

Nebraska Territory

Fall 1997

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**This publication was edited and designed by students
in J.V. Brummels' Literary Editing class and Eddie
Elfers' Computer Layout class**

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Home on the Plains

consider the dung beetle
black and bulbous-bodied

fighting off competitors
in a gladiator ball game
to accumulate and shape
the largest pile of manure
to attract a female

just when we think our lives
couldn't get much lower
this unsung hero of recycling
rolls her way underground
to begin the process all over
rising from the mud
awakening to a feast
navigating by scent
in irresistible flight
toward the mystery of life

Building A House

everything is on hold
everything in your life
all summer on hold
including your old toilet
making that water sound
& the bowl seeming fuller
than it should be &
when you asks he says
the guts need replacing
the internal mechanism
the toilet-repair-kit-gizmo
& you say you know
& he says there's only one
of me there's no time now
& that's how it is everything
on hold because the new house
the rush the push the race
now to get it enclosed
tonight just finish up the shingles
on the east end of the south side
toward the peak just a few more
feet just about an hour of sun
maybe tonight we'll do it
then there's the ridge cap
piece of cake comes in
ten foot lengths a cinch
then it's done all roofed
all insulated R-11 R-30

Building A House

Twyla Hansen

all plumbed all electrical
all heating all framing
2 by 6's 2 by 8's 2 by 10's
all fitted all inspected
now drywallers now the front
storm door gotta get it stripped
just one more layer of paint
already got maybe five off
down to fir down to wood
yes we're down to something
solid something old something
shithead Dale took off & dis-
carded
when he started remodeling
now who would throw away
a perfectly good wood storm-
door who tell me who
those suckers'll cost you
major bucks this one'll be better
than that crap they advertise
this one has class this one
once all that gunky paint
gets off will be but to envy
better than new about the age
of the front door off the Chism
house set aside the beveled glass
stripped off 80 years of varnish
down to solid oak with three tall
lost art glass panels true art
best thing to come out of that
whole house that front door
before they bulldozed it
& now it'll go on the new house
have a new life be ten times
better than the cheap stuff
they charge an arm & a leg for
so you see there's no time
for the toilet for a bike ride
for doing it for doing anything
got away once this summer
took one trip one 24-hour ride
to Kansas City the only chance
& wouldn't you know it

there was one of those archi-
tectural salvage warehouses
& it was like he'd died & gone
to heaven doorknobs grillwork
wooden doors windows fireplaces
you name it phone booths fences
chairs tables light fixtures the
whole mess all of it just waiting
to be measured & claimed
for somebody's new house
somebody's remodeling project
toilets sinks banisters newel
posts the whole damn she-bang
sensory overload to a born-again
recycler a pack rat a person
who drools at the sight of
quarter-sawn oak like there's
a serious shortage of it
like the things you could do
with all that stuff redoing it
not to mention the sheer beauty
the way they used to make things
back in the old days the old way
the solid the real none of this
flimsy stuff no ornamentation
no frilly useless decoration
just rock-bottom durability
not like that furniture Erik & Ellen
bought looked nice for awhile
made of teak veneer-shit TEE-
but the third or fourth time
we moved it fell apart
held together with staples & glue
glue & sawdust so much
of the new furniture nowadays
looks OK at first then it falls
apart so you see we've got to
get back got to return to the real
the authentic & there's no time
getting closer just a month maybe
right after kitchen cabinets
measuring & fitting & building
them

the siding the inside & outside
painting & staining right
after laying that oak flooring
board by board sanding it by
god slapping on a gym finish
better than anything new you
won't be able to take your eyes
off it & we'll have it done
we can do it we can do it right
it'll be worth it I know I just know
we can do it oh baby

Twyla Hansen

Crane River

...language is not even a river...

-Mary Oliver

No word sufficient to redeem this channel,
running like countless others
through banks of opportunity,
where each cubic flow-inch is deliberated,
where once only grass dominated,

no language to account for late-winter clouds
hanging benign and cold, under them
your breath a vapor-pool, rising,
the frigid earth bundled, hushed,
and over the curved horizon

a hint of sun - not quite coral,
no description adequate for their trill-
the voice of sandhill crane flowing
through your middle ear,
through anvil, hammer, stirrup-

spindle-legs roosting in sand-basin,
your feet snug in insulation,
binoculars trained on the mass,
immeasurable, their trebles at lift-off,
at first light when all things merge into one-

earth, sky, animal - a diminished river
running through it.

18 below zero F

outside and it's
time for Briana to lie down
so I race her up the stairs
lie down beside her and the bed
sing songs and pray a bit
while someplace out there
they are doing it to each other
guns knives bombs the law
then I start to drowse myself
lying here on this bed
by my five-year-old
full of sweetness
and grace—

I who have much to do
none of it
too important
the world outside
truly cruel and cold
we know that now

Opus 110

The countryside
is just beginning
to think of fall —
ten ruby leaves on
one green tree,
sumac barely reddening.
My daughter in the
passenger seat seems
older, all dark glasses
and lipstick.
College is fine, Anna says,
except for geology.
She hopes Steve isn't dating
anyone in Virginia,
though she knows
that's irrational.

