

In the central portion
of the great North American Continent
there lies an arid and repulsive desert,
which for many a long year
served as a barrier
against the advance of civilization
From the Sierra Nevada
to Nebraska,
and from the Yellowstone River
in the north
to the Colorado
upon the south,
is a region of desolation
and silence.

Arthur Conan Doyle

SAMUEL R. MCKELVIE NATIONAL FOREST

SAND HILLS

SPRING 1991

NEBRASKA TERRITORY

SPRING 1991

Amy Beran is a student at Palmyra (Nebraska) Junior-Senior High School. We believe "The Nothing" to be her first published poem. **Robert Cooperman** lives in twentieth century Maryland and writes of 19th century Colorado. **Leo Dangel** has some association with the English Department at Southwest State University in Marshall, Minnesota.

Jean E. Delehant is an Omaha lawyer. **Neil Harrison's** feet are on the ground, his eye along the skyline and his nose into the wind.

Larry Holland's 1990 Elkhorn Prize is for the most significant contribution to Nebraska Territory's first two issues. The Prize is a Crumline trophy buckle embossed with a saddlebronc and rider.

Linda Hasselstrom is a Dakota rancher and much admired writer. The Western Meadowlark, the Cottonwood, Little Bluestem and **William Kloefkorn** are the Nebraska State Bird, Tree, Grass and Poet, in that order. "Of Dogs and Men" is **Jerald Liss'** first appearance in the Territory.

Widely published and collected poet **Walt McDonald** recently completed the Plains Writers Circuit. **Red Shuttleworth's** play The Children's Hair Turned White was produced this fall in Las Vegas, Nevada. It is "a contemporary Western nuclear necrofable." These days **Norma Clark Wilson** hangs her hat up Vermillion way.

COUNTRY WESTERN

Dressed in jeans and a red plaid shirt
festooned with silver doohickeys
I catch the early attention of my audience
with a swift rendition of
She's bowlegged, she's drunk, and she's mine,
and halfway into the number
a middle-aged couple on the front row
stands and begins to dance, rusty at first,
then before long smooth as anybody's oil,
as if with my lyrics I had
healed them all over again,
so when the applause finally fades
I go with *If you'll hand down
your heart, I'll throw up my love,*
slipping quickly then into a song
about my best friend, Norma Jean,
who one evening at the old fishing pond
takes my bobber under and keeps it there,
and by now even those few
who might have come to scoff
are hooked, so I cut
whatever slack might yet exist
with *I told her to play the field,
and now she's getting plowed.* Now
couples are dancing everywhere,
too many of them for security to control,
whereupon I change the tone
from rowdy to mellow,
yodeling softly my way into and out of
Jesus wants me for a cowhand,
then over the sound of many hands clapping
I introduce each member of my faithful band.

*

During intermission
I change into a dry shirt
and sign autographs until my hand aches.
A lovely blonde in a two-gallon hat
says that she has never said this
to a celebrity before, honest Injun, but
she'd like to take me home with her,
so I write in her program, *If you're
not really an easy pickup,
why are there mudflaps on your panities?*

*

I open the final set
by chugalugging a bourbon and water back-
stage, saving the last few drops
to gargle like muskrat love
into the microphone. *When she
made fun of my apartment*, I sing,
slipping into and out of a falsetto,
I knocked her flat. Working
to sustain a thematic imbalance
I continue with *You're both the rock
and the hard place I'm between*, then (because
suddenly and against all odds
I make eye contact with the lovely blonde),
I croon O so deliberately
Hogtie me, baby, to the fencepost of love.
When I borrow the music from the Hallelujah Chorus
to try a new number--*I don't care if
your mother does live in Cleveland, we're
spending the rest of our lives right
here in Utah*--the audience goes apeshit,
rises en masse, and waving my arms
I can feel my fresh shirt sopping sweat
like a red plaid sponge,
whereupon I bring the audience down
with a plot that never fails--
the male animal
whose appetite for dissatisfaction is

insatiable:

*She was beautiful--almost--
But I really shouldn't boast;
She surely wasn't anything all that special.
She was beautiful--I guess--
Yet just about like all the rest,
And that's why I kept on walking down the road.*

I have lost eye contact
with the lovely blonde.
Behind me my faithful band
makes all the right noises
at all the right times.

*So I just kept on walking
Until I got to here,
Sitting on the sofa, drinking Miller beer,
And thinking of a lady, a lady I once knew,
Who was beautiful--almost--
But for me that wouldn't do.*

*

I dedicate the first encore
to all those who tried it once
but didn't make it--
*Life is so miserable without you that
it's almost like having you around.*
For the second encore (because
suddenly I find myself in possession
of a small child, ringlets fine and golden
across her forehead), I indulge the baritone--
*Every time I hold my baby close, I
thank the Lord I held my baby close.*

*

Beyond a pandemonium of tears and flapdoodle
I find sanctuary in the loaded bus,
its motor in a low moan
idling. When
*I'm inside you, nothing outside
matters any more.* Especially
the lovely blonde in the two-gallon hat,
her butt in bluejeans that last image
framed by the moving window:
innocent as the night is long, honest Injun,
*She's just hanging on to whatever matters most
by hanging out.*

PERSPECTIVE

When they dammed the creek in Sherman County
my brother and I rode out to Loup City
one morning with my uncle and
fished all day while he pushed dirt for the dam.

That evening I leaned over
a six-pack on the seat between us
and saw my uncle push his '55 Ford
over a hundred miles per hour.

Later I slept
while he and my brother talked
court costs, fat fines and narrow escapes
those dark miles back to Stanton.

God only knows
how he hammered those old Fords
back and forth from far-off jobs
in Iowa and Minnesota.

Now my uncle hardly drives,
never at night, his eyes
dim with scar tissue
from an old splinter of steel.

But yesterday afternoon
he brought his mother into town
for groceries and her annual
checkup at the doctor's.

I was with them, limping
back to Stanton, doing thirty-five
on Highway 24, and a kid in a Buick
blew by us going sixty.

"Christ!" I heard my uncle's mother growl,
"Where's the fire!"

CLAUDE

Slumped on the couch
or sprawled
on the floor in front of the television,
he snores through sitcoms,
nods off
mid-way into conversations,
but mention bows
and something wakes inside this man
wilder than anything he's done in years;
suddenly
more heart than swollen paunch
he talks longbows and days gone by,
his face
a muscled beast
gathering itself
in the shadowed crags
of broken dreams beneath his brows;
his story ends
and I stare in awe of the viable predator
crouched in this crippled form,
this man
leaning back on the sofa,
closing
his eyes;
the mysterious animal
slips silently back to the night.

