

MAP OF NEBRASKA: Circa 1856

*In the frayed right-hand corner
the wind, cheeks full and puffing,
blows at the back side of covered wagons
headed west from the banks of the Mo.
Just below the wind's chin, wheat fields,
far as the wind can see, bloom where once
the Sioux and Omaha gathered wild plums.*

*In the corner below the wind
some one has sketched a herd of buffalo
grazing along the Nebraska side of the river.
Below the buffalo, printed by a fine hand -
the words: "A Modern Guide for Travelers
prepared at the request of Peter Sarpy
and John Baptist Miege. Printed
by the New York Book & Print Company. \$1.00."*

*To the left of the wind and wheat and buffalo,
out near the land's edge, happy settlers
walk arm in arm with natives, deer dance,
small sod houses wait beneath huge elms,
the words "Peace and Plenty" are etched
on a scroll of birth held by two small children.
One wears feathers and a loin cloth,
the other knee-shorts, shirt and tie.
They have their arms around each other
and stand just outside a small white church.*

-Frederick Zydek

NEBRASKA TERRITORY
Winter 1991

Beyond an Omaha postmark, **Michael R. Catherwood** remains, at press time, an enigma. **Robert Cooperman's** collection In the Household of Percy Bysshe Shelley will be published by the University of Central Florida Press. **J.D. Garrison** writes that he "is a member of the Palmyra Writers Workshop and once stayed up all night discussing Kant and barbed wire collections with Neil Harrison." **Twyla Hansen** recently returned from a convention of turfgrowers.

Linda Hasselstrom is the winner of the 1991 Nebraska Territory Elkhorn Prize for her contributions to last year's issues. The awards ceremony will likely take place this spring in Wayne City.

William Kloefkorn is fine and good, thank you. **David Lee** is well known to readers of the Territory. He is currently coaching a fifth grade girls basketball team. **James Magorian** currently resides in Lincoln. **Curtis M. Meyer** is a student at Wayne State.

Barbara Schmitz lives, teaches and writes in Norfolk, Nebraska. **Russell Thorburn** lives in the UP of Michigan, generally, and Marquette, particularly, where he sacks groceries and substitute teaches. His chapbook The Company of Widows was published recently by the March Street Press. This is **Rodney Torreson's** first appearance in the Territory.

Fredrick Zydek, whose poem covers this issue, lives in Omaha.

NEBRASKA TERRITORY Winter '91

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 4-19 **David Lee**
 The Wart
 Curley
- 20 **Linda Hasselstrom**
 Calvin
- 21 **Michael Catherwood**
 A Poem About Fifty
- 22-24 **Barbara Schmitz**
 Letter of Minnie in the Omaha Hospital #1 & #2
- 25 **Russell Thorburn**
 Dust
- 26-27 **J.D. Garrison**
 Single Words
 I Pray the Lord
- 28-29 **Rodney Torreson**
 While Father in the Hospital Re-imagines His Hand
 The Ascension of Sandy's Drive-In
- 30-31 **James Magorian**
 Imperfect Bounty
 Fire-fighting Practice
- 32-34 **Curtis M. Meyer**
 Builders of the Oedipus Complex
 Second of the Month
 Ten Pins of Life
- 35-38 **William Kloefkorn**
 In a Motel Room Somewhere in Western Nebraska
 Raising Rabbits
 Killing Time in Jobie's and Toby's Bar in Platteville, Wisconsin
 Waitress
- 39-44 **Twyla Hansen**
 Snowstorm, Late October
 Bike Ride
 Love One Another
 At Roundwind, Late Summer
 Father Poem
 Burt County, 1957
- 45-47 **Robert Cooperman**
 Sophia Starling sees Figures in the Snow, Colorado Territory, 1874
 John Sprockett, Colorado Territory, to Sophia Starling in England,
 Late 1874
 Willie Leeson Awaits Trial for the Murder of John Sprockett, Gold

The Wart

And when I passed by thee, and saw thee
polluted in thine own blood, I said unto
thee when thou wast in thy blood, Live.
Ezekial 16:6

You ever had any warts?
I said yes, John, I have,
in high school and then two years ago
I had a bad one on my foot.
How'd you get them off
did you have to go to the doctor?
I said the one on my foot, yes,
he had to operate and said
it was the biggest one he'd seen.
How bout the others?
John, I said, I cut one off
with a pocketknife and the other one
just went away.
By itself? he sed.
Sort of, I said and John sed
you found you a healer didn't you?