She says she likes
the piano sonata
on the stereo.
I tell her it's
a late one;
Beethoven was deaf
when he wrote it.
Beethoven never heard
this music, I say.

Except in his head,
she replies.

This is no Mozart
or Haydn, though —
the big-hand chords,
pedal down, fortissimo

fading to double piano,
the washes of arpeggios,
the buzz of fast notes
so far into the bass
you can barely
hear the tune.

We cross the Platte
and grow quiet,
listening to the sad part,
me wondering if
Beethoven knew, then,
that he had only one more
piano sonata in him.
They say Beethoven
chastened musicians
frustrated by such
hard-to-play music.
I'm not writing for you, he said.
I write for the future.

Well, here I am in 1996
on my way to Omaha
with my daughter,
no piano in sight,
and I hear in this
sad melody, music
of willow leaves
soon to fall.
I hear the song of
the mother whose
child has grown
and moved away
before all the
games were played,
stories read.

A string of single
notes begins and I
ask Anna if she knows
what a fugue is, but
her eyes are closed and
her jaw hangs loose,
so I just listen and
before long, with
the of-course-ness
of that cottonwood
in that creekbed,
Beethoven moves from
all sorrow to the
happy rumble and
chord and delay
and crash
of that conclusion,
and I, way into the future,
have to wipe my cheek,
breathe deep,
and keep on driving.

-1-
Myrtle
the Greek

Next-door Myrtle.
Resident scholar
neighborhood naysayer.
Seventy long years of
observation.
Wisdom
abounds.

Olive green lazy boy.
Seat
of divine revelation.

Remote control
in hand
generic cigarette smoke
circling pinkly curled
gray head.
Sage Santa Myrtle.

Mauve cracked lips
urge my consumption of
pale
lemon sandwich cookies.

Chins become one
Myrtle bends.
Defuses glowing
ash ember from orange shag carpet.
Wheezes, coughs
wetly.
Continues talking.

Today I consider
her house,
an aeropagus of
rural higher learning.

*She thinks
ergo
it is.*

Myrtle the Medic

Monday.
Myrtle's depressed on Mondays.
Always rainin'
bars all closed.
Good for memories though. . . .

Take Tessie.
Poor, niece Tessie.
Smart girl, lil' Tessie
go far if she
didn't have that danged
speech amphetamine.

Tessie's Dad Harry
God rest his poor soul.
Used to have his picture
used to have lots of things
can't find anymore—
all smogged down.
Ole Harry left this world way
before his time,
couldn't fight
that Old
Timer's disease.
Dead as a nail, he is.
Comes to everybody.
Still. . .
Worry'n
way too much.
Be her downfall.

Can't help
wonderin' 'bout that
outbreak
of ammonia.

Good thing she got that flu shot n'all

No use dwellin' on one's own
problems she's
feelin' sorry for
people in Michigan.
Terrible thing...
Squirrels out there
carryin' that Blue Bonnet
plague.

Don't do no good to fret, though
just gotta sit back
light up.
Camel.

No Filter.

Good health.
Myrtle
coughs. Pauses.
Good health,
says she,
can't never be taken
for granite.

Noodles and Pretzels

It was the friday nights
we wound up
on the broken porch
out front
with those speakers
turned
toward the door
just loud enough
to upset
the neighbors

And that dog
was always chained
to that cement block
he occasionally
dragged behind
when in a hurry
to chase our
finished
cigarettes

I always wore
that same
straw hat
which seemed to go with
the dog
the broken porch
and our
beer

And I learned
how to
do the pretzel
from a woman
from Oklahoma
and she was scared
of the dog

because
this one
just bit her
and it might have
rabies
and that made it worse

She always said
we looked
cute
with
hair and hats
and we'd just laugh
and drink some more

She had a scar
on her arm
from the dog
and it reminded her
of the friend
back home
who had a scar
from going
noodlin'

She said they'd
go get their
gear
and sink down
the banks of the
river
and stick their
hands in these
holes
until the catfish
swallowed em'
and they'd bring em'
to the top
still suckin'
and say
"look at this beauty"

She had more stories
about the
fish
and I told her
I wouldn't
be trying that
too soon
but I think it would be
neat to see
and maybe
we'll build
a river
around the porch here
and go tubin'
and have Noodlin' Contests
and later
teach everyone
the pretzel
she'd just laugh and drink some more

Just sittin' back
with that
damn old dog
takin' it all in

Jim Reese

The Jive

When Jimmy Cravin
lies in bed
lovin' his girl
he talks baseball

She listens
in disbelief
but listens cause it's love
he says
he was the fastest
from base to base
and she runs
some herself
and can't rightly see
Jimmy runnin'
from anything
but trouble

