of your morning tea.

In particulars there live universals.

In the *Abbey Poems*, Zydek is able to discover, or at least, attempt to discover, his place in a place, the Abbey, and its place and power over him. It is, essentially the study of a man interacting with what he understands is God, nature, himself, all the usual suspects, indeed. Zydek elevates the Abbey to his own Paterson – it is a place that he listens to, and wants and allows to listen to him.

Eric Hoffman, Omaha



*Blue Collar Light*

Paul Zarzyski

Red Wing Press, 1998

42 pp. \$6.00/paper

*Blue Collar Light*, by cowboy poet Paul Zarzyski, is a chapbook of sixteen poems devoted to his homeground in Hurley, Wisconsin, and the hard-working parents who put him there. An introduction by Zarzyski celebrates in prose what stands out in all his poems: a love for the people, the food, and the very words that brought him up. Worm-picker turned rodeo star turned poet, this man is all cowboy. He grabs the bull by the horns and lets "the poetry buck."

Reading Zarzyski is a little like riding bareback broncs yourself – the words twist and jump with the thrill of life, and you're along for one tremendous ride. This collection ends with a crowd favorite: "Words Growing Wild in the Woods." Part of the pleasure of reading this poem lies in the poet's tribute to his father:

I dreamed a Robin Hood-Paladin-Sinbad life  
from those shoulders. His jugular pulse rumbled  
into the rattle of my pulse, my thin wrists  
against his Adam's apple – a whiskered knuckle  
prickly as cucumbers in our garden  
where I picked nightcrawlers, wet and moonlit,  
glistening between vines across the black soil.

What comes through all of Zarzyski's poems is a sincere connection to his community. From the supper table to the football team to his comrades of catechism, Zarzyski cherishes an intimacy with "everything / living off that one heart of earth." These poems are refreshing in that Zarzyski shows us the cold, "blue-collar" reality he grew up in, a father who lived his life in service to The Man, a mother who nourished them with the little resources they had, but this is not what we dwell on. Instead, we come away with hearts revived, willing to take risks and climb the walls that block our paths. After finishing these poems, the reader is deeply compelled to sit down and write a few of his own. I know at least one was.

Jon Martin, Wayne State College



*Mark Twain Made Me Do It and Other Plains Adventures*

Bryan L. Jones

University of Nebraska Press, 1997

208 pp. \$15.00/paper

One of the consistent supporters of regional writing in the plains has been the University of Nebraska Press with its Bison Original paperback series. A recent publication in that line is *Mark Twain Made Me Do It and Other Plains Adventures* by Bryan L. Jones. Perhaps in keeping with the plains idea in this book, some readers may see little in the way of real adventures here. Or at least that's what conventional wisdom about regional writing might say about this collection. All the adventures here, after all, occur in the plains of the Midwest where real "adventures" surely died out with the frontier a hundred years ago. Furthermore, who would have the audacity to claim plains adventures in the name of Mark Twain? He wrote only one work, maybe two counting *Roughing It*, set in what could authentically be called the plains, and that work, a sequel to *Huckleberry Finn*, remains largely unknown and unread. Even if someone so inclined discovers that there are sequels to *Huck Finn*, which is itself a sequel to *Tom Sawyer*, how many know that the first and most authentic one is called *Huck and Tom Among the Indians* and takes place on the Great Plains? Or that there are additional sequels besides *Indians*, all of which begin immediately after *Huck Finn* and cover the same time period in Tom and Huck's lives?

It is only in *Indians*, though, which is probably the best of these intriguing simultaneous sequels, that Twain takes his boy-adventurers into the plains for "rip-snortin' adventures among the Indians" as called for at the end of *Huck Finn*. Furthermore, this earliest sequel ends in mid-sentence just as the adventures with the plains Indians are about to climax. Twain never finished this sequel and, as he himself might say, no one has ever tried to help him out in doing so. Talk about "adventures" and sequels. Consider Twain trying to have what are probably America's best-known bad boys chase Indians with a frontiersman in an unfinished sequel, and then, years later in two more sequels, play detectives to solve a murder mystery and fly a hot-air balloon around the world all at the same time. And doing so in futile attempts to recapture the magic of Huck and Jim on a raft going down the Mississippi to escape slavery. It was magical and preposterous at the same time, as magical and preposterous as Huck helping Jim escape slavery by going down river deeper into the South, when you think about it.

One of the things that Twain makes Bryan Jones do in *Mark Twain Made Me Do It and Other Plains Adventures*, indeed, is duplicate Huck and Jim's famous journey down the Mississippi. Jones' trip, however, is on a much more modest scale, on a different river entirely, in a completely different time and place, for a far different purpose, and with much different results. Come to think of it, a reader's expectations about finding Twain or Huck or Tom or Jim on the Plains of the 1950s in this book are all dashed to smithereens here, as Huck might say. What we do have, though, is a series of personal reminiscences about life in rural and small-town Nebraska which often reads like fiction and has some close parallels to Twain's, and Huck's, mid-nineteenth century life.

Jones accomplishes this by clear borrowings from Twain's famous novels *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* as well as with the occasional nod to a few of Twain's delightful and accomplished short stories. The most intriguing surprise, though, is that Jones appears also to have in mind Twain's *Autobiography*, which may be the best memoir by an American writer and



surely one of the best autobiographies of an American life, ranking right up there with those of Benjamin Franklin, Frederick Douglass, and Malcolm X. To this end, Jones' adventures are arranged roughly chronologically and follow his boyhood experiences with parents, siblings, extended family, relatives, friends, and townspeople, some of whom nearly rival Twain's characters. Fortunately, he imbeds some recurring characters and events which help to hold together what may otherwise have been, and for some readers may prove to be, a somewhat confused boyhood chronology in which developing pubescent interests mix uneasily with more innocent youthful devilry. Only Mark Twain, after all, can throw everything in his life together in an autobiographical heap and have it all come out in a delightful story and a great book. Even so, I say of the one what I always say of the other – there is much that is readable and likable here.

What there is to like about *Mark Twain Made Me Do It* comes out in the first story, though not as forcefully as in some later pieces. Some of those things not to like come out here, as well. "Pot Roast Every Sunday" introduces our "I" narrator, Bryan Jones, as a four-year-old at family dinner where his Methodist pastor father is entertaining the bishop after Sunday services. As might be expected, and is consistent with Twain's treatment of the occasional clergy in his writings, Jones' bishop is an "incorrigible gasbag" who prevents him and his two older sisters from eating their pot roast due to his "ponderous inanities." Consequently, the boy seeks solace in the sanctuary of the upstairs bathroom where he proceeds to indulge his apparent penchant for experimenting with an overabundance of foreign matter in the lavatory stool before flushing it. The predictable Twainian result is a "steady stream of pungent, extravagantly colored water" cascading onto the downstairs dining room table seriously disrupting the family dinner and embarrassing everyone in the presence of the bishop.