REQUESTS AND SUPPLICATIONS

After his father dies
before he sobers up
he yanks me from my getaway to bed;
Mother will not save me as my earthly
father leadeth me beside still music.
At nine years old I bear the gift to
memorize his songs, that cruel gift to
play the stanzas taught him by his father,
and while the Lord is sure to be my light
and my salvation, I fear I won't be saved tonight
until his head is slumped in stupor,
until I play the songs which bring his father
back to him, requests I hope will find their way
under the nearest bushel basket.

O Lord, will you ever make my legs grow long enough
to keep from dangling frigid from this bench, will
you fetch me thy robe and thy slippers to comfort me
against the cold of this catastrophe, and if this is
the sunroom by day, what is it by night?

Father stacks money on the music rack to prod
my repertoire; he knows I know his songs and
I must play them. Yet as I begin,
they restoreth not his soul which falls
convulsing in this dreaded vale of tears.
What will save me now? I make up verses
I don't know without a break between them
and still he cries. When, precisely, Lord,
will you grant him just enough serenity to
pass out? Promise me, Lord, on a stack of Bibles,
that you will stop these cold recitals
and promise me, Lord,
honest Injun now,
that you won't make me dwell
in the house of my father forever.

MOTHER TO MOTHER

Under the tap
I work the chicken through the water
muscle to bone, tendon to flesh
remembering how she knew so well
the joint at which to cut
the parts which gave so freely
and which would not
her hands much stronger
more able
then and now
the knife in my hand just short of certain
and how these same hands today
hesitant of skin to skin
applied the talc so gingerly
above the surgeon's cut
surprised by space un-
touched by age, her back exposed
still smooth and taut
muscle to bone, tendon to flesh
I work this brief expanse well into night
pressing toward an unsure thickness
kneading, ever cautious, through the dark.

AFTER THE CURE

Father took the cure plane to Minnesota
where even priests, they say, stop drinking;
we tell the neighbors he's in for an operation
so mysterious they dare not beg details.

*"Honey ,I'm home!," he'll call,
bounding home at five-thirty-five
dealing out smiles like political buttons
grabbing Mother around her waist,
"How's the sweetest little darlin'
in a thirty-state area?" and*

*when he winks at her we blush.
She will wear black dancing shoes and pearls.
"I don't much feel like cooking tonight," she sighs,
tossing her hair, now blonde again, back behind her ears.
"Looks like the Ritz again,"
he hugs her so tight
we scatter from the kitchen.*

Mother begins each day with a purpose.
"It's darned ironic," she volunteers again,
"that in the end he begs us for that plane;
it's all behind us now
and from now on
it never even happened."

*My brothers become Boy Scouts
and Mother can't sew their badges on
fast enough
the circle of boys sit wide-eyed as
Father tells of Indian lore
and the Irish Setter we do not have
wags his tail steadily to the tom-tom.*

Mother pulls the plastic Serenity Prayer plaques
from every room
stacks them in a cardboard box
places it in the basement storeroom
behind the Thanksgiving platter
we never remember to use.
We memorize words
we are not to bring up again.

CHILL FACTORS

I like to wear my corduroy cap
when fall turns cool, but the wind
blows through that hole in back
above the adjustable strap.
I get my wife to sew a piece
of cloth, that matches pretty well,
inside the cap to block the hole,
and the next day I go and help
my neighbor Arlo mount the corn head
on the combine. Arlo says
that piece of cloth on my cap
looks a little silly. I say
I don't know why it should look silly,
it seems practical to me.
But Arlo says that some might think
I'm too cheap to buy a cap
without a hole, if that's what I want.
I squat and tighten up some bolts
on the combine. It had occurred
to me the patch might look odd.
Arlo says that Old Man Brunner
has a patch like that on his cap.
Then Arlo's eyes light up.
He tells me what I should have sewed
in the back of my cap so no one
would even know it is a patch--
some fake fur the color of my hair,
or maybe, when my bald spot grows,
a piece of flesh-colored cloth.
Arlo says he can get me some cloth
to match my skin -- his mother-in-law,
who's at the nursing home, has a pair
of stockings about the right shade.
Looking down at the Crescent wrench
in my hand, I consider how long
it would take to club Arlo senseless

I drive home at noon and park
the pickup by the machine shed.
I take my cap off, study it,
put it on again, and look into
the rear view mirror, turning
my head from side to side.
I sit there wondering how soon
I'll open the door and get out.

Classified: Hogs and Personals

Registered Hampshire Boar.
Rugged, productive.
Heavy-muscled,
but sensitive.
Loves to lounge
on fresh bedding
and listen to radio.
Eclectic musical tastes:
classical, especially Bach,
jazz and Willie Nelson.
Super sound body.
Appealing belly contours.
Handsome classic snout.
Gentlemanly disposition,
but roots with roguish gusto.
Stands ready to clean up
any garbage in habitat.
Can show charm nonverbally.
Has engaging grunt.
Performance tested.

Jerald M. Liss

OF DOGS AND MEN

The hole had already been dug and the pile of dirt next to it was still fresh. I was the only soul around.

It was early fall, a time for wearing long sleeve shirts and for kids to start wearing socks again. I came out of the house after breakfast and Dagget met me before I made it down the steps. Dagget's our Collie farm dog, a twelve year member of our family. As I walked across the barnyard toward the windmill, Dagget darted around me in circles, yipping and dodging at me, trying to get me to play. I held my arm out to the side, about shoulder high, and snapped my fingers. Dagget took the cue and jumped up to my fingers, nipping at them with his harmless teeth. And, as I expected, his legs crumpled as he landed. He could still jump well enough but he couldn't land anymore. Too old, I guess, plus I think he had arthritis in his hips and shoulders. I kept on walking but didn't make him jump anymore. Dagget still wanted to play, though, as he jumped up and planted his front legs on my chest. He caught me unexpected and smeared my gray sweatshirt with his dirty paws. You'd think he'd have learned by now that I didn't like it when he did that. But that's the way he is and I've learned to live with it. Besides, he was just playing around.

Anyway, I caught his front legs and I made him walk backwards on his hindlegs for a little bit. I could see the nervousness in his eyes, so I let him down. I looked at my sweat-shirt sleeves, they were all wet and muddy from holding Dagget's front legs. I looked down at the ground, the sun lit up the beads of early morning dew that were thick on the grass. I kept walking and decided to watch as my tan leather boots turned dark brown as they soaked up the dew. They were completely brown by the time I made it to the water tank.

Funny how things change. Like my shoes turning brown from the moisture. Like Dagget getting old and worn out.

Dad was standing by the fence next to the windmill, staring at the cows, he had one foot resting on the lowest fence plank. A lot of times I just go up to the fence by the windmill, put a foot on the fence and lean my forearms on the top plank. Just like Dad who is leaning against the wooden fence next to me. It's comfortable. You can let your thoughts wander. Lots of times Dagget will be there too, sitting on the ground next to us, quietly looking out at the cows who are in his pasture.