"I only got one
good one here
to tell ya' Sally
and I ain't lyin'
We all stunk
the whole damn team
that's no lie
We was good at some
but not so good at the other
and the coach
he cursed us
always
but all he wanted
was to win just this
one time
he said his wife
would be comin'
and he'd already lied
and told her we's good
and he didn't want us
to be lettin'
her down none

"Now by this time
they'd already
been callin' me
the Jive
cause I could tun
them bases
like dico dancin'
couldn't hit
couldn't see that damn ball comin'
neither
but I could run
and that's what I
was good for

"It was the tournment
and we were playin'
the Travellers
and they were better
than all of the
highschools
and some colleges too
they all got
scholarships
fer the next fall
and were feelin'
good about themselves
Brian Seeber
said he's so good
he was gonna
stick the ball
straight up our ass
he guranteed it

"Anyhow
I was scabbed up
pretty good by now
from stealin' bases
so bad that I knew
I'd be opein' them up
and start bleedin' after the first
run

"See I'd never slide
with my feet

hittin' first
no sir
not me
I seen Todd Anson
slide once
usin' his feet
in little league
I think it was
a double cause
he'd been goin' perty
fast
and down he went
into second
catchin' his foot
on them stakes
under the bag
and his leg just stopped
and the rest
of him
kept on goin'
them that shin bone
came straight out
his upper leg
where your muscle is and
it went through
his knee
even came through
his pants
and Sal you should
have heard it
the sound was like a
popping sound
just a snap
and there it was
just hangin' there
I heard his folks had to
blindfold him
on the way to
the hospital
cause the sight of it
was just too much
He's safe though
the ump gave it
to him

and he won that
game fer us
"Anyhow that's
why I never slide
with my feet first
cause it ain't worth
gettin' them stuck
underneath
the bag like that
me I dive headfirst
cause you got the
helmet fer protection
and yer skulls hardest
bone in the body too

"Now Brian Seeber
he'd already hit one
out for the Travellers
but we weren't
too far down
coach said we needed
two runs
and Charlie Paxton was
the only one on
and he's on third
then the coach says
put the Jive in
and I come up to
bat
and I knew I'd be
buntin'
cause he wouldn't have me
hittin'

"He gives me the
sign and
Charlie
he's already
half way down
home stretch
when I
got a hold of it

'So I runnin'

not even my fastest
but goin' pertty fast
and Brian Seeber
that tall son a bitch
was standin' there on
first smilin'
blockin' my space
and he's thinkin'
he could block
me out
so I thought no way
and lowered my head
and right before I
got there
I went drivin' straight
at him
It was like tacklin'
some said I even
drilled him in
his privates
but I never knew

"So he's lyin' there
and the ball went
right on past him
So I turned
and was goin' to
second
and Brian Seeber
he had to be
pertty pissed
cause I seen that ball
go flyin' over
second
into left field
So I kept on
goin' to third
and coach
was signalling me
to go home
but I was feelin'
pertty good
about myself and I

wanted to look
at my accomplishments

"Brian Seeber
he's so pissed
kept pointin' over
to third
yellin' something
and hittin' his glove
I just waved
and smiled
a real big smile fer him

"Anyhow that next
play I went home
never felt better
about my playin' neither
I figured that was my
prime and I wouldn't be
playin' too many more
games that way
never felt any
pain neither
from them scabs on
my hip bones
they were bleedin'
pertty good too

"We ended up
winnin'
and the coach was
pertty proud
of me he said
the crowd was cheerin'
everyone was cheerin'
cause we'd never
won
they couldn't believe
it
and the coach he
starts yellin'
"You finally won

you finally won
god damn"
and then I think
he remembered
his wife
bein' there
and he looked over at her
kinda' scared to look
at first
cause he knew
he had been lyin'
to her all along
but she wasn't mad
she's cheerin' along
with everyone
and she just smiled
at him
and pretended
to care
cause they was in
love"

Abandoned Church: Platte County, Nebraska

- for Tom Greisen

There's a grove of young cottonwoods growing
through the sidewalk leading to the front steps.
They've broken the concrete like an iceberg
breaks through the hull of a ship. In this place
the great anchor did not hold; captain, ship,
cargo and crew - all evaporated
as surely as the great sea that once swirled here.

We climb the steps to the big weathered doors,
avoid the cow patties and pigeon dew
as best we can, and continue upwards
like prospectors or tourists, great white bears
out to seek their fortunes in what is left
when the fire is taken from the hearth
and the cave is left to fend on its own.

We enter like wounded sheep. The place reeks.
There is bat dung everywhere; rows of them
cling like demons from the loft and belfry.
We go below them unnoticed. Stained glass,
broken and strange, is everywhere. We find
a saint's cracked eye near the high altar,
pieces of a halo in the men's room,

a stained glass thumb in the old sacristy,
the words 'ora pro nobis' lost in dust.
the floor sags. Its brokenness claims us.
We hear odd sounds hurry in the basement
and forgive our urges to go downstairs.
Something here is dying. It knows our names.
We leave its great silence almost ashamed.