If these last two sentences seem a bit too precious, too clever, and too self-consciously overwritten in view of the subject matter, you are right. Like the unnatural and artificial mixture put so determinedly in the toilet stool by the rascally four-year-old, the level of diction, point of view, and narrative tone get all mixed together in this first story and overflow their bounds. The adult author looking back at this early episode in his life is putting his own present spin on this event, of course, just as he is on all the stories in the collection. But here the "voice" of the 4-year-old innocent ("I gotta potty"), co-exists uneasily with the voice of the adult narrator looking back archly as he recalls this self-consciously clever trick. Consequently, from his superior adult point of view, he indulges himself with some overly fine writing: the bishop is an "august personage" who gives a "convoluted blessing" and "obsequious thanks," before he commences his "knife and fork usage." The satirical, superior perspective and voice are expected here, though at this point they are more like Twain's omniscient narrator in *Tom Sawyer* than Huck's voice in *Huckleberry Finn*.

This first piece in Jones' collection is clearly designed to evoke Twain's own shenanigans written up in his autobiography and *Tom Sawyer*, but it is an anecdote with a flimsiest of pretexts for its punch line. The author reveals this by his own unconvincing attempts to justify the matter:

Perhaps I think a dose of just the right mixture of chemicals will cure our toilet of its chronic habit of overflowing at inopportune times. Maybe I am so bored by the bishop's speeches I will seek relief in any novelty.

All this is so clearly a set-up for a cute, good-bad-boy incident that a reader may suspect the worst immediately and shift into a defensive mode designed to steel oneself against what is becoming a curse



of the late-twentieth-century: the cutest-stupid-childhood-tricks-accidents-and-pranks-on-video. The unfortunate immediate result is that this first piece in the collection reads like a "Children Will Do the Darndest Things" or "My Most Embarrassing But Cute Moment" article from *Reader's Digest*. However, the archness, cuteness, and too-high level of diction are less obtrusive in later stories (or maybe I just got used to them), in spite of the narrator's warning that ends this opening chapter: "I will persist in flushing balky upstairs toilets secure in the knowledge that no matter how awful the consequences, someone in my family will find them humorous." The reader can only hope that the author is not the only someone.

Fortunately, the next story is longer, fuller, more rewarding, and a truer indication of what Jones does well here. "Bloomers Eldon" emphasizes more successfully the youthful view which is the source of strength of many of these stories. Spending much of the summer on his grandparents' farm, the four-year-old Jones begins to become aware of some of the serious issues that will creep into his life and these stories. A few years earlier, his Uncle Leo had been killed in World War II and Grandpa finds no good reason for good young men to die – "no reason is good enough to 'kill boys.'" The important lessons learned here are continued in later stories, as well, though fortunately the occasional Hamlin Garland-like style is not. This story has a good many of those words and phrases that some "regional" writers are fond of putting, in quotation marks for emphasis or "local color." Hamlin Garland used this trick a good deal in his early stories presumably to capture the "flavor" of his Midwestern farmers. Jones gives us a good "helping" of such "local color" words, perhaps, like Bret Harte, to establish his superior perspective to the events narrated: "to put over ona fella," "look for something to do," "get told fraidy cats," "need doin'," "purty strong special" salve, "my eggs eatin' fruit."

Actually, the author does not need such easy stylistic tricks since he has some increasingly effective writing in these stories. As Jones seems to warm to his subjects, his voice comes through more genuinely and authentically even while we hear, increasingly, echoes of Mark Twain, Huck Finn, and even Holden Caulfield. "Hall of Science," for example, contains one of the more serious accidents in the collection, but also some of the best descriptions of the school-sponsored softball games that must have been played on every last day of school in the midwest in the 1950s. There is a good deal of such effective nostalgia connected with similar characters and memories here and in many stories that follow: Jackrabbit Vincent running the mile only once in his life and better than anyone, Jones and friend bombing the coolest guys in town with water balloons thrown from the church tower, Sunday school, Bible and church camp, school room shenanigans, and a host of typical small-town activities from hunting to rafting to baseball.

In the chapter on "Baseball," Jones compellingly combines some rather extensive knowledge of the lore and history of big league baseball of the 1950s with his own small-town baseball experiences. His favorite Richie Ashburne "bottle bat," for instance, was widely believed among serious boyhood ballplayers to help out those of us with arms too scrawny to mount much of a swing at the plate. It may have been a poor substitute for the more formidable Louisville Slugger of Mickey "The Mick" Mantle that was in every team's bat bag and that every one of us surely wanted to use, but it compensated for embarrassing athletic deficiencies.

Jones' personal experiences playing in pointedly unorganized small-town baseball games with his boyhood friends are among the best, most evocative memories here. They charmingly evoke with nostalgia, wit, and humor, warts and all, the genuine boyhood ballgames on ballfields carved out of sidehills, pastures, and school playgrounds. The makeshift, pickup, half-organized, rag-tag nature of



these ballgames was their biggest attraction and the strongest source of nostalgia in their retelling here. It's what Huck Finn or Holden Caulfield would have sounded like if they'd played baseball in some small, dusty, midwestern towns in the 1950s and then told us about it:

We made our own rules, settled our own arguments, sometimes without bloodshed. If we struck out, no dipstick adults stood around making us miserable with criticism or helpful batting tips. We cheered any kid who got a hit after a long slump, even if he was on the wrong team. Mostly we tried to keep the teams even, and if Fanocle's team got too far ahead, which it most always did, he might volunteer to switch with me or one of the Wertz boys to even things up. We chose drama over winning. Most kids do.