Sometimes Dad and me just stand there, looking at the cows or at the pasture grass or at the water in the cowtank or whatever else, but never saying a word. No need. Other days we stand there looking at the cows or whatever and we talk; and our eyes never meet you understand. Othertimes, when I'm by the fence alone, I'll call Dagget over and I'll talk with him. Only I can look at him. Dagget with his big, brown, watery eyes. Last couple of years I noticed that his eyes really drain a lot, this leaves little streaks running down the sides of his face from the inside corners of his eyes. Sometimes it looks as if he was crying. But I can always look at him, into those warm and watery eyes. And I can discuss anything in the world with him and he never seems to mind. Some things never seem to change.

"Bill wants you to come over and take care of his dog," Dad said. Bill was a neighbor who lived on a small place not too far away. He had a dog that was a boxer

and husky cross. Not a bad looking dog except that it looked possessed. It was the eyes. It had the big white eyes with tiny, black, BB sized pupils that certain kinds of husky dogs have. Almost always I can look a dog in the eye, no trouble at all, and it backs down. The dog gets all nervous and jittery and looks away. But that dog, he was different; I really had to put forth an effort to stare into those white eyes I kept thinking about a movie called "The Exorcist." I had seen it as a junior in high school. In the movie a girl is possessed by the devil and her eyeballs roll back into her head and all you can see are whites of her eyes. Frightening as hell. Especially when you start thinking about things like that at night, when you're the only one home, or when you have to go out to the barn to check on a sick calf after dark. Let me tell you, those are times when you're real glad to have a good dog around.

"He's been chasing cattle," Dad said. "Got some so excited the other day they broke fence and ended up wandering the roads."

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Dean told me about it." Dean's my younger brother. He told me how Bill's wife and kids had to go after the cattle because Bill wasn't home. And how the cattle belonged to Bill's neighbor, which even made it worse. I guess the dog ran 'em really good, ran 'em even after they got out on the road. And worst of all, something that Dad didn't mention, the dog had ripped up a cow's hind leg. This is kinda strange--usually a cow will start kicking and the dog can't get close. But that didn't matter now because the dog did get close and he drew blood. And this was the second time he had drawn blood. First time was in late spring on a calf. After that first time Bill chained the dog up for over a month--but he never asked anyone to come over to do it. Finally, he let the dog off the chain, thinking maybe he'd changed and it wouldn't happen again.

"Bill said he'd have him chained up first thing this morning. He'll be down behind the hogshed." I didn't say anything. Didn't need to. I knew what was expected of me.

So I headed over to Bill's place in my pickup. Had to have the motor rebuilt when I bought it a little over two years ago. Nothing too traumatic about that. Having the motor rebuilt, that is. That kind of decision is easy. A .22 caliber rifle hung on the gun rack in my pickup. It always hung on the rack that went across the back window of the cab. I wanted to be done with it, but I wanted to put off doing it too. Besides, it's not the kind of thing you rush over to do. Someone might think you were eager to do it; might never understand that you just wanted to get it over as quick as you could and be done with it.

So anyway, I drove over to Bill's real slow and pulled onto his place. Bill's pickup was parked by the house, but the garage was open and I could see that the family car was gone. The hogshed was set a good distance away from the house so I drove down by it.

I got out of my pickup and kinda stood there awhile. The way you always do when you drive onto someone's place. You stand there and wait. Someone always comes out of the barn or from the garage or from one of the sheds to see who's come over. Always a good change from work.

Well, I stood there and nobody came. Didn't expect anyone would. I reached in the pickup and grabbed my rifle. I remember how I let my sister's kids look at it one day. They wanted to play with it like it was a toy. Dogs are kinda like little kids. Don't always know what they're not supposed to do.

I fiddle around putting some shells into the rifle. Kinda stupid, but I put in about eleven or twelve shells.

I knew it wouldn't take eleven or twelve bullets. Hell, with a dog, one shot is all you usually need. Sometimes two. Rarely three. With cows and hogs it's different. You pop

a big steer in the wrong place and the only thing you've done is shoved a hunk of lead into his bony skull. Then it's hard to get a good second shot because the steer gets real jumpy.

Dad would always say, "Aim right between the eyes and up a bit. Not enough brains between the eyes. You've got to shoot a little higher."

After a while you get pretty good at it. You learn where to pop a steer. And when you do it right you know it. You hear the soft pop of the .22 and the steer stands there for a moment, still looking at you-- and steers always are looking at you when you shoot 'em-- and then it just drops into a heap on the ground. Then you rush over with a knife and slice the throat open. You push hard, leaning in with all your weight to force the blade through the steer's tough hide.

The way it usually happens is that someone does the shooting, and someone else has the knife ready and he rushes over and begins slicing the throat as soon as the steer drops. Sometimes when steer is shot and down, it kicks like crazy and you can't get close enough to cut. And other times you're cutting the throat open and the steer jumps up all of a sudden--sometimes with the knife still stuck in his throat.

Whenever the steer doesn't stay down you have to take the best shot you can get because the steer goes crazy. The steer's crazy because of pain and fear, and sometimes rage, and sometimes confusion, like you blinded him and he's gone nuts, running all over the place and crashing into fence posts and barn walls. And maybe it's only his big heart pumping, or maybe it's something else inside of him, something that all animals are born with, and maybe it's something that's keeping him up, because his brain is probably dead. It's like going crazy is a last effort, an effort that doesn't even need the brain, just something inside that wants to keep on living.

Don't get me wrong. It's not always that way. Especially with cattle, sometimes you have an off shot to the head and they just stand there. They stand there, still as can be, like they're waiting for the next shot.

But it's never that way with hogs, not in my experience anyway; have an off shot with a hog and he always goes crazy. Always. Hogs seem smarter than cows. They are more wary, more cagey, and if you hit them wrong they'll run and fight and complain like hell, doing everything a hog can do to hang on to life. And when I say complain, I mean screaming like you've never heard. You've never heard a scream until you've heard a hog scream. It's something you'll never forget. A hog's scream will put any woman's scream to shame.

It's different with steers and hogs. Your hardly ever alone when you kill a steer or a hog, almost always somebody else is around to help you do the butchering. And they're almost always there for the shooting too. Yet, some do the shooting and slaughtering alone, might not have any other choice, no one else around to help; I bet guys who butcher alone are glad when the shooting and throat slicing are over. Of course, it's something you don't dwell on too much. Unless something goes wrong like an off shot or a sliced finger.