In The Buff

I left the boat there,
in weeds at the lake.
The warm summer rain
poured down harder, hard.
I took off my shirt.
I took off my shoes.
I was soaking wet.
I took off my socks.
I took off my pants.
I smelled like dead fish.
Under the orange tree
in the wide side yard
I took off my shorts
and ran to the house.
My sister Jo screamed,
dropped a pot of stew.
Ma slapped me for this,
for spoiling our lunch.
Pa saw what I did,
said, "Sister should not
have seen you like that,"
and whacked my bare ass.

She Came Knocking On His Back Door

He was the new guy in the neighborhood,
the handsome stranger from out of state.
She came knocking on his back door
and they talked and nibbled on some cheese
and he played good blues on his guitar.
She came knocking on his back door
and they hugged and squeezed each other
and they drank beer and gin and sour-mash
whiskey.

She came knocking on his back door
and she stuck her tongue in his mouth
and they made love on the davenport.
Then her husband got wind of this affair
and waved a pistol in his face
and slapped her screaming down the street.
Now nobody comes to his back door no more,
nobody comes to hear his blues.

Gramma's Journal

Oh this has been a very very severe cold day. I have done nothing but built fire at 5 this morning, crawled in bed a bit, then built fire and crawled in bed again, in fact did that a number of times till the room was warm (and the fire was not out last nite), then stirred pancakes and stir oatmeal and fry mush and fry eggs and make tea, and build fires and set my feet in the oven to warm, and make toast and fires and warm my feet and skim calf milk and skim pig milk and eat breakfast and make bread, and make fires and strain cows milk and strain goats milk and make fire and warm my feet and wash dishes and heat an iron red hot and put it down the water pipe and thaw it here in the kitchen and finally got it thawed. And made fire, and warmed my feet and kneaded the bread and take up the ashes and cleaned ashes from the top of the stove and built fires and warmed my feet and gave Walter a drink of water. (He has been very quiet today. I did not have to wait on him much.) And knead the bread into loaves and make corn bread and prepair dinner for Walter and fry more eggs for our dinner and build fire and warm my feet and eat dinner and bake bread and skim more calf milk, and wash a few dishes and then just set down and toasted my feet in the oven and built fires and that was all I got done and this has been a terrible cold day.

Wednesday, February 8, 1933

From my own journal

Winter is a gaunt stranger in a ragged coat
who stalks me across
a stretch of frigid prairie
who hounds me into the wind.
I see his breath,
and hear him wheeze and snort
like an old man laboring
against lust and emphysema
like an interloper whose
intent has no place
in the white sweep which
surrounds us.

Don Richmond

Iwo Jima

From our warrens in the hills
above the black beachhead,
we saw them coming,
smoke from the shelling
from there ships still lingering
in our caves.

To the south rose Suribachi,
crater-pocked, bristling with ordinance.

North on the flats was where
we wanted them,
and to Red number one
they came in waves,
dripping bloody bundles,
still splitting the rock
like a cell dividing,
Suribachi and Kitano weird nuclei
waiting to wink out
when the firestorm found us.

Where six-fives and Nambu chattered
in the caves they stopped,
our bones rattle.

November...

the deer crop the grass and
nothing happens

grey in the east
the deer crop the grass
the wind blows and
nothing happens

daybreak
the deer crop the grass
the wind blows
the hunter crests the hill and
the deer become the waves the wind blows
through the grass and

the hunter fills his lungs
with wild plus, wet cottonwood, alfalfa hay,
something ancient that reminds him,

then wanders on; and
the waves become the deer again, and
the deer crop the grass and

November: Leaving the Office

The woman in the next cubicle
is ill,
terminal, they say.
We meet in the hallway
and she gathers herself,
eyes merry brown leaves
dancing,
then falling,
falling
into deep November.
Out the window
trees point
at the slanting blue of the afternoon.

At five o'clock, leaving,
we look up
to the cries of geese
flying high overhead.
I remember that moment,
the snakeskin smell of leaves
drifted along fences, into corners;
the sound of her breath
moving in
and out.

Then
the rising of the wind
to scatter all the leaves,
and empty out
the sky.

Climbing

In autumn
our corn crib
was filled to overflowing.

But in summer, empty,
it became a cathedral:
a vast expanse of swaying shadows
sunlight slanting through the cracks,
silent,
waiting.

We dared each other
to climb the ladder
to the bin
at the top,
hand over hand
to that sacred place
just below the cupola,
secret with silent dust
filled with the feeling,
the presence
of something we just missed:
 something fleeting
 sensed with the sixth sense
 seen from the corner of the eye,
the mourning doves, perhaps,
or something akin to the grace of doves
gliding noiselessly away
as we crept up.