And like Huck and Holden, our hero relates some pointedly disreputable actions and remarks that show the real place of these experiences in the lives of these real people. In carrying out their duty-bound obligation of baiting the umpire during a baseball game, the author's team comes up with the entirely original and otherwise meaningless epithet "dinkphod." "A stroke of genius, much worse than any cuss word we'd ever heard." It quickly mutates into "Dimple dinkphod" and "Triple dimple dinkphod" and finally "Ovid dinkphod," which then took on "immediate currency as the awfulest epithet we could yell at another human being." It is in this spirit that Jones then injects one of those youthful quasi-legendary pranks which are recorded in the oral histories of every boyhood and reduce things to basic essentials if not base elements. While being pounded by a neighboring town's ball team, "Darrylybelly," Chappell's second best player, launches a sarcastic salute to their opponents from the very depths of their humiliation – he "lit a fart with his brother's Zippo." Following in the long, well-established boyhood tradition of good sportsmanship, being good losers, and congratulating the winners, this tribute "sort of sang on the way out, a 'Toodle-Doodle-Do' kind of song, and then it ignited, shooting a narrow bluegreen flame straight out between Darryl's chubby legs." A delightfully irreverent admission of defeat and recasting it into the stuff of schoolboy lore and legends.

Such personal touches, not all of them so disreputable and vulgar, show the genuineness of ordinary life in small towns that existed easily alongside the big league baseball stars, statistics, and stories in the big cities. Many such delightful anecdotes inject flashes of youthful abandon into the serious business of adulthood that every small town boy would recognize. Jones extols warmly the virtues of a number of adults, especially his immediate family. His Methodist minister father, for example, is sensitive, carefree, and understanding — somewhat like e. e. cummings' father who "moved through dooms of love/through sames of am through haves of give." Many of the adults here, though, are either eccentrics or some degree of villain. Following the technique of leavening his past with the flavors of boyhood and then filtering everything through the occasionally obtrusive voice of adulthood, Jones shows us the seriousness lying beneath some light issues and treats some serious issues curiously lightly. Mostly these issues are related to his family and the religious upbringing his parents attempt on his behalf in such chapters as "Growing Up Methodist," "Polio," and "The Clan."

These recurring adventures with the adults and children of his extended family as they move to various parsonages in Nebraska provide much of the material for virtually every story in this collection. The centerpiece, however, is presumably "Mark Twain Made Me Do It." This story begins by evoking the titles of Twain's two best-known books so as to emphasize, not surprisingly, the "adventures" to follow. (What is a little surprising is Jones repeating the common error in referring to the title of *Adventures of*



*Huckleberry Finn*.) After so explicit an invocation, it may be barely excusable to notice so quickly what Twain would not do in this story. This in spite of some effective early descriptions of the “pesky insect life” tramping across his bed drawn by the stifling heat and the ten-year-old’s reading lamp. But Huck-Twain in this context would not say “piece of cake” or “soaked up like a sponge” or “nocturnal ramblings” or describe swarms of insects as having “familial disagreements,” by way of setting up this adventure. And the night policemen would not be “constabulary” nor would the mayor have “rather limited sang froid.” But it is surely carping to see only what Twain would not do when we can see so much of what he would do. For example, when the two “night constabulary” are cherry-bombed into flight we are treated to “a pair of broad-beamed butts scuttling hemorrhoidally down the street.” This is perhaps very much how Twain would describe them today.

But it is the “Huck Finn Raft Expedition” that this story centers on. Even if 10-year-old Bryan-Huck talks his father into buying two Sears-Roebuck canoe paddles in place of the pole Huck would have used; even if the father of his Tom Sawyer companion simply says no to the river expedition and Bryan has to settle for his “cousin Dick”; even if Dick has to take a Trailways bus to Chappell, Nebraska, to begin the raft adventure down the South Platte River; and even if Bryan’s sympathetic father pushes them off from shore into the eighteen-inch depth of the not-so-mighty river – in spite of all these non-Huck Finn elements, there is a quite delightful Twain-like feeling to some of their relatively tame adventures.

When they take aim with their BB guns at a rabbit “not two feet off our starboard bow” so as to bag their “first big game” that will supply them with food along the river, a “rattlesnake bit the rabbit square in the ass” before they could get a shot off. Then the rabbit “jumped almost as high as we did,” and the raft “spun lazily down-current as we goggled-eyed the recoiling snake and his twitching victim. The snake looked smug.” A quick, short, successful bit unadorned with meaning – no symbolism (the snake and all, you know) and no nonsense about down river omens, original sin, or predatory nature. The lines that follow immediately show the author’s fine touch in capturing Huck’s voice, in spite of a few false notes, and in confirming his commitment to pointedly not pounding social implications into his version of *Huckleberry Finn*.

Later, after our shrunken hormonally-disadvantaged testicles had a chance to descend a bit, we wished we had riddled that sneaky reptile’s sorry carcass with hot lead. Teach him to steal game from the big boys. We’d have made a couple of spiffy hatbands from his tanned hide. Any snake could take a full-grown rabbit out that quick had to be thirty feet long. Hell, we could have made hatbands for the whole damned town. Made some meals out of him, too. Would almost be worth eating snake to tell those 100 percent Ovid dinkphods we’d done it. We ever get another chance at a rattler, we’ll shoot first, ask questions later. A trip this long we could lay up half a hundred trophy skins by the time we hit North Platte. But even with our snake killing urges brought to a froth, I don’t remember either one of us suggesting we go back and look up the first and last rattlesnake we were to see.

Indeed, if the author tried “pounding” into his adventures any kind of what he calls “social criticism, lead-brick heavy with moral inference,” it may well sink quickly for any reader who remembers that this version of the mighty Mississippi is all of eighteen inches deep in most places.

Most memorably, and most embarrassingly, perhaps, is the ignominious ending of this adventure. In



direct contrast to Twain's novel, our two river-runners abandon their journey to reach the North Platte and make a decision literally impossible (and symbolically suggestive, it must be said) for Huck and Jim: "Okay. I'll call Dad. He won't like it." He doesn't, neither do the boys ("We were bailing out. Chickens. . . . pissing our pants. . . . dinkphods. . . . We blew this shot by quitting."), and neither does the reader. But perhaps something is salvaged by Jones making another parallel, this time to one, maybe two, of the most touching episodes in *Huckleberry Finn*. Bryan denies his own "niggling feelings of relief to be leaving the river," and turns on Dick: "Called him awful names. Tried to shame him into going on. Dick gave me a look of stolid disappointment." If this does not remind us of Huck's tricking and shaming of Jim on at least two occasions, Bryan's insightful self-reproaches do: "I'd been a fourteen-carat jerk, no question, but was too stiff-necked to own up."