Never have heard anyone talk about what they feel like when they do it. It's just something you never talk about. But it's all right to have others around when the shooting is done for butchering. And don't get me wrong, when guys are together for butchering they give each other crap about being a lousy shot and all that stuff. There's nothing wrong about having others around when the shooting is done for butchering. Nothing wrong about it at all.

With dogs it's differnt. The one who has to do it is always alone. The same is true for any kind of pet, like an old milk cow you've had for years and she has a name and all. Then one day ole Boss slips in the mud by the water tank and breaks her hip. You'd be alone when it came time.

But this isn't always true, either, cause I have to say that some folks have their kids there, on purpose, to see it happen. To see what has to be done. Kids, especially if

they're real young, ask a lot of questions, and dads usually give only a few answers. Moms are usually more patient, but it's dads that are usually doing it, so it's dads that are getting the first questions because moms aren't there. And don't get me wrong, some moms do it too, but most often it's dads. That's just the way it is.

But what it boils down to is that when it comes to dogs or other pets and if it comes time for one of the kids to do it, the kid will be alone.

Then you bury the animal in a special place if it was loved. Usually you go back somewhere, always out of sight of the house, and you do it. And I don't mean the burying only, I mean that you go behind the chicken coop or the machine shed, or off in the trees, or a secluded part of a meadow, to do it. Then you bury the animal someplace where the earth isn't trodded upon very often. And once in a while when you're passing near the spot you might stop and remember. Or, maybe you visit the place on a certain day when you're thinking certain thoughts. It's all hard to explain. I'm not sure you can explain it. But you know you have to do it. That part is plain and simple. But the stuff going on in your head is strange. And you get that strange feeling sometimes, if you let yourself, when you walk past those places where you know special animals are buried. Can't really explain it. It's just strange.

When it comes to pets, there's something strange about all of it. When it comes to pets, especially dogs, even grown men get strange. Especially if it's their own dog. Even if the dog has gone bad, a grown man still gets strange. If they don't catch the dog in the act of killing or chasing a calf, or already eating a chicken or goose, they often can't bring themselves to it. And sometimes even if the dog is caught redhanded they still can't do it. A few hire a vet. Most ask a neighbor.

There are times, though, when there's not time to ask anyone. Once Dad told me about how when Mom and him were just starting out on a place. My two older sisters were just little kids then. I wasn't even around yet. Dad farmed during the day and had a part time night job. Dad had gotten a German shepherd to have around for protection. After breakfast one morning he went to chore. When he got to the hog lot he saw dead little pigs all around the lot. Fifteen dead, maybe more. They were about the size of small Collie puppies.

Dad somehow knew it had to be the German shepherd. He hurried back to the house and got the only gun he had--a single shot .410. The .410 is a small bore shotgun that most hunters don't even want to use for duck hunting. Not enough BB's, not enough range, not enough power--for bringing down a duck. Dad knew all that as he grabbed a handful of shells, stuffed them in his pocket and went to the barn. He went inside and looked around, but didn't find anything. He went out the back door of the barn and toward a couple of haystacks.

As he walked toward the stacks the German shepherd came from behind the first stack. The shepherd stood about fifteen feet away. He had a little pig in his mouth, and blood all over his muzzle and chest. The big dog stood there, holding his ground, and growling as he held that little pig in his mouth. The shepherd growled deep in his chest and that's the kind of growling that worries you. It's not barking that worries you, it's a dog growling deep in his chest that worries you.

Dad cocked the hammer back on the shotgun real slow, worrying that the click of the metal hammer might spook the dog. Instead of being spooked, the shepherd took a couple of small steps closer when the hammer locked back. Dad saw the little pig wiggle around. The shepherd tightened his jaw on the little squirming pig. The pig squealed, as loud as a nearly dead baby pig could squeal, that is. Dad had to pop the shepherd straight in the forehead and right between the eyes. Dad had to make sure that he at least blinded the dog so he could finish him off with another shot. The shepherd's jaw tightened again, the pig squealed. The big dog growled and stepped closer.

Dad shot. The big dog dropped to the ground, the little pig still in his mouth. The one shot had been enough.

Dad said he had worried that the shepherd had rabies, but after he checked he didn't think the dog was rabid. Thought the big shepherd had just turned to killing. Just like something snapped and the killing started.

That's why I drove over to Bill's real slow like. I didn't want anyone to think I had snapped. Come to think of it, I didn't want to think I had snapped either.

Dad never had time to think much when it came to the shepherd. He did what he had to do. You just can't have bad dog running loose. Just ain't right. And even though the dog had gone bad he did it as mercifully as he could.

Have you ever thought about wounding a dog and watching him run off, knowing the dog is dying and has enough pain to drive him crazy before he dies. You can't let a dog go through that kind of misery. Just ain't right. Doesn't matter if he comes for you. You have a responsibility to him: get it over as quick and as painless as possible.

But if he's a big dog, you always think about him coming at you. And you think about shooting the dog just enough to get him pissed off and then have him tear into you? Maybe he could even jump and lock his muzzle right around your throat. You think these things. Especially when you're a kid and the dog's a big, strong dog. Doesn't matter though. It's your responsibility.

There's something strange about all of it. Everybody knows that it's part of a dog's nature to kill, that it has only been domesticated, but it's still a dog. It has a right, or had a right, to go out and kill and feed on its kill and survive through the taste of blood.

Farmers always hate it when their dog gets a taste of blood. They say you can never change a dog that's tasted blood. I'm not so sure that that's always true, but I've seen it do some strange things to dog.

And hell, it's not only dogs. The taste of blood does something to a lot of animals. I've seen hogs that will snort and sniff at chickens that jumped into the hog lot. If one of those chickens gets trapped or stepped on and starts squawking, the hogs go crazy. They kill the chicken. Then they eat it--bones, feathers, everything. And then the hogs have the taste of blood and it's never safe for the chickens again. Not until that bunch of hogs is shipped to market anyway.

And speaking of chickens, they're strange, too. When you're raising chicks by the hundreds in a brooder, you've got to get them the right minerals and feed and you especially have to take care of the chicks that have diarrhea and the chicks that have sores and cuts. If you don't, the other chicks will peck at the sores and basically will eat that chick alive. And if you have to put a stop to the pecking or all the chicks start pecking each other. It becomes mass cannibalism. That is, if chickens can be cannibals.

Dad said it's the salt in the blood. Animals love salt. Hell, it might just be me, but there seems to be something more than salt. I watched a T.V. documentary not long ago. I guess we always thought chimpanzees were vegetarians. Well it appears that a group of wild chimps, studied by a lady named Jane Goodall, actually go out on organized hunts for smaller monkeys of a different breed. Then the chimps return to where they live and have a feast. I watched it on T.V. And while the chimps ate the smaller monkeys they always chewed on leaves. The guy doing the narrating said it was kinda like having salad along with the main meat dish.

A lot like us if you think about it.