True believers,
we laid our dreams there
on that lofty, dusty altar,
and wrote our names
in red chalk
high up on the wall.

The Man Who Made Cages for Rocks

He stayed up all night
to build the first one:
plywood floor and ceiling,
dowels for the bars.

There were some rooms
where the dowels were far apart.
He set the sticks closer together
for the rooms where he kept
small rocks he found
under his feet in the creek.

He was proud of the cage,
the dowels cut straight
and glued to the plywood
in a satisfying perpendicular way,
the color of the wood the same
as the color of the bars.

He put two or three rocks together sometimes,
but that made them neither happy nor unhappy.

They tried to get out,
flinging themselves.

They were old and used to being
at the center of things.

They hated the parallel shadows
cast by the bars in the afternoons.

They hated being warm when they
should have been cold,
the cold gone from their centers.

Some of them gave up,
wanting out but not wanting to
break themselves,

forgetting sometimes for a whole day
to hate the man who made cages for rocks.

The Man Who Made Cages for Rocks

Marjorie Saiser

He began to add another floor,
more dowels. He measured and cut,
planning another layer, a tower.

Some never gave up. They wanted
to shrink down to pebbles,
shrink until they could fall out through the
cracks.

They cursed the man who made cages for rocks:
May your mother melt.
May she be covered with the sea.

He felt the anger of the rocks,
but he couldn't help himself.
He was a man, and rocks were rocks.

Watching

Tonight in the bakery, my husband
points to bread in the case
as I watch him from the car,
the windows two paintings in the brick wall,
as if an artist had good luck
with the color of light,
shine of glass,
with the shape of my husband's head
collar of his faded green jacket
angle of his body

the painting having so much light
as to make it dark and lovely here in the car,
the heater running,
on the radio a song:

Leaving on a jet plane
Don't know when I'll be back again.

I roll down the window to join
warm and cold together.
Across the street the bare hands of elm trees
are holding the fog.

Surrender

I am standing chin deep
in the Platte river reeds
the knees of my soul feel
an ancient trembling, a need
to kneel before a higher power

I have never surrendered
yet now it would be gentle
almost easy
like lighting a lamp
just before dusk.

The Work Ethic

They caught me today
crosslegged on the desk
chin between my knees,
Canon cover over my head.

They wouldn't believe
there were aliens
in the wastebasket
claws tearing at my gut
when I dropped surveillance

but they found
it easy to believe
sometimes I only go to work
because I need a cup of coffee.

Fatal Attraction

This barn leans toward death as an old man
Leans on his cane -
Waiting for the last shudder
Bringing rotten rafters to heel.
Sagging doors a final rattle.
This barn fights
Its death throes
Grappling for its lifeblood
In a land where generations
Once reaped and sowed.

With dreams worn thin as rusted hinges,
This old barn tells stories
As a World War II vet
Relives the battles of the Big One.
Each blizzard, drought,
Failed Congressman's promise
Reverberates in this old barn's shell,
"There's always next year,
Always next year . . ."

Ridiculed by technology,
Replaced by gleaming steel,
Corrugated aluminum,
This barn stands as dated
And immortal as Dylan and Baez
Sprouting truths from the universal,
Edging towards the individual.
Everything grows up, grows old, grows un-
known.

Standing in isolation,
This barn fades in the camouflage of age.
The American Dream translated
From agronomy to industry
To Silicon Valley and beyond.
This barn no longer fits in the scheme of things.

Reclamation

A thunderhead climbs to
twenty-four thousand over
the land far from Oz.
Scooting across the sky
west to east
It sets crosshairs on crossroads
home to a town
twelve square blocks with a main street.

The barrier blocks the sun
to trigger street lamps in
alleyways
and front yards.

Flickering lights linger
then sputter out
as the shadow creeps away
Roaming past the target
and changing sites
It settles on a farmstead
hiding a house
two stories with a front porch.

Sparrows in cedars
tuck heads and clench claws
with intuitive anticipation.

Until the hammer strikes
to streak hot fury propelling,
twirling the barrel with
ripping talons of an eagle cloud
that snatches the field mouse with
eyes enlarged
scurrying in a screech.

She slides across a farmer's wheat
leaving behind
clean-cut corkscrew threads
overlapping manicured terraces
as a gesture of reclamation.

Snake Oil

For those who will believe,
it is the quick elixir
that slips the friction from their lives.
Whether Wynn's or Marvel or Bardahl,
it is the cure-all patented to keep them cool
whenever they would ask.
My father uses snake oil but quietly,
because I tease him.

I want to let the questions fly, to stick them
to his slick intent. Accidentally,
he has left a quart sitting in my truck,
hoping to infect me with the venom
of belief, and I am pumping heat,
my flashpoint far too low for being his son,
although I love him.

I hand it back, the lid still closed,
and close my skeptic's heart
against his smile. I witness in his eyes
the blue of tempered steel. His voice,
a soothing balm, glides toward me.
"So that was where I left it. Say,
you wouldn't want to try some?"