The affectionate endorsement which quickly flows out of this central adventure and ends the story holds true of most of this collection. Indeed, a sympathetic understanding embraces even the most serious, occasionally deadly, adventures related here, ranging, from a cousin's hand blasted off by a huge firecracker, the accidental drowning of a child that is almost prevented, the polio epidemic of the early 1950s, a maliciously cruel teacher crippling an innocent student with an unabridged dictionary, and the death of an uncle in Vietnam. But the sympathy and acceptance here are sometimes possible because of another characteristic of Huck's, a less than admirable one, perhaps, but necessary for survival. Tragedies and near tragedies are often merely narrated, and nothing more. They are not resolved or otherwise explained, but simply tallied alongside other, more innocent and innocuous events. It's not that they are callously ignored necessarily – in an eerie parallel to recent tragic events of our own time, Bryan sets out with his rifle to lay in wait and ambush the teacher who bashed in the student's head. But, ultimately, the inevitable cruelties of life become just part of the pain the boy shares with Huck and Holden of having to leave the river and be "sivilized," fall off the "crazy cliff" of childhood, and grow up into the world of adults. It is a world which can be so twisted that in one less-than-tragic case Bryan reacts with nearly the exact same words as Huck: "Made me ashamed of the entire human race." (Huck's words are "It was enough to make a body ashamed of the human race.")

Ultimately, kindness and sympathy prevail over shame and intolerance – largely due to the powerful forces of family and place in *Mark Twain Made Me Do It And Other Plains Adventures*. And the power of love for what Jones calls the "clan" and affection for the place called Nebraska and the people he shared it with. If warm nostalgia and the resulting affectionate wisdom can occasionally become the witty overwriting of ironic detachment, little damage is done to the memories themselves. When we both love and lament the plain adventures of our long-ago lives, whether in reading or writing them, perhaps we see more truly how those endless "green afternoons" of our youth so pleasingly evoked here prepared us for the gray evenings of adulthood. And maybe even for the dark nights that will surely follow.

Bill Cosgrove, North Dakota State University



*Goodnight Nebraska*

Thomas McNeal

Random House, 1998

336 pp. \$12.00/paper

*Goodnight Nebraska* is, quite simply, a tale of the American Desolate. It is a story that can only happen in the barrens of Utah that becomes a story that can only happen in the sorrow of Nebraska. A story of how lonely can become lonesome. A story of a young man and the tragedy his life must become before redemption can be found in the arms of reconciled love.

Although Tom McNeal isn't a son of Nebraska or the town he fictionalizes, the characters he portrays are red to the blood, be it the Husker-talking store clerks or the down-and-out bar patrons. But below the surface of this small town are seeds that have rotted, and McNeal draws their gray flowers to the sun like a master. There is the Beauty Queen love interest, whose life is seemingly ruined after falling in love with the Football Star and mechanic Randall Hunsacker. Leo Underwood, Frank Mears, Marlen Coats, Jim Six and Whistler, barflies whose small-town prejudice leads to a hate crime. The adulterous Dorothy Lockhardt whose illicit love draws her closer to oblivion. Lovers, cheaters and murderers, all of whom McNeal pens with proficiency.

Books are strange things, and McNeal's strange thing will probably be his breaking-out book. He gives such an expected and intuitive look at small town politics, the novel comes a hair's breadth to horror fiction. The small society he creates is a mixture of Main Street and Gomorrah, a town where everyone claims to be innocent, no one can leave, and everyone pays for their sin. To tell of the most striking element of this work would be to spoil the sick surprise that turns into redemption, communion in a parched land.

Timothy Black, Wayne State College

---

*The River Warren*

Kent Meyers

Hungry Mind Press, 1998

271 pp. \$21/cloth

In *The River Warren*, Kent Meyers takes his readers through a tale of small town life turned upside down. Using seven narrators, from a mentally handicapped man to the town gossip, Meyers effectively reveals the true nature of people in general. Meyers' book is a must-have.

Aaron Stueve, Wayne State College



*The Witness of Combines*

Kent Meyers

University of Minnesota Press, 1998

229 pp. \$16.95/paper

*The Witness of Combines* is a collection of short stories and essays by Kent Meyers. All the tales written in its pages have heart and are important to the writer in some way. The tales are mostly true and are primarily about childhood angst and growing up in a large family in the middle of the Great Plains.

As with *The River Warren*, every character in every story is interesting and serves a purpose. The theme of the book is consistent in every tale. What makes Meyers who he is today is shown in every short story and essay. In short, *Witness of the Combines* gives the reader a peek into the inner workings of one of the least recognized and most underrated writers today.

Aaron E. Stueve, Wayne State College

---

*The Lives of the Saints*

Barbara Schmitz

Main Travelled Roads, 1996

26 pp. \$2/paper

Although Barbara Schmitz's chapbook *The Lives of the Saints* is almost four years old, some of her most intriguing poems are housed within its pages. As an introduction to this collection of poems, Schmitz writes: "*The Lives of the Saints* grew out of my spiritual practice working with the Sufi Wazifa (Mantra) YA RAHMAN . . . it's as if I heard these various voices asking for their stories to be told." This quality makes her chapbook an interesting read, leaving the reader attempting to separate fiction from non-fiction.

*The Lives of the Saints* compels its readers to experience the real horrors of tragic subjects, told through Schmitz's poems. In "The Survivor," a victim tells of her gruesome ordeal: "The slaughter went on for hours/ One at a time as if we were being/ led to our coronations . . ." Schmitz also explains in the introduction that the victim in this poem was the surviving nurse in the real-life Richard Speck mass murders: "After I'd done the poem, things appeared in the newspapers and I realized it was the anniversary of the mass murders."

Schmitz's work is a rarity among regular poets, a must-read.

Melissa Beery, Wayne State College



*Learning American*

Robert King

The Frank Cat Press, 1998

33 pp. \$7.00/paper

*Learning American* by Robert King is the Frank Cat Press's annual poetry chapbook contest winner; there are twenty-two poems in this collection.

The cover art – a black-and-white photograph by Debra Lockas Phillis of rail-lines, fall sunflowers, and telephone poles flowing toward grain elevators, the vanishing point in the frame – is an appropriate image for these Midwest meditations on time, on place names, on new houses and old, on rain, on fishing, on history, on journeys, on fathers and mothers – on being American.