I had the rifle loaded and still nobody came around. I knew no one would. I tucked the rifle under my arm and walked up to the shed and looked at the hogs snorting around. It was a cool day and they were frisky. Hogs are a lot like dogs; hot weather and they just lay around in the shade; get a cool spell and they get frisky as hell.

I had to remind myself why I was there. Figured I had done enough meandering. I headed past the hogshed and down a gentle slope that led into some woods. I knew there was a small clearing not too far back and that would be the place.

The boxer-husky was chained to a small tree. He had a good fifteen or sixteen feet of chain--but he wasn't going anywhere with that log chain hooked to his harness. And he pulled that big chain around with no problem whatsoever. Hell, I struggle when I have to heave a big chain up underneath a tractor seat. Those damn chains are heavy.

Those possessed eyes watched me as I came nearer. I didn't look into them. The big pup--he was barely a year old--jumped and danced all around. That heavy chain clinked and clanked as he danced around, but it didn't bother him a bit. He yipped and danced. He wanted to play. It was cool out and he was frisky. He knew I was still kind of a youngster and had some playfulness left in me. He wanted me to play with him.

They say that dogs can sense evil in a man--and I think there's something to that--but that dog wasn't worried a bit. Now maybe it's something about my nature or maybe it was the dog or maybe something about the weather that day, but that dog just wanted to play. He didn't sense any evil. No jitters, no slinking, no growling. Just that playful dance and those little yips teasing me to play.

Matter of fact, he got bored with me. After a while he walked a couple of steps back toward the small tree, laid down and looked at me occasionally and then around at his territory. He jumped up and barked a couple of times when he heard the hogs get carried away with all their snorting and with the games they were playing. He wanted to go join them, run along side the fence and play with them. It was a cool fall day, a day to be frisky, a day to play.

But that's not why I was there.

I called softly to the big pup and he danced toward me until the chain ended. I stood about five feet from him. I wanted to get closer and pet him. But suddenly I couldn't bring myself any closer. I already felt too close to him. And it wouldn't be right to pet him and then do it.

The big pup danced around at the end of the chain. We're going to play, he thought. He danced around and bounced up and down on his forefeet and wagged his tail about sixty miles an hour.

Finally he stood still and looked at me. I raised my rifle and in a kind of raspy voice, I said, "In a little while you'll be gone, old boy." Sounds stupid but I wanted to give him a clue, a chance, something. Something to make him mean, killer mean, so it would be easier. Something to make him vicious like the German shepherd Dad dealt with. That way I wouldn't have to think about it.

I looked through the rifle sights, almost dead center between the eyes and up just a tad. At five feet I wouldn't miss. All I had to do was apply a small amount of pressure with my forefinger. It would all be over.

The dog twitched. Or, at least I thought he did. I lowered the rifle and he got bored with me again. There still wasn't anyone around and I was real glad for that. I wiped my sweaty hands on my jeans and I called the big pup again.

"Here boy, c'mon, c'mon, c'mon," I got my voice real enthusiastic like and the dog danced out to me again. I raised the rifle as he settled down. I looked at him, not through the rifle sights, but just at him, at those possessed eyes; I didn't have any trouble looking into those eyes, not anymore; and the big pup wasn't nervous because he started to dance and yip again while he looked at me. He looked at me wanting only to play.

I thought about how he had chased the cattle, how he had drawn blood from the calf and the cow. I knew the pattern, I knew where it led. First to one killing and then another and then another. Maybe some things don't change.

And what can you do? Have you ever tried getting rid of a big farm dog that's tasted blood? Can't give the dog away to another farmer. Hell, you'd be putting a curse on the man. And have you ever tried finding someone in the city who's willing to take a big hound? Then if you do, you take your dog and all you see is the eight foot by ten foot cage or the tree with a ten foot chain tied to it. You can't leave your dog to that. You take your dog back home. You do what is merciful.

I thought about a book I read in high school. It was called "Of Mice and Men." There were two guys who were pals in that book, if I remember right. A big guy, strong as an ox and dumb as one, too. The other guy was smaller and smarter, and he basically took care of the big guy. The big guy was just like a little kid, like his mind never developed or something, and there came times when he couldn't control his great strength. And because he couldn't control his strength he killed mice when he only wanted to be petting them. Well, the big guy ends up killing a lady, he didn't mean to you understand, but he got scared and it happened because he didn't know his own strength. Something happened and he got frightened and confused. He broke her neck when he just wanted to keep her quiet. His smart friend finds out and knows something has to be done. So somehow it happened that a bunch of men are out hunting for the big guy, but his small, smart friend finds him before they do. The small guy has a pistol with him. It was just him and his big friend. The big friend who didn't know any better. The little, smart friend did what he had to do. He was merciful.

It's like that here. It has to stop somewhere. You can't run away from it.

You're always alone when you do it. Even your first time. And the first time you wonder why nobody else is there to help. But then you get real close to it and you start feeling kinda funny inside and then you don't want anyone around. Not before, not during, not after.

The dog got bored with me again. He went and laid down beside the tree. He was a good twenty feet from me. I took three or four steps toward the pup. He danced and pulled the chain tight. He could almost touch me. He pulled and strained against the huge chain, wanting to play. He only wanted to play that day. He leaned toward me, all four of his legs straining against that chain. He had that chain taut. It would have taken my pickup or a tractor to make that chain taut.

I could easily have rested the tip of the barrel on his forehead. He was that close. He was too close. I let him get bored again. Finally he went back to the tree and laid down. He was a good fifteen feet away now. For some reason that made it a little better. I whistled a soft, little mouse hiss between my teeth. The dog stood and cocked his ears and looked directly at me.

I aimed between the eyes and up a bit.

I was taught to shoot with firm, even pressure on the trigger.

I squeezed.

Sometimes you have to.

The dog didn't stand there and stare for a moment the way a steer sometimes does. The big pup simply collapsed. His forelegs folded under him and, as he fell, the weight of the chain pulled him to one side a bit.

He was gone.

I looked around. A shovel was leaning against a big cottonwood tree. The hole had already been dug and the pile of dirt next to it was still fresh. I was the only soul around.

The Winner of NEBRASKA TERRITORY's 1990 Elkhorn Prize

Larry Holland

BLOOD BROTHERS

Summer mornings we'd hear the switch engines.
The bump and rattle of coupling cars
hurried our hoes up and down potato rows
so we could go watch real work.
When Mother said good enough
we'd run two blocks to cross
the highway and a hay field
to see Bill ride stockcars
over the hump by the stockyards.
Sitting on top of a railroad car
like a sultan on a magic carpet
he'd turn the big brakewheel
and the car would stop
as if he willed it.
He moonlighted as a butcher.