It is sliding from my hands,
I have no grip. I cannot ask against
the poison of his faith. If he could
only ask of me, I'd say that
I have hoarded all the heat he let away,
that friction is my god.
I believe in its resistance.

Tree Bending

Toby tilled the land
Paid his bills
Married a strong woman
Bought groceries
Picked out her dresses
Raised eight sons.
(The girls were hers!)
And died in his cowlot.
The sons became him
They plough straight furrows
Work long days
And are respected.
In honor of hot afternoons
Working weedy potato fields
They quote Dad's
"you left one weed!"
As a credo of their lives.
While their wives
Silently gnash their teeth.

My Father Driving Backwards

The Blue Heeler riding in the passenger seat, stares straight ahead,
while my father navigates them through his little acreage,
cranking his weathered sunburnt neck
to see out the back window of the old truck.

I wave from the steps of the farm house, goofy old man,
too cheap to get the transmission fixed.

How like everything falling apart.

Relics of junk:

appliances, tires and plows,
junksale bargains, barns, sheds,
his first little Johnny tractor,
the Old Blue Nash and wheelless Studebaker,
lined up now like steel dinosaurs, slow-dying into tall weeds,
And all those wild plans and get-rich-quick schemes piled along-
side,
rusting.

How the loyal dog loves him, with faith absolute,
no yesterday, no tomorrow,
just moving along with his old man
going in reverse.

Duane Is Sixteen

It is his clumsy summer,
sixteen,
because he's traded his body in
for a stranger's.
He resents wearing Huskies
with all his friends
in Wranglers and Silver Streaks.
His thick hands hang on him like homework.
The phone lines to his feet
are out of order
and the bad connections bring him down,
top-heavy as a power pole.
Slipping into his favorite boots
is as fat a chance as
sneaking home late
without tripping over the furniture.

The Rain Takes A Long Time

Sometimes the rain
takes a long time
coming down
like a calf
in a slow breech birth
the sky a troubled old cow
moaning for hours
in the west pasture

Late evening
all of it quickens
the rumbling
the swelling
the raising of dust
lightning
sharp as a rage of pain

then the shower
welcome as a calf
perfect and whole
from the frazzled mother

A Matter of Taste

Harrison is a quiet man. I know because we've spent a lot of time on mountains and in rivers and lakes not talking to each other. We were a week together one summer canoeing Nebraska's upper Elkhorn. Sometimes I'd have to look around to see if he was still there. At night I'd keep a stick handy to poke his bedroll. If it went "uhh" I'd relax; if it didn't, I'd poke some more until it did.

Other than when he was literally prodded into it, he didn't say anything until the afternoon of the fourth day. We were floating the south bank and he said, "Lovelies at 9 o'clock." I said "What?" He pointed with his left trigger finger. "Lovelies." Sure enough. On the north bank. Cavorting in the sun. Three women. "Hairsn, after a week in the hot sun, at three hundred yards across a river and up a sandbank, **anything** could qualify as lovelies."

He didn't talk again for awhile—not until two nights later, when I asked him why he was swirling his fork around in his plate of beans. He said, "I can't find the mosquito that dropped in. I'm covering him up so I don't know when I eat him."

Now if a guy doesn't talk any more than that, what he **does** say must be important, right? That sort of logic always makes sense to me.

That evening he seemed right talkative. After supper, and after the dishes (and our clothes, and we) got a good wash in the river, we sat by the fire with a cigar each while we listened to the beavers splat the water with their tails.

"You ever eat beaver, Hairsn?"

He pondered the bright end of his cigar, like a jeweler with a fine watch. "Yeh. A real delicacy. Good as buffalo hump." In the light from the campfire I imagined the edges of his eyes crinkled. I thought I got the pun, but I was afraid to laugh in case he was serious. That would have made him clam up until October. He spoke again: "I've had possum and raccoon too. And know a fella's had skunk."

"Aw, c'mon, Hairsn. That's really terrible."

"Maybe. But imagine the courage required of the first man to cook and eat lobster."

"Yeh." I thought on feelers, claws and beady eyes for a moment. "You make that up?"

"Naw. I read it someplace."

"But you're right," I said, hurrying. "You know what my wife says about eggs."

"What?"

"If you think about 'em they'll make you sick."

He stared at me. The corners of his eyes didn't crinkle. He spit in the fire. Quiet men rarely go into hysterics over little jokes. I tried to get us back on track.

"Do you shoot possum and raccoon regularly?"

"Nope. Sometimes I just pick 'em up."

"How's that?"

"Roadkills."

"Oh, c'mon, Hairsn! Nobody does that!" He eyed me with the speculation of a man who's just been told his liver's shot. I waffled: "You really do?" His eyes didn't waver. "Ok. I'm sorry. It's just so . . . uh . . . unusual."

"So? What makes **you** so normal? You said you ate snails in France that time."