A couple of unfortunate typographical errors distract the reader from the pictures created by the language, and there are places where the rhythm of individual sentences bogs down; but, with a few exceptions, these poems scan well visually and “hear” well spoken aloud. King often repeats words in a sentence or phrase: “Hickok died somewhere behind the bar he died in” (“*Learning American*”); “I’m drenched with shine beside a shining river,” (“*On Top of the Earth*”); and “I look at shadows of light and shadow” (“*Historic Stopping*”). These are only mildly annoying redundancies. In one poem, “*At the New House Every Day*,” a hibiscus plant prompts a soliloquy on the jaunts of the rich retiring to summer luxury juxtaposed against the journeys of travelers along the Platte River trail forced to drop off their possessions along the way. Images of “iron-banded steamer trucks [sic]” morph into images of “monumental trains” and “heavy privileges of impediments” which morph into a contemporary “someone...carting off my scrap lumber, mirrors...the alley an empty flat road again.” I had to read the poem several times to decide finally that the poem’s characters are not analogous to each other in any historical sense, that the journeys are all in separate directions, but that the conceit of the poem is travelers’ baggage and what King makes of that baggage’s metonymic allusions. Many of the poems contain truly lovely passages. From “*At Reevey’s Prairie*” we read: “Grasses move in sentences/ We are afraid to understand.” From “*The Creel*” come the lines:

At fifty, after never fishing, I remember  
a day I didn’t even live, the men who would be  
my father and my grandfather flicking their lines  
at the dazzles of a mountain stream, rose-flecked trout  
laid on bunchings of fresh grasses in the wicker creel  
I hold in this attic carefully, a dry antique.  
The network of the old basket smoothly over  
and under itself, a familiar weave, the ancient  
patterns of containment. You will need this my father  
didn’t say when he stored it here.

My favorite poem is probably “*The Old Place*”:

They live with a decay he never notices  
behind their trailer, the old two-story house,



paint shaggy, windows gone, in the thick nest of trees.  
She wants it torn down . . .

. . . She can't tell him how

it hurts, cracks etching down the walls, the crazed  
linoleum, its grit of glass, and – worse than that –  
the people she is sure live there, who gather food

. . . collect themselves at night . . .

[count]

their money on the oilcloth . . .

. . . remember

. . . long, loud stories,

who plan – and this is the worst of all – who plan  
again and again. It is this harsh joy burning  
in the village of the dead she can't bear.

All in all, *Learning American* is a collection well worth having and sharing.

Gretchen Ronnow, Wayne State College

---

*The Lost Son*

Brent Spencer

Arcade Publishing, 1995

225 pp. \$19.95/cloth

Dead-end lives and desperate people are squeezed between the covers of this book. The utter despair and bleakness in spirit of the characters in Brent Spencer's 1995 novel, *The Lost Son*, makes the story difficult to read. The horror of warped personalities inflicting indignities on innocent young victims is not conducive to pleasurable reading, but the story does twist the reader into its pages.

This book tells about people who are evil, who are destructive, and who are degenerates. It is about the victims – men, women and children – who suffer at the hands of those people. It is the perpetuation of terror.

The reader knows this is a novel, but the story rings with truth. People like these characters are in the headlines: they live in the real world. The most disturbing conclusion the reader must come to, as the story ends, is that it happens.

Mary Maas  
Stanton, Nebraska



*Desire For More Cows and  
Old Froggo's Book of Practical Cows*

By Matt Mason

Reprinted from *Grassroots*

Is there any animal more representative of Nebraska than the cow? Omaha poet Matt Mason doesn't think so.

Cows and cow-themed poems dominate Mason's self-published volumes, *Old Froggo's Book of Practical Cows* and *Desire For More Cows*. Every poem in the older of the two chapbooks, *Old Froggo's*, contains at least a mention of a cow. *Desire*, on the other hand, is broken into three sections: "Groceries," "Business Lunch: On A Business Trip To Tampa," and "More Cows."

Cows are given human qualities in some poems. In others, cows become gods, some possessing heroic qualities. Cows are crafty, curious and even generous.

Several poems evoke images of a world controlled by cows, in which humans are oppressed by their bovine overlords. Turning the dinner tables, so to speak. The following is from "When Cows Ruled The Earth" in *Old Froggo's*:

I was one of the first branded by the bovine  
bastards; I was abused by oppressive hooves,  
screwed over by the cud-munching Conquistadors,  
made to bend my knee to every Holstein.

Cows, of course, aren't all bad. Mason waxes nostalgic about their smell in the poem "Ode to Omaha" (from *Old Froggo's*). In the final poem, "Lewis and Clark: September 20, 1806," cows signal a return. "... They shouted for the cows/because a cow means/you're home."

Not all the poems center on cattle. Many of the poems in *Desire* feature Mason's relationship with food. No less than four poem titles include the word donut. From the same section come poems about pork rinds, Belgian waffles and Clamato. Mason's poem "Ingredients Listing" (from *Desire*) recently tied for first place in Literal Latte's "Rosemary and Rhyme" Food Verse contest.

While many of the poems in *Old Froggo's* and *Desire* are serious on the surface, Mason's tongue is at times firmly planted in his cheek. In "Another Tale of Cow-Crossed Lovers," he follows a woman driving a car adorned with Holstein seat covers. As she pulls away, he pleads with her to slow down. "Don't you know these speeds aren't cost efficient," Mason reasons.

Bruce R. Nelson, Omaha



*Story*

Neil Harrison

Logan House

22 pp. \$4.00/paper

*Story* by Neil Harrison is one of the best collections of poetry I have ever read. Harrison has a way of bringing the rural man to life in his writing. Since I am from a rather large urbanized area, Harrison's poems give me what few writers can: the sense of being in the country, of hunting, and of many other activities I have never been able to do. This does not mean I did not understand his poetry or the message he was trying to convey. He showed me the beauty of living out here, in the middle of Nebraska. In my eyes, Harrison is one of the best unknown poets in the Midwest today.

One of the more moving poems in *Story* is "At Blue Hole." This poem describes the agony the hunter feels for his dog when it appears he is stuck in the middle of the river while retrieving a duck: "... He/ faced the wind and the long way back and I/ cursed; he seemed to be swimming in place." The dog stuck in the pond begins to make some headway towards shore: "Then he was coming, plodding but gaining,/ and I was walking out..." These simple lines could make the sternest, most critical reader hope for the poor dog's safety. Eventually, the dog makes it to shore: "His tail pulsing with the long habit as he/ brought the warm bluewing to my trembling hand..." The dog is safe, and I, the reader, am happy.

Aaron E. Stueve, Wayne State College

---

*Disciples of an Uncertain Season*

Larry Holland

Up the Creek Publishing, 1998

45 pp.

Larry Holland's Nebraska is seen in *Disciples of an Uncertain Season*. Within forty-five pages Holland effectively gives the reader glimpses into his surroundings, family, and himself. Holland is consistent throughout his chapbook in letting the reader take a good look at his character: a common man with an uncommon knack for explaining his connection to the Plains. As seen in "Mid-January Thaw," Holland derives a personal reaction to his father's emphysema.