And I had to say yes because John was right.
I aint never come back
has it? sed John and I said no
and it won't he said
this one I got's grown up right
between my fingers and it hurts
when I gript something
you think I can find me a healer
now when I need one?
I spoze I'll have to go to some doctor
and let him burnt it
but I'd as soon not

Mizrez Patrick back home
got 1 on her finger once
she couldn't have that she was rich
didn't want no scar where it was
so people could seen she had warts
she went to old Mr. Cummings

the janitor in the grade school
for years till they had to finally retire him
then he was the gateman
out to the cotton mill
everybody in town known him
wasn't nobody didn't like him
he raised us all
when we's in school
never forgot 1 of our names
when we got in the trouble
we'd have to go talk to Mr. Cummings
he'd make us feel so bad about it
wasn't no way we'd do that again
whatever it was
he could of cured Judast we all bet

so she went to him in the night
he taken them off
they's all gone in 2 weeks no matter
how many you had or where
she tried to offer him money
that's all she had by then
he wouldn't take it
never believed in it sez
it was a gift
it'd be ruint taking money
she sent him a card
she wrote herself and he kept it
I seen it when I's older
he was the best I known
for healing and could do it all
cured fire, thrash and warts
and could stop blood miles away
wasn't no doctor around
that could handle yellow thrash
they could do red and some black
they'd send them with yellow to somebody else
anybody to get them somewheres away
cause they didn't know what to do
but Mr. Cummings could suck it out
some of the doctors known it
would even send the kids to him

it was 1 baby had thrash so bad
his lips swolt almost shut
with yellow blisters and in its mouth
went down its tongue
in its throat before they brung it
he never sed a word
taken that baby
and held it down where he could
look in its mouth then
wadded up his hand in a roll
shaken that baby till it cried
its mouth come open
he put his hand over its mouth
and put his own
on the other side and sucked
he turned his head and spit
mebbe he sez some words then
I don't know
done that 3 times
give that baby back
to its mother and he sez
you clean that baby up
put some warshed clothes on it
you taken and warsh yourself
before you let that baby suck
if it don't get better in 3 days
you bring it back
if that thrash gets down
in its stomach it'll die
he never lost one
I bet he cured a hundred
I never seen him do it
I heard about it
and blood he could stop anywhere
he didn't have to be there
he known the Bible verse by heart
had it welded in
he could speak it
put in the name if he known it
in the right place
blood would dry up right then
over the telephone even

not just somebody
it was a horse run into a picketfence
rammed 1 up in his chest
when they pulled it out
blood come out like a waterhose
that horse was gone die
and it belonged to Wesley Stevens
broke out its pen and run off
trying to find something to eat
so it wouldn't starve to death
he fed them to his pigs
when they died that way
but he'd of said they stoled it
and killed it on purpose
it was worth 4 thousand dollars
a racehorse and sued them
they had to get that blood stopped
so they called Mr. Cummings
at the school sed please come down
he sed how far is it and where
tell me what that horse looks like
they did and sez you coming?
he sed no
that blood'll be stopping about now
it was just across the street
from where they's calling
they was mad and sez he's a liar
not to his face but when
they got back that blood
was down to almost nothing then stopped
horse lived
they had to pay for feeding him
while he healed up
it wasn't Wesley Stevens' fault

nosebleeds at school
cut fingers and bit tongues
school nurse would send them
right to him
he stopped a knife cut in a fight
than man would of bled to death
doctor sed so
his vein was cut

doctor sed it wasn't no way
it should of stopped bleeding
but he didn't believe in it

he could throw fire out
him and his cousin Grace Nelson both
she's a womern and used her breath
he called it out and made it leave
Wart Thuett we called
this one I grown up with
real name Wallace Garland Thuett
when he's in grade school
they's taking the Saturday bath
it was cold
so after they got out the tub
in the kitchen they'd dry off
by the woodstove
it was a Stewart Warner
he was little then
backed up to it to get warm
backed up too far
burnt a hole on his ast
against that stove
never had no clothes on

they called Mr. Cummings right then
on the telephone
sed that boy was burnt bad
where it might cripple his leg
he sed he'd be right over
he come and looked at that burn
arredy running together
he looked down in to it sed
I'm bringing that fire up
off the bone and out of his muscle
but I'm gone leave part of it on
he'll appreciate it
one day when he's older
they sed will he be cripple?
Mr. Cummings sed no
why'd you bring me here
if you wanted that?
he pulled that fire up out of him
using the Bible words and the faith
it took about a hour or 2

they sed you could see it boil out
and then here come a word
on that boy's butt they hadn't saw
it spelled wart right there
where he'd backed up on the nameplate
on the stove but that was all
that was spelt on him
Mr. Cummings left that
scarred on his ast
that's how he got his name
he never even missed
a day of school and set down even
he was healed
that was a hell of a lot better
name than Wallace Garland
you ask me