His old pickup backed
into the maze of wire and boards
Dad had thrown up to raise two pigs.
Bill unloaded his gear, a battered
Winchester .22 pump and a long thin knife.
Mother cautioned us from the porch
to not bother Mr. Schnebly.
"The boys won't be no bother, ma'am."

We stayed near the house as he shot
once, pumped, shot again, each
behind an ear. Gingerly

over garden clods to the back lot
and past two spent cases like eyes
the color of the sun staring in the dust
we walked up to 250 pounds of dead weight
already hung from each side of the rack and
slack across the tailgate. Punctured
arteries streamed into the ground.

"I want to be strong enough to lift
a pig someday." My brother said,
"You'll never be that strong."

Big-eyed at ripples in rounded shoulders
black under overall straps, we watched
rivers of sweat thin the blood of his work.

"A little grisly, ain't it, boys?
But it's sure gonna taste good."
Bill winked. Our eyes widened.

He skinned and gutted fast,
cleaned up, picked up, drove off
with the mystery of pig to pork
a dark secret on our minds. After,
when we'd see him on the street and say,
"Hi, Bill," he'd know the ritual.
He'd say, "Hi, boys," and wink.

A muggy summer wrapped our lives
like winding sheets on mummies.
The merciless morning sun, hoe handles,
potato rows and oppressive afternoons
gained on us. Switch engines thumping
cars on the sidetracks
no longer made us look up.

At the end of a row my brother stood
frozen in the pose of a boy studying
a hoe blade half-buried in its next cut.
Shimmering stillness pressed us back
into the dust of the rows. "How come
Dad's comin home this time of day?"

Mother met him on the porch.
They stood as if for a photograph
neither would want a print of.
She went back into the house.
Dad looked down, then out at us,
waved and was gone up the street's heat wave
like a wraith disappearing into a mirage.
At dinner we tried to digest the news:
Wrong signals had bumped Bill
under tons of tandem wheels,
the artery where his leg had been
could not be held.

At supper Dad said he and Mother
would be going to Schnebly's that evening.
My brother tried to wink at me
over mashed potatoes, pork gravy and roast.

After dishes we went through the garden
to barren ground surrounded by sunflowers
now head-high, boards and posts and rolled wire
neatly stacked. The sun was still hot.

We sat in the dirt, heads down, tears
dark spots on the blood-darkened ground.
My brother cursed the railroad.

(for Bill Schnebly)

THE LENGTH OF SHADOWS

I imagined him
standing under the depot roof,
lifting it from the right vest pocket
by its burnished gold chain,
pushing the stem with his thumb
to snap open the case,
other thumb hooked in the left.
He would look down the tracks,

then down again to his hand.
He'd say, "On time."

I got it as a tarnished case,
hinged, with a worn clasp.
No hands pointed out
Roman numerals on the white face.
I don't carry it
with any need to track time
beyond lengthening shadows,
the feel of a day.
I carry it because
my father handed it to me
after the funeral:
"This was your mother's fathers.
Thought you might want it."

No time left for a wife
and two daughters, he died
when she was four.
Mom went at eighty-six,
not knowing entirely
what time of day
or whose lifetime it was.

Shiny as a rubbed doubloon,
wound every morning and admired
several times a day at arm's length,

its mainspring coils
a third generation.
The jeweler said this one
never did keep perfect time
and never would.
I hold it in my hand,
in my own sweet time.

PAHRUMP

I come from a good home.
Braids in my hair. Momma used to
stare out the noon window at the moon,
And you know what? She saw us all
grown up and far away. So she said,
"If you're gonna be on your own,
you better learn how." We learned
to be alone. The family rule was:
except for meals, no more than one
person in a room at a time.

JEAN AND DUCKWATER

Hey, don't touch me. Wash
that coyote blood off first.

The horses, the flies, the work.
You lie down on the hard ground
dreaming some angry waitress.
The horses are hobbled. You light up
a cigarette and know it won't work.
But you go back to her anyway.

Don't get all sullen, will you?

I brought you this porcelain rabbit.
It means I love you, even if this
ain't gonna be a National Finals
love affair.

I used to have hair on my nipples.

Thanks for telling me.

BEATTEY

Out near Utah, in a town we hauled into
with a pair of tired ropin' horses,
I felt your shadow, grandfather.
All your best friends were Apaches
down south: Black Knife, Corn Flower,
Blue Sleeves, Naked Horse. And now,
with this trunk of your old magazines,
Sure Fire Western and *The Western Raider*,
I daydream the Stetson you paid
five bucks for in 1933: I gave it to
a Van Horn, Texas, rodeo queen.
She had blueberry eyes. And we darted
around that motel room like chipmunks,
chattering like children in a barn.
Out near Utah, I felt your shadow
and called home to the woman
who squints into morning sunlight,
her slip clinging to her skin.
I called home and the phone felt
cold for a lot of minutes.
You know it: I loved her worst of all
in sunlight coming out of Colorado.

NEBRASKA VOICES

1

Kay came here with her husband--
they were going to grow marijuana--
Great big woman.
Whatever they did they made money.
Went to the Virgin Islands after
they left here
started a natural food store.
Her husband was full of energy
good with tools.
One night he got out of the shower
and the floor was wet.
He slipped and fell into one of those
big bottles of purified water.
The bottle shattered and a piece of
glass went right through his heart.
He died like that.

2

She'd been fighting the other kids
all day. I went up to her on the
playground and asked did she have a
good weekend and she said no--
Her daddy ate all the donuts himself
and didn't give her or her sister any
then he made them watch the movies.
Then she told the whole thing
how he stuck his thing in her butt
and how she didn't want to watch
the movies, and he told her not to
tell anybody because if she did
the police would come and get him
and put him in jail. And I called
the police and they came and asked
her about her life and now her daddy's

in jail and she's in a foster home
and she's angry, fights all the time.
But some of the other kids try to
ignore the way she acts and walk up
to her and rub her back and tell her
it'll be ok.

3

My sister was abused as a child until
she was seven, but she didn't tell me till
she was thirty. By an old man that lived
in the neighborhood, her uncle and her
dad. She was three years younger than me
and when my mom and dad got a divorce,
she went to live with him in Oregon
and it was my aunt that told my mama
she'd better come and get my sister.
There were a lot of men in the house
all the time and my aunt thought they
might be doing bad things to her.
She died in a car accident in seventy-eight.
Before that she lived with an abusive man
for seven years and was in the hospital
I don't know how many times. He'd do
terrible things to her. One night she
came home late, and he brought the children
into the living room and raped her in front
of them. He has the children now, but he
may be about to go to the pen. He was
driving drunk and ran over a woman who was
standing outside her car next to the highway.

Broke some of her bones.