"Doc says my lungs are like leather."  
Dad hadn't put a word to what coal miners  
call Black Lung, but I guessed sixty years  
working lumber into sawdust and cabinets  
made emphysema sound about right.

Holland gives the reader sincere personal perspective, whereas many other poets try to give the reader one deep, universal understanding. Holland's work is natural, yet crisp and on the edge. Larry Holland is one of the true great poets from Nebraska; his work a must-read. Holland leaves us with these words, "... and I see, by the gods, forever/ there's no more to wish for."

Melissa Beery, Wayne State College



*Hearts of Gold*

James Magorian

Acme, 1996

222 pp. \$18.95/cloth

James Magorian's 1996 novel, *Hearts Of Gold*, set in Omaha, begins slowly as Magorian introduces William "Easy Street" McShane in the midst of one of his cons – this one involving stray cats and the Shangri-la Retirement Village. We learn that McShane "had always wanted to be rich, but had never come up with a surefire business idea or worked in a position of trust where embezzlement was a possibility." McShane is a member of the Omaha Flying Saucer Spotters Club who are in possession of a map to the Lost Dutchman Gold Mine, located in Nebraska, not Arizona as historians have thought. Mainly McShane has joined the Spotters Club to flirt with the beautiful and plucky Amelia, daughter of Professor Stennerflit who teaches window tinting at the Community College and is co-leader of the expedition. McShane is also trying to avoid the "muscle" of Bruno "the Hammer" Sorklemeyer, a loan shark whom he owes money. The plot of the novel involves the quest for the gold, avoiding the loan shark's goons, courting Amelia, and meeting a plethora of idiosyncratic and bizarre characters along the way.

But the novel gains momentum and even a certain solid humor as these characters begin to accumulate. McShane's mother (now dead) had been a stock-car racer. His father says, "Hell, if the welds on the roll-bar had been better, she'd still be taking checkered flags." "Don't forget the perks," his father tells him; "when she drove you to school, you was always the first one there. Traffic and hazardous road conditions were nothing to her." And hustling is a skill McShane learned in grade school from his many uncles and paternal relations of his father's.

One of the characters, Jeeves, an amnesiac who's been told he is a servant and has adapted happily to that role, spouts inane but somehow appropriate one-liners, each of which could serve as the first line of any short story: "A dog-groomer isn't going to honor a grand jury subpoena," "A blues singer has no business owning a Hawaiian quilt!" "Is thirty rupees too much to pay for a mongoose with no snake experience?" and "Now that communism has collapsed and the Berlin Wall taken down, it's time to put our typewriter keys in alphabetical order!"

Another ongoing gag is Miss August of the current calendar, but her attire depends on whose wall she's hanging on. In a sheriff's office Miss August is a "bikini-clad meter maid, draped enticingly over the fender of a highway patrol car." In a service station cum fishing-tackle store, Miss August is "a bikini-clad brunette in wading boots, draped enticingly over the fender of a dune buggy, clutching a fishing pole and a can of night crawlers." At the monastery of Brother Flapjack, Brother Snaggletooth and Brother One-Eyed Charlie, Miss August is a "bikini-clad nun from a Cleveland convent, draped enticingly over the fender of a sleek Vatican II convertible." And at the Roatcaps, a family of hillbilly savants, Miss August is a "bikini-clad physicist, draped enticingly over the fender of an electric car."

For Nebraska readers perhaps the best parts of the novel are the references to local place names and associated escapades – Omaha, Hastings, Minden, Hayes County – to the sights of Highways 6 and 34, and to souvenirs such as pillows embroidered with the slogan NEBRASKA, THE GOOD LIFE.

*Hearts Of Gold* is an action-adventure/quest-venture parody, a rural, small-town, back-roads caricature – a cartoon in the best sense meant for Saturday morning entertainment back when Saturday morning cartoons were truly entertaining.



*All These Bullets, Separate as Nuns, Eager as Reynosa Whores*

Red Shuttleworth

Logan House Press, 1998

24 pp. \$4.00/paper

Red Shuttleworth is all about pistols, rattlesnakes, Jesse James, and whores, as seen in the title of his chapbook, *All These Bullets, Separate as Nuns, Eager as Reynosa Whores*. His raw cowboy poetry captures the gut of the West with more than a hint of unintentional outlaw charm. His poetry maintains all the characteristics of fine poetry, such as effortless lines breaks and smooth storytelling, but his rough side echoes the true grit of the West into our average lives. Shuttleworth is simply a real cowboy, as seen in, "It Will Never Be Noon Again": "Everything has its revenge, but my friends/ keep spraying agent orange on their fields, / and I keep eating squirrel stew. With my good hand . . . ."

Melissa Beery, Wayne State College

---

*Angels Devils Lullabies*

Timothy Black

Nice Marmot Press, 1999

35 pp. \$6.50/paper

*Angels Devils Lullabies* by Timothy Black is an eclectic chapbook that covers a range of emotions and ideas. Aptly titled, this collection of poems can evoke feelings of simple happiness, as well as terror and anger. Black's style varies with his poems. For instance, in the title poem there is classical rhyming:

All this silence makes me scream.

All the water makes me dry.

All my waking world's a dream.

All my laughter turns to cries.

In other poems, such as "Negro Cowboy," Black has a more contemporary touch:

I wanna raise my left brow

And thumb my hat up

When some redneck complains

About the negro cowboys

There is sincerity in everything Black writes. Reading his poems is like glimpsing his soul.

Aaron E. Stueve, Wayne State College



*Angels Devils Lullabies*

Timothy Black

Nice Marmot Publishing, 1999

35 pp. \$6.50/paper

Timothy Black's chapbook *Angels Devils Lullabies* is a collection of poetry filled with vivid imagery. The bonus CD adds another dimension (a highly demonic one.) The CD is seventy minutes long and contains readings of some of the poetry in the chapbook and also many other unusual tidbits. The sound effects are fantastic and the narrative is full of horrific imagery and, at times, intense gore. The CD definitely lives up to the "Devils" in the title.

Among the highlights of the chapbook is the poem "I Wanna be a Negro Cowboy," which headlines the "Lullabies" section of the book.

I wanna be a Negro cowboy,  
And although I don't quite  
Know what that is,  
I wanna wear Stetsons and  
Stiff leather gloves.  
I wanna wear chaps and spurs.  
I wanna chew tobacco  
And slap frozen snot  
From my curly mustache.

"Oh God" is one of the selections from the "Devils" section. It tells a tale of a young poet with a complex mind, a thirst for liquor, and an inside view on the imperfections of life.