worst was when the Baker boys
not Charley Baker's idiots
some different ones
got burnt in the lye pit
during pig killing
and soap making
had this big lye pit burning
kids playing pop the whip
so they could be in the way
while the people worked
Ralph Baker was on the end
of the line so they popped him
slung him off
he went right in that lye pit
lit on his back
burnt him from his heels
up the back his head
all his hair come off

his brother Dole
2 years oldern he was
walked in that pit
picked him up and carried him out
before the wormalen seen
started hollering
they run him in the house
torn the rest his clothes off

put him on a bed
that boy was hurt
nobody thought he'd live
one sez call the doctor
another sez do that but call
Mr. Cummings and Grace Nelson 1st
then the doctor after
they can pull that fire out

Grace Nelson she come right then
but they couldn't find him nowhere
she went right to work
I seen every bit of it
put her hands over that burn
never touched it
they had to hold Ralph down by then
took 4 of them to keep him still
she moved her hands over him
away from her like she's pushing
the fire off from him
blown on it
with her head right down
over her hands
I don't know how she stood the smell
it was bad 3 times
and when she done it
whispered the words
at 1st we couldn't hear
but it took all night
after awhile she whispered louder
then talked trying so hard
some say we shouldn't of heard
or she could lose the power
you can only give it to one other
I don't know but what she sed was

There came a angel
from the East
bringing frost and fire
In frost
out fire
In the name of the father
the son and the Holy Ghost

that's what she sed over and over
I didn't hear nothing else

doctor come sed my godamitey
that's a bad one
we gone have to take him
up to the capitol for a specialist
she sed not yet
I aint got it out or he'll die
and the doctor sed
yas I expect he will
that's too bad a burn
for him to live without a miracle
they worked on him
never give up

it was a hour or 2 later
bedroom door flung open
Mr. Cummings stood there
nobody ever got him
by the telephone we never known
how he found out about it
face all white
his eyes bugged out like a cow's
hollers get OUT of here
goddam you you aint welcome
popped our necks
we hadn't never heard him yell
or say such a thing
except his cousin
she never jumped or missed a breath
kept on whispering and healing

he talked to that fire
like it was a man cussing it
telling it to get the hell out of here
all night that room was crowded
with people trying to watch and help
nobody left and everybody sed
it was like they was a extra one
in that room you could count
I seen it too and I was only 12
back then in the corner
I never slept a minute that night
try to count the people
in there but it'd never come out the same
always one more

he called that fire every kind
of a sonofabitch
you can imagine all night
Grace Nelson kept on working
the wormen prayed
doctor did what he could
men stood back and watched
us kids set on the floor
by the wall till the sun come up

Mr. Cumming's face was as red
as hogblood
when he yelled Go
and don't never come back
he quit
him and his cousin had pulled
that fire out of that boy
doctor was as stupid as a duck
over it and couldn't believe it
they poured powder
for chapped ast from diaper rash on babies
to soak up the oil when it come up
that fire bubbled out of him
all night through that burnt skin
by morning they had it
up off his bone
where it would of killed him
it was only a burn
like you'd ironed him
with water blisters
that he could live over and not die
he did
not even scarred bad

they left him finally asleep
went in the other room
there was Dole who'd brung him
out of the fire
nobody'd remembered him
his feet was burnt black
Mr. Cummings sed oh no
why didn't somebody bring him in?
we never known they sed
is it too late?
he sed I don't know I hope not

him and Grace Nelson started over
but they couldn't get it all out
too much time had went by
it was in his bones

Dole's feet healed
but his toes wouldn't bend no more
when his feet grown after that
they grown right out
from under his toes
stuck up like peanuts
grown on top of his feet by summer
where he couldn't wear shoes
they finally had to cut them off
doctor sed he'd be cripple for life
wouldn't never walk
except like a goose and limp
they took him to Mr. Cummings
he sed that's a lie
big toe was on both feet
he sed he'll walk just fine
if that's what he wants to do
it's up to him and his business
they sed would he pray over him
he sed what's the matter with you
don't you know how?