THE MIDDLE YEARS

A pot of chile bubbles on the stove.
I'm cranking this old freezer
steady as I can, trying to make it stiff.

I'm dreaming of making love in summer
on the beach, picnics of spicy chili
and ice cream. She's at the ironing board,

recalling gulls and stars,
the Galveston Gulf, smoothing
wrinkles from her wedding dress,

stored in the closet all these years.
How could this happen? Our daughter's
only twenty. They're off to Hawaii

and we're left with bills
and a white, outmoded dress
my own bride's ironing to put away.

TWENTY BELOW

When you crack ice with your teeth
and lip the pieces, I think of our first
backpacking-winter in the Rockies,
kindled in sleeping bags

zipped together, trying cold kisses
to test if love was worth it.

Only twice in my lifetime
such a blizzard, such wild nights,

nights when I learned most
the secrets of mouth and flesh,
learned how warm teeth can be
in the world, how necessary.

Robert Cooperman

**SOPHIA STARLING IN ENGLAND WRITES
TO JOHN SPROCKETT, COLORADO TERRITORY, LATE 1875**

Dear John,
I have grappled all morning
with how to break my news to you,
the swiftest way best:
I'm to be married.
Perhaps I have erred in answering your letters,
which would have surely ceased
along with your infatuation
when I boarded my train in Denver:
you the one who didn't wait
to shake hands like true comrades.

I would be a liar
to say I don't miss you:
especially when an east wind
blows dustily in high summer
and I can smell thin mountain air,
a campfire, the rank perfume
of horses ridden over rough terrain;
hear the songs you sang--
little miracles of civilization
in that pagan-glorious wilderness.

I know you are too honourable
ever to mention our few instants
of rising to the stars,
inexplicable magic of the climate.
Safer to recall
our grand scaling of Long's Peak:
a memory that warms my heart

as a match illuminates a lamp,
and in turn, a whole room.

Edward is a gentleman,
a physician devoted to the poor,
thus a paragon in my eyes.
Wish me well; find your own joy,
or better, the treasure of contentment,
its surfaces not so easily tarnished
as the base pyrite of brief ecstasy.

**LETTER FROM JOHN SPROCKETT, COLORADO TERRITORY,
TO SOPHIA STARLING, LONDON, EARLY 1876**

Dear Miss Starling,
Now that you're marrying a doctor
I can't call you Sophie.
By the time you get this,
you'll be vowed and kissed
and maybe a bun in your belly.
If your high-minded physician
ever mistreats you, just send word
and there'll be one less
gentleman-bully in the world.
But I suspect you can handle him,
like you soothed me when the need
for a drink crawled like a scorpion
and only your lullabies--
about England's green meadows
that I still can't believe in,
knowing only mountain, plain and desert--
could pry that stinging devil loose.

Should I ever get far enough ahead,
I'll see for myself if you sang true.
Don't fret, I won't descend
like a buzzard in buckskins.
Sides, I'm fixing to marry too.
No, I just said that.
Who but you could see anything
but my scooped-out grizzly-eaten socket?

Anyway, I wish you only good.
Here's a gift to prove it,
and if he ever offers you trouble,
remember what I said about a favor
from an old friend.
I remain true and trustworthy,
believing you to be the one blessing
in my life of rot-gut and six-guns.

THE MAHATO KID

Six weeks in a motel room does something to the eyes; they adjust to small spaces. But if the motel room is in Lemmon, South Dakota, the distance overwhelms you the minute you open the door. It's a long way to the end of anything in the northwest part of the Sunshine State.

A few years ago I worked for the South Dakota Arts Council as a writer-in-the-schools. One job required spending a week in each of five schools in the northern third of the state. To make my schedule even more confusing, I never had a settled week; I spent two days in Lemmon, two days in Bison, a day in Timber Lake, two days in McIntosh, two days in McLaughlin, and so on. I was not only working with students in writing poetry, we were also publishing a poetry book as a joint effort between schools. This meant I took my usual four boxes of reference books and volumes of poetry, plus a large electric typewriter, a portable light table, and publishing paraphernalia--scissors, sheets of type that could be pressed to pages for headlines, cutting and measuring tools. I also needed clothes for the October weather when my sojourn began, as well as for the blizzards I anticipated, not in vain, before it ended. I established myself at a motel in Lemmon, and drove to the other schools.

There are advantages to small-town motels towns, though some of them may have disappeared in the years since I finished the job. I had called ahead for a reservation, but when I arrived on a Sunday afternoon, I found the motel office locked. For a minute, I panicked; then I noticed an envelope taped to the door. It contained a note saying the owners would be back in the evening, and a room key. I didn't see them for several days, during which I enjoyed the facilities without having paid a cent. But they trusted, because I was working for the school system, that I was reliable. For the entire time of my stay, I saved money by cooking meals in an electric frying pan in the bathroom; though they must have known, they never objected.

On the first night of my sojourn, however, some fun-loving hunters in the next room called me several times to invite me to a party they were loudly enjoying. I declined, but they kept me up most of the night anyway. The next midnight, when I stepped outside for fresh air, I noticed several sixpacks of beer keeping cool in the snowbank between my door and theirs; the rooms had no refrigerators. I enjoyed one a great deal, alone, to atone for the noise of the previous night.

The Lemmon high school was only a few blocks away, and Bison was next nearest at 42 miles; Timber Lake was most 98 miles distant. The discrepancy in distance resulted in monologues while brushing my teeth at night: "Let's see, tomorrow I have to be in Timber Lake, so I'll get up at 6 and be on the road by 7:15 unless it snows, in which case I'd better get on the road by 6:45. Wait--no, it's McLaughlin tomorrow..."

Long drives provided me with a time to plan the day, review ideas that weren't going well, and--best of all--to observe the country, taking notes which resulted later in fiction and poetry.

Each community has its own style; certain kinds of country demand certain responses. I think northwestern South Dakota, now being altered like the rest of the state by large-scale farming, mineral development, and dwindling populations, is one of the most beautiful places I've ever seen.

One sees change everywhere: big, empty houses that once sheltered large families sag sadly beside smaller, newer houses built for a new generation. Sometimes a farm is entirely abandoned, and the old farmhouse stood like an old lady holding her skirts away from the machinery rusting in the yard.

Writers are observers, and some of us drive dangerously while scribbling on note

pads in the car seat. These are some of the observations I made in the distances of northwestern South Dakota.

A four-wheel drive Jeep contains four muscular men and numerous rifles; a bumper sticker declares: "STEERS!"

Almost every second vehicle is a pickup with an individual who waves at every other pickup, including mine with its out-of-county license plates. Friendliness is everywhere, from the Lemmon store which cashes my checks from Hermosa, 220 miles and four counties away, to the sign at the end of a driveway, "The Felchles say Hi." The other side of the sign has

a smiling face and orders, "SMILE," and behind the sign is #19 putting green, used by golfers from Lemmon.