I didn't have a snappy comeback. "Yup. Right. Ok. Tell me about how you fix this stuff, then, Hairsn."

"You sure you got the stomach for it?" I wasn't, but I said I was. "Ok. Well, what you do first is pick up your roadkill. They come in two kinds."

"Two kinds?"

"Yeh. Yours. And somebody else's." He grinned. Funny, too, because Harrison hardly ever grins. "Yours are safer. You know how long they've been dead."

"I get it," I said, trying to imagine smacking a beast with my car, slamming into reverse to the spot of the kill, jumping out and tossing a mutilated carcass into the trunk.

He went on to explain that the trained eye, and nose, is adept at sorting the keepers from the leavers in the "someone else's" category. He pointed out that these are safest in the dead of winter; occasional periods of thaw still make that a bit chancy, he said.

He also added a word of caution on the "hit-your-own" category: It's unsporting and downright dangerous to go out of your way to smack a moving target with a moving vehicle. "The concentration required to aim 350 cubic inches at a small target," he said, "often causes one to lose sight of such incidental decorations as culverts, fenceposts, telephone poles, mailboxes and roadgraders. These tend to wreak inordinate havoc on grills and fenders, and the whiplash incurred as one tries to duck flying glass is a long-time pain. Never forget too that big game can bash up a car all by itself. The Game Commission considers the only fair take in the roadkill game 'accidental'." He must have noticed my mouth hanging open. "What's the matter with you?"

"That is the longest speech I ever heard you make. You can be downright erudite at times."

He eyed his cigar again. "You, on the other hand, can really screw up the woods with those big words of yours sometimes, you know that?"

"Oh. Yeh. Sorry." I apologize for the dumbest things around Harrison. "Go on. Go on. This is really gettin' interesting." I was amazed to discover that I meant it, even moreso that he seemed convinced.

"Yeh. Well. You gotta' clean this animal like you would any other—get rid of the head and feet, fur, guts."

"Right!"

"Then dig a hole, about four times the size of your beast, and two feet deep. Pit-barbeque style."

"Right."

"Then burn enough hardwood in the hole to get about a six-inch deep bed of hot coals. Or use briquettes." His expression indicated briquettes smacked of civilization. "Season the beast the way you like—herbs, spices, use some bay leaves, maybe lay a couple of apples inside. Lay it on a water-soaked piece of plank—rough-cut bridge plank is the best. Then wrap it all in long grass, tying string around the whole thing so you have a nice green bundle."

"Right." I didn't remind him that this was the second-longest speech I had ever heard him

make.

"Lay the green bundle on the coals. Throw dirt loosely on the pile. Cover it well, but **not** firmly. You don't want the coals to suffocate before they do the job."

"Ok. How long do we leave it?"

"Well, naturally it depends on the size. Say, four to six pounds, you leave it three to four hours. Add thirty minutes a pound."

"How do you know that?"

His cigar had gone out. He pulled a burning stick from the fire and puffed. "Experience," he growled around the stub in his mouth.

"Yeh. Good. So now it's cooked. What do we do?"

"Carefully scrape away the dirt. Then shove two sticks under the ends of the plank and lift it out onto the ground. With a sharp knife cut along both edges of the plank, slicing through the grass and string."

"Right."

"Scoop the stuff off the plank into the pit. Throw dirt over it."

"What?"

"Yeh. Then eat the plank." Now my cigar had gone out. I looked at the dead end of it. Then I looked at Harrison. He was looking past a warm glow off the end of his nose toward the river. I was stuck at least three more days with a guy with no sense of humor.

Covenants

by William Kloefkorn, David Lee

Spoon River Poetry Press

Granite Falls MN

Not knowing of David Lee, I picked up *Covenants* with the sole intent of enjoying a new book by William Kloefkorn. This is by no means meant to slight Lee, but I couldn't help knowing more about Kloefkorn. His poetry has appeared on the first pages of almost every *Nebraska Territory* I've seen, and he spoke at Wayne State College's graduation last year. For the most part, if you ask anyone to name a Nebraska Poet, fifty percent would stand there drooling, twenty percent would answer, "That one guy... no, he's from Texas," and twenty percent would say, "William Kloefkorn."

The big question that is not initially answered is, "How did these two writers end up having a book together?" There is no explanation concerning the tie that binds these two poets, but I pressed on, eager to enjoy the culmination of their labor.

Undoubtably I enjoyed Kloefkorn's section of *Covenants*. He writes *with the simple things* in life: rain, trees, pinball, and squirrels. What makes his writing so fantastic is how he ultimately weaves these simple things, a regional grab-bag, into the higher things in life.

A good example of this style is "April," starting out with the simple, we see-

By now most of the cowlot newborn
have found and extended their legs,
by now most of the airborne critters
have changed their minds - and
by now most of the rest of us
have reached consensus:

It's about time.