Oh, yeah, and I drink to sleep  
Just like every other fool alcoholic,  
Thinkin' cuttin' down on TV  
Is like cuttin' down on Cutty Sark.  
And I've peeled the foil  
From so many of them  
Damn dinners I coulda bought  
A car if the system was set up  
That way.

The poetry is excellent, the book is neatly organized and well-constructed, and the CD is a somewhat shocking surprise definitely worth checking out.

Trenton Muth, Wayne State College



*With the Three-Legged Cat*

Melissa Beery and Aaron Stueve

Broken Bottle Press

23 pp. \$5.00/paper

*With the Three-Legged Cat* is a collection of poems by Sylvia Plath and Shel Silverstein. It is a collection by Edgar Allen Poe and Weird Al. Truthfully, it is by none of these poets and all of these poets. *Three-Legged Cat* is the first edition of a magazine edited by Melissa Beery and Aaron Stueve. Given the poems is the flagship edition, subsequent editions are eagerly anticipated. Here is an excerpt from the title poem, Stueve's "The Three-Legged Cat":

So I just fed him, and let him heal.  
Until  
A flock of evil little girls  
Tried to claim him for their own.  
It was time for me to get tough too.  
I cussed, kicked, and threatened  
Those little bitches

Now let me preface the remainder of this review by saying that I love stories about 1) cats, three-legged or otherwise; 2) evil little girls; and 3) evil little girls who are called "bitches." So, I read the whole magazine with enthusiasm, and the poetry (save some niggling complaints I have about comma use) is very good. It's refreshing to hear about a good father for a change, as in Beery's "The Smell of Dad."

Me and my dad generally have  
No conflicts.  
He fixes my '91 Grand Prix  
When it stalls too much.  
He comes over about once a week  
To chat with me. We order supreme pizza.  
He eats most of it. We listen  
To oldies on the radio.  
He sings.

Nowhere in the poem does Beery get molested, raped, or abused. It is refreshing to read an uplifting poem about fathers, who are mostly used as whipping-boys.

As far as style goes, there are some gems in *Three-Legged Cat*. First, Beery writes, in "Mattress":

She helps me load it  
Onto the roof of  
My '85 Escort.  
Her tiny



Body  
Is crammed  
Into a smaller  
Vinyl black skirt.

Classic. Then, in another bold "Dads are Good" poem, Stueve tells of his father's bout with leukemia:

Six months gone by.  
Throwing up into a bed pan.  
Your drugs made you higher than any drug has ever made me.  
I hugged you with rubber gloves and a face mask.  
Greasy lumps of hair on your pillows.  
Then,  
But you beat it. With the help of your wife, your kids, and  
Your God, you beat it . . .  
Your hair, a little thinner,  
Your eyes, a little darker,  
Your legs, a little smaller . . .  
"Always My Dad"

This poem brought tears to my eyes that 26 years of male conditioning were quick to suppress.

It's a good magazine. Rumor has it that the next edition will include a plethora of poets, but don't let that get you down. Hopefully Beery and Stueve will share some more pages soon.

Timothy Black, Wayne State College

---

### *Words from the Highway*

Paul Williams

The Estate of Paul Williams, 1998

33 pp.

Paul L. Williams' chapbook, *Selections From Words from the Highway*, takes you across the country in a semi-truck full of verse. On one page you hear tell of a truck stop in the middle country, and a couple of pages later you might be wading in the ocean. Williams speaks a straightforward truth about the way things are from coast to coast. The language is simple and so are the tales. Under-appreciated hard work seems to be a prevailing theme. In this chapbook the road wears on you, the cold freezes and the unsung hero reigns supreme.

Trenton Muth, Wayne State College



*Words From The Highway*

Paul Williams

The Estate of Paul Williams

33 pp.

“You belong among the wildflowers, you belong in a boat out at sea, sail away, kill off the hours, you belong somewhere you feel free.” – Tom Petty

Paul Williams, of any road poet I had the pleasure to meet, belonged somewhere he felt free. More ambition than any fellow students, or anyone for that matter, I’ve shared a classroom with. His wish or call, or more importantly, his message, was for those others to hear what he hears, to see what he sees – what most take for granted throughout each of their own routes.

We weren’t that close. Wish that could have been the case. He and I shared a workshop together at Wayne State College. I wrote my own way or tried, and Paul pushed every way. Did he and I agree? Hell, no. We argued. Which is common in a workshop. Not like an argument where you walk away cussing each other – sometimes just heated discussions about trying this style or that. Paul always appreciated the eloquence old school poets had to offer – like Yeats, Byron, Tennyson. Hell, he could beat ‘em down with words like skinny fella drops a bully with a blow to the knee. That wasn’t his intention, he just had an admiration of and a hope to write like these legends. He was more blue-collar than most – more road than Kerouac – one who knew what miles truly meant. Eyes glassed over after hours and hours of watching the thin line run long. The hum and drum of wheel against concrete, sun dried face feeling too hot and tired-eye stinging white. You know what it’s like to push a freight from east to west? He did. And did it all in a day’s work. As time moved on we came to talk about writing – what we knew, what we felt, and what, if anything, might make some sort of difference.

So sleepy – this night too long –  
The country too big – Fresno so far.  
Ghost trucks in fog are tied like fishing boats  
In truck-rest-stop harbors.  
Sea of lights stretch out.  
Where is port? Starboard? North or south?  
Small freighters – or is it a big liner –  
Running fast for Nice or Suez?  
It’s another hundred miles at least into Reno.

That’s just the start. Williams wrote about the heartache, the monotonous grind of Kenworths turning asphalt into hardpan – about the waitress in the sky smiling (on the outside) high. The trucker and the payphone go hand in hand. There’s only so much time a fella can spend with himself, and this work – the grueling hours Paul pushed were lonely because he had to and, I suppose, for the salvation he found tracking and back-tracking from coast to coast.