People in this country line things up: haystacks, trees, farm machinery, outbuildings. The terrain is so rolling it looks like an ocean, as if no fence ever would stay pegged down; perhaps the straight lines everyone creates are an attempt to exert control. Cedar chokes the gullies. It is easy to visualize Hugh Glass hunting grizzly with the Ashley party in 1823, or crawling southeast past Thunder Butte after a grizzly bear clawed him nearly to death and his trapper friends abandoned him. He crawled more than two hundred miles, healing and getting angrier with every inch.

Everything changes when it snows. Snow-covered men stamp into the truck stop where I eat and crack ice off their mustaches. The waitress, on a Tuesday, remarks to the room in general that she hasn't been home to the ranch since Thursday. The wind howls all night long, piling drifts across the roads to Timber Lake, McIntosh, McLaughlin, and Bison, and my October timetables no longer apply.

Almost every yard provides a vehicular history of its residents. One place has two 1949 Chevy pickups out back, a 1954 Chevrolet at the side, and a 1978 Ford with dealers' tags in front. He was loyal a long time, in this country where a man usually buys the brand of pickup his father and grandfather bought, just as he votes the political ticket they chose.

Conversation in the teachers' lounges is not all academic. In Bison, I hear the principal say to a teacher, "Your tractor's done. It was that carburetor, all right. I put a rebuilt one on it; cheaper."

Everyone knows everyone. I'm assured by a principal that the kids get more understanding this way because, "We know if their father's leaving a week before he goes."

Kids hang their coats in the hall and nothing is ever stolen. This may be partly because most of the students drive pickups with rear-window rifle racks to school. And it might not.

The United Parcel Service driver says that, with the possible exception of some in Texas, his is the longest route in the United States--from Mobridge, South Dakota, along the Missouri River, to Wibaux, Montana. He always carries food and sleeping bag, but if he gets stranded, he usually can find a hot meal and a warm bed at a farmhouse.

In Lemmon, I attend an Italian dinner cooked by a poet from New York with help from his wife, a poet from Hawaii. They moved here when she inherited her grandparents' house and farm. Among the guests are a mountain man from the Rockies, a cowboy with a reputation for seduction who is elusive about the location of his ranch on the Grand River, a high school girl who writes poetry and works at the local radio station, a retired widow who's just returned from a trip to New York, and a man constructed along the lines of a mountain range who says six words all evening, all of them wise and funny. I'm assured the gathering is not unusual, except that it usually includes the Lutheran, Presbyterian and Catholic ministers. Writers and ministers tend to hang out together in small towns, only partly because they may have the only college degrees for miles in any direction.

In McLaughlin, surrounded by millions of acres of grass, a heavy chain protects the

high school lawn from student traffic. From a high window I observe huge letters painted on the roof: "The Mahto Kid." Mahto is a small town near McLaughlin; the word means "bear" in Lakota. There are no further clues. A sign downtown proclaims that the Three Sons Restaurant is the "Soup Capital of the State."

In McIntosh, I park in the middle of the street with everyone else. The only way to get out of town is to make a U-turn at the end of the same -- and only -- street. All along the highways are cars, parked at mailboxes by students who ride the bus to town. After school they reclaim their cars and vie for speeding records. Certain stretches are notorious. "Yeah, I wrecked a car there last year, too. The old man is getting a little upset."

All the road signs have bullet holes in them. Apparently the numerous guns in back windows are not used exclusively for hunting game. I ask a sweetfaced lad in Timber Lake what he shoots. "Anything that moves," he replies with a dimpled smile.

DROUGHT YEAR

I dreamed I slept alone in a drought year,
and now I do.

I lie in the short grass;
water is a dream.

All day I was fuel for the sun
burning like wildfire over a dry land.

Ghosts of streams slash earth,
water's memory
ripples in sandstone.

I dreamed you died in a drought year,
and you did. Now
I dream water all night long:
hear it laughing in the throat of a cloud,
imagine dry grass brushing the house
is rain. When the killdeer cries
at the edge of the dry pond,
I add my plea to hers
in a voice husky with dust.

I dreamed myself a dry woman,
and I am, the juice gone
out of me. My skin is fragrant

with prairie odors.
I am drying grass, wind-bent.

Long tough roots grapple
deep into baked prairie earth.
Leaves die, but roots dream
in crumbled sod,
wait for rain.

GEORGE'S POEM

required few words.
Even dying, he kept it simple:
"Be happy. Watch the sunsets."

What kind of philosophy is that
to get me through the next forty years?
I have to figure it out by myself--
but that's not new.
He believed I could.

He helped me up if I fell,
but he didn't grab my arm
when I strode ahead.
When I cried and clung to him
on his hospital bed,
he muttered, "Don't get too poetic."

George's poem is one doe
standing knee-deep in Slate Creek.
She scratches an ear
with a shiny-wet hoof.
A man and woman read in sunlight
on a lichen-covered rock
rearing out of autumn snow.
Near a blue tent,
a white dog chases gophers.

Walking at dusk, they hear a fawn

wail in fear and cold.
All night the dog sleeps between them.
At dawn, snow collapses the tent.
Entangled, they all crawl out
laughing, throw snowballs, make
coffee. The fawn's tracks cross
the meadow beside his mother's.

Now he is dead, I remember
how he smiled as he drank coffee.
He was writing a poem with no words.
I cannot read it in a book.

No one else
will ever read it at all.

WHAT THE FALCON SAID

Flat on his back, feathers bloody,
surrounded by drooling cats,
the young falcon hissed,
clacked his beak, clawed air.
His feathers were bloody;
one cat licked a bleeding ear.
Falcon's yellow eyes didn't blink
when I picked him up
like a handful of springs,
like a grenade with the pin pulled.
None of the blood was his.

I put him high in a cedar tree.
He clutched the branch and panted,
glared at me,
then shot straight up like a bullet.
Next day, on my horse, I saw
a redwing blackbird whistling on a post
explode in the middle of a fluid run of song.
The falcon shot away, clutching the corpse.
He screeched once but I heard what he said:

Don't expect pretty lies from me.
I know my job.
You saved me from the cats
so I could live.
I kill to eat.

So do cats.

So do you.

THE NOTHING

A snow-white castle stands out,
I see the empress inside it.
"ATRAO, ATRAO!" she calls,
but I do not hear her.

This land is to be consumed
by the nothing.
No-one dreams anymore,
no more hope is left.

If someone wishes,
If someone dreams
There will be hope for us.

My luck-dragon carries me away,
away from the nothing.
Please help,
the nothing grows every second.

The nothing has come
the snow-white castle is no more.
Only left is poor me,
and a grain of sand.