As usual though, by the end, he has transformed these simple things into what may be the meaning of life itself:

I go therefore inside
to attend the cradle. Wake up,
sleepyhead. We have places to go,
fat to chew, people all over the globe
to shake hands with. Wake up,
little Morpheus, little doormouse.

It's about time.

As I flipped the page to David Lee's section of *Covenants*, I recognized some of the names listed in his dedications. With this, I pressed on again, eager to learn more about this author. I was impressed by Lee's poetic style; he is a classic story-teller, and I felt as though I've known some of

his characters my whole life.

Lee's characters catch some of the most prominent, touching, and sometimes hilarious traits from their cousins in the real world. In "Cigarettes," we find the character of Rob Bob Jamerson who, we find out through Lee's use of stylized language, is a pig-headed, obstinate old son-of-bitch because he "had some principles to live his life by."

I found out how William Kloefkorn and David Lee ended up getting paired together when reading "E. U. Washburn's Story: Uncle Abe." They both have found that magical way of touching on those things that run deeper than most. The wandering man, "Uncle Abe," spins his tail of true love lost, and makes his covenant:

... now I got hope and mebbe
and then whatall time's left
this paperbag of sweet candy with one covenant
for her somewhere waiting
if I'm so blessed

Contributors' Notes

Dave Etter lives in Elburn, Illinois, and teaches creative writing at Elgin Community College. His most recent collection of poems is *How High the Moon* (Spoon River Poetry Press).

Marilyn Dorf grew up on a farm near Albion, Nebraska, a background that influences much of her writing. Some of her poems have appeared in *Plainsongs*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Willow Review*, *Whole Notes*, *Northeast*, and *Nebraska Poets Calendar*. Her book, *Windmills Walk the Night*, was published in 1992. She now lives in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Sue Wortmann writes, "Ages ago during third grade recess, my best friend Mailyn and I solemnly vowed to we would grow up to be famous 'wealthy' writers. Although we've lost touch over the years, and I've come to realize that 'writers' and 'wealthy' aren't necessarily two words that go together, I'm still working on fulfilling my dream to be a writer." In the last several years she has contributed to *The Nebraska Farmer*, *The Cedar County News*, *Voices*, and *The Judas Goat*. She lives in Seward, Nebraska, with her husband Joe and kids Jeremy and Alex. She is currently working on a short story and novel.

Twyla Hansen was raised on a small farm in northeast Nebraska. Her BS in Horticulture is from the University of Nebraska. Since 1982 she has been employed as horticulturist and arboretum curator at Nebraska Wesleyan University, where she has also studied creative writing with State Poet William Kloefkorn. She and her husband have a married son and two granddaughters. They live in Lincoln and maintain their yard as an urban wildlife habitat, winning the Mayor's Landscape Conservation Award in 1994. Hansen's has two books of poetry, *In Our Very Bones* and *How to Live in the Heartland*. Her works have been published in *Wellsprings*, *Six Nebraska Poets*, *A Contemporary Reader for Creative Writing*, *Inheriting the Land*, *Contemporary Voices from the Midwest*, *Nebraska Voices*, *The Decade Dance*, *Anthology of Magazine Verse & Yearbook of American Poetry*, *Iowa Woman*, *Kansas Quarterly*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Slant*, and *South Dakota Review*.

Joan Hoffman of Clearwater, Nebraska, has had her work published in *Graining The Mare* and other collections. Her chap book will soon be released from Up The Creek Publishing of Hamilton, Montana. Joan says: "Grammar's Journal" is a 'found' poem, literally taken from an account entered February 8, 1933. The following day, February 9, she wrote, "No wonder I couldn't keep warm yesterday. It was the coldest day for several years. (It was 27 degrees below zero Tuesday night.)"

Fredrick Zydek has taught creative writing at UNO and the College of Saint Mary. He now writes full-time and farms part-time. Zydek has been published in the *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *New England Review*, *Nimrod*, *Northern Centinel*, *Poetry Northwest*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Southwest Review*, and others.

Marjorie Saiser's poems are forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *West Branch*, *Laurel Review*, and *Zone 3*. She lives and teaches in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Pam Herbert Barger lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, where, besides writing, she teaches piano lessons, sings with a weekend blues band, and develops land. Her work has been published in *Poetry Motel* and *American Suzuki Journal*.

Shelly Clark teaches creative writing and journalism at Chase County High School in Imperial, Nebraska. Her poetry has been published in *Nebraska English Journal* and *Writing Works*. She edited two statewide student creative writing anthologies commissioned by the Nebraska Literature Festival coordinating committee.

Don Richmond of Kearney, Nebraska, teaches high school English and History in Elm Creek. He coaches cross country, basketball, and track. Richmond writes poetry and songs for his bluegrass band.

Larry Holland recently retired from Northeast Community College in Norfolk, Nebraska. His writing has been published in *Nebraska Territory*, *Nebraska Review*, *Yarrow*, *Montana Outdoors*, his chap book, *My Link to the Plains*, and others.