There is something magical about a night that is dangerously cold. The stars and the moon are too bright. Somehow the souls of the people who have been there before you are real, and you



wonder how they ever survived a night like this. There you are driving around, watching the sunset and dawn, and knowing that all these other people saw exactly the same things. They had dreams and people they loved, and they had to stay warm somehow and keep those they loved warm, too

“Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Truck Stop”

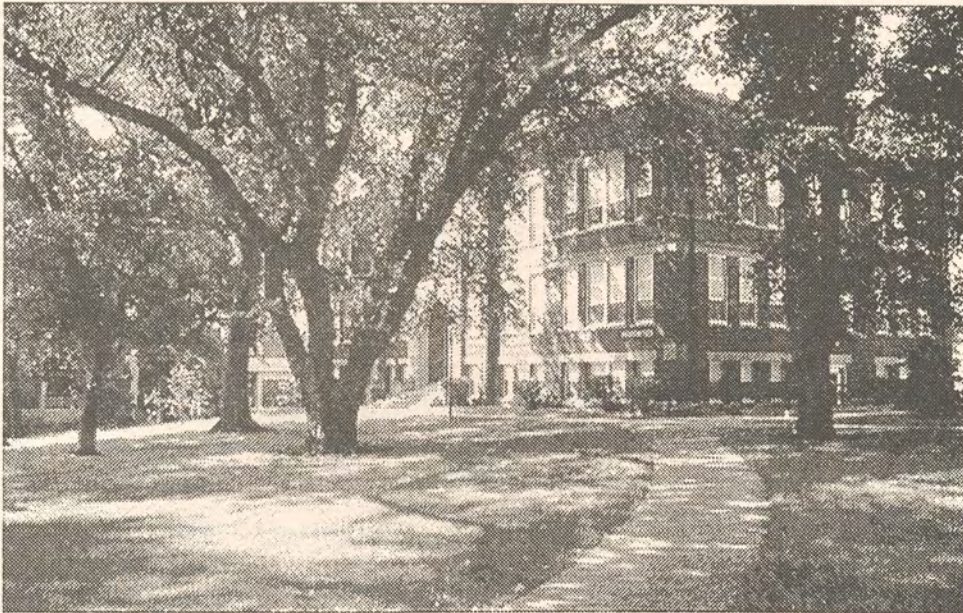
Paul Williams goes from “Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Truck Stop” and triple bacon cheeseburgers to ice-packed windshields and roads in his poems and the inevitable fear of having to go on, and on and on. Most people probably would have packed up and headed back home after the first forty-mile blow – Williams triumphed. He had that drive, that push, to carry on.

*Words From The Highway* now echoes his call. Paul Lawrence Williams (1946-1997) was killed in a semi-truck accident in Missoula, Montana, on May 31, 1997. He had a slew of poems ready for everyone to take in and a master’s thesis finally completed that month.

Jim Reese, Lincoln



# Wayne State College English Department



## Home of the Plains Writers Series

---

Please join us for the 1st annual Balsley-Whitmore Lecture  
to be given by Sayre Andersen on March 30, 2000,  
at 4 pm in the Frye Conference Suite  
in the Wayne State College Student Center.

For information about our English major or  
minor programs or graduate courses,  
call 1-800-228-9972





# CHRISTMAS CREEK BOOKSELLERS

Rt 1 Box 154, Winside, NE 68790  
(402)-286-4891

BILL TO:

SHIP TO:

| Author                             | Title                                                         | Pages | Cover Type | Quantity | Unit Price | Total |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------|-------|------------|----------|------------|-------|
| Beery, Melissa<br>And Stuve, Aaron | With the Three-Legged Cat: Volume 1                           | 23    | paper      |          | \$5.00     |       |
| Black, Timothy                     | Angles, Devils, Lullabies (With Free CD)                      | 35    | hand-sewn  |          | \$6.50     |       |
| Block, Ron                         | The Dirty Shame Hotel                                         | 156   | paper      |          | \$14.95    |       |
| Fort, Charles                      | As the Lilac Burned the Laurel Grew: Poems                    | 30    | paper      |          | \$10.00    |       |
| Fort, Charles                      | We Did Not Fear the Father: New and Selected Poems            | 62    | paper      |          | \$25.00    |       |
| Hansen, Twyla                      | In Our Very Bones                                             | 64    | paper      |          | \$12.95    |       |
| Haruf, Kent                        | Plainsong                                                     | 320   | cloth      |          | \$24.00    |       |
| Harrison, Neil                     | Story                                                         | 22    | paper      |          | \$4.00     |       |
| Hasselstrom, Linda                 | Leaning Into the Wind: Women Write From the Heart of the West | 388   | cloth      |          | \$25.00    |       |
| Jones, Bryan L.                    | Mark Twain Made Me Do It and Other Plains Adventures          | 208   | paper      |          | \$15.00    |       |
| King, Robert                       | Learning American                                             | 33    | paper      |          | \$7.00     |       |
| Kloefkorn, William                 | A Time to Sink Her Pretty Little Ship                         | 67    | paper      |          | \$11.95    |       |
| Kosmicki, Greg                     | Nobody Lives Here Who Saw This Sky                            | 113   | paper      |          | \$12.00    |       |
| Magorian, James                    | Hearts of Gold                                                | 222   | cloth      |          | \$18.95    |       |
| Mason, Matt                        | Old Froggo's Book of Practical Cows                           | 35    | paper      |          | \$6.00     |       |
| Mason, Matt                        | Desire for More Cows                                          | 51    | paper      |          | \$6.00     |       |
| McNeal, Thomas                     | Goodnight, Nebraska                                           | 336   | paper      |          | \$12.00    |       |
| Meyers, Kent                       | The River Warren                                              | 271   | cloth      |          | \$21.00    |       |
| Meyers, Kent                       | The Witness of Combines                                       | 229   | paper      |          | \$16.95    |       |
| Sanders, Mark                      | Before We Lost Our Way                                        | 120   | paper      |          | \$9.00     |       |
| Schmitz, Barbara                   | The Lives of the Saints                                       | 28    | paper      |          | \$2.00     |       |
| Shuttleworth, Red                  | All these Bullets, Separate as Nuns, Eager as Reynosa Whores  | 24    | paper      |          | \$4.00     |       |
| Spencer, Brent                     | The Lost Son                                                  | 255   | cloth      |          | \$19.95    |       |
| Zarzyski, Paul                     | Blue Collar Light                                             | 42    | paper      |          | \$6.00     |       |
| Zydek, Fredrick                    | The Conception Abbey Poems                                    | 36    | paper      |          | \$7.95     |       |

## Credit Card Information:

☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard ☐ Novus Cards ☐ American Express

Credit Card Number

Exp. Date

Signature

Subtotal

\* NE Residents add  
5% Sales Tax

Thank-You!

Balance Due

## Shipping and Handling (Orders over \$100.00 are shipping free):

Up to \$20.00, add \$4.00.

\$20.01-\$40.00, add \$6.00

\$40.01-\$70.00, add \$7.00

\$70.00-\$100.00 add \$8.00

*\*Individuals send payment with order.  
Libraries and schools will be billed with shipment  
Lincoln and Omaha, add appropriate tax.*