he sed they could do it
as good as him
they didn't need his help for that

it worked
both boys made it
Ralph had to make up his school
Dole walked just fine
but couldn't jump too good
Ralph couldn't neither
so we figured that was
his daddy's fault by birth
they both driving bread trucks
to grocery stores for different companies
somewhere in Texas

that night

might of saved my life
I's burnt in a oil well fire
where they thought I might die
spent almost 4 months
in the hospital
where they sed if I didn't die
I'd be scarred for life
burnt all over and the rest
of the crew that was burnt died
except one and he killed hisself
cause of the burnt scars
all over him where
you couldn't tell who he was
in the bed I remembered
what they done that night
to them boys
practiced it on myself
called that fire all I could remember
and sed her words
blown on it and pushed it away
I lived and don't have
no bad scars that show
but that was a long time after

so when I worked at the cotton mill
when I's older
one day I give Mr. Cummings
a ride home in my car after work
he seen my hand on the steering wheel
sed how come you got them warts
all over you
don't you want them off?
I sed yas but I didn't know how
he sed when you get home
they'll be tinkling a little bit
you take and put some castoroil on
then you forget about it

I'd forgot he could do that
last year R. B. McCravey
give me a nickel and bought
3 of my warts off the other hand
he done that for Homer McCreary

where he had one on his ast
where he couldn't set down
in a bathtub and he thrown
his nickel under the rug
they went away but I spent mine
so they come back
if somebody buys your warts
keep the money so they'll stay gone

they went away like he sed
in about 2 weeks I never noticed
then they was all gone
he'd just take thanks
no money
and they never come back
where they was then
but now this one
it's in a different place
right between my fingers
and he's dead
I don't know where to go
they aint no more like him
and it's a dam shame
you caint find a healer now
when we really need them

Curley

Greater love hath no man than this,
that a man lay down his life for his friend.
John 15: 13

Town drunk for years
was Curley Robinson
2 years Fred Lister took over
till he ruint his liver and died
Curley got it back

he's a finish carpenter
when he felt like it
until he took his drinking serious
he'd put a door then in
it wasn't no way it looked like
you could walk through
standing up straight
he'd set there drunk monkeying
till it would close and lock

got in a terrible fight
front of the postoffice oncet with Fred
when they come for mail
sed whar you going?
othern sez what you say?
sed none of your business
well I aint ascared of you he sez
sed prove it you sonofabitch
swung on him
standing 5 foot apart
couldn't of reached each other
with a boat paddle
swinging like a tilterwhirl
Curley hit 3 times in a row
last one all the way back
went around fell on his ast
Fred dropped down on his knees
sed I had enuf
Curley sez you win I quit
Fred puked he's breathing so hard
Curley sez I'm too old to fight you
evertime you come up
I aint doin this no more

Fred sed I'm goin home
my wife can get the dam mail
from now on if you're still here
both set in the street
almost a half hour
getting their breath back
neither one hit the other once
so Curley got up finally
went off to find his car
whole crowd of people watching
went right by Mizrez Fortune
who was about 80 back then standing there
sed what you staring at you sonofabitch?
I don't know how Fred got home

he could save money
making his own beer at his house
in the garage and bathtub
he'd have a tasting party
didn't think it was polite
to drink by hisself
nobody else would much come
embarrassed of their reputation
so he'd go out back to the sheds
and drink with his pigs
specially this 1 hog
was his favorite
him and that spotted boar'd
get drunk on homemade beer
and fall down sometimes
he'd try to race him
drinking a bucket of it
but he never won

oncet drinking quart bottles
that boar'd learnt to hold it
in his mouth and tip up
like he's a man and swaller
so Curley tripped and dropt his
all spilt in the mud
he tried to get that boar's away
from him to get some of it back
before he drunk it all
you never heard such a squalling

and belling
leggo you fat sonofabitch that's mine
I want it he hollered
that boar hung on with his teeth
squolt like you stuck him
with a icepick in the neck
Curley had to bust a board
over his head to get it away
made that hog so mad
he torn his britches leg off
trying to get it back
he'd already drunk over half

this one other time
he never come home that night
for supper or bed
next morning his wife was scairt
thought he might of died
and wrecked the car
she calt the law
looked all over and put him
on the radio to see if somebody'd
fount him off dead
he's out back in the hog shed
where they seen him still past out
after dinner when they
took slops out
him and that boar drunk
laying there on top of each other
car was parked in the shade
the whole time
she never looked to see

he was making beer
in a shed out back in bottles
when he got the east wrong
sugar started working in the daylight
bottles blown all their lids off
beer spurted out on the dirt floor
they heard him in the house
hollering like he's caught hisself
in the tractor fanbelt
come out here he yelled get out here now
come running to see
if it was any blood

go get the boar he sed
get him and turn him out
he's down on his belly
slurping beer out of a dent
in the ground
hurry up and bring him goddammit
he sed it's a draining in
we caint let it all waste

Calvin

Doomed to be a short, fat man,
he dreamed himself sinewy lover,
Shakespeare of the Rodeo News.
Among lean brown men at the chutes,
he scrawled bull riding metaphors.
Cowboys spit just past his Tony Lamas,
jerked their hat brims down.
When a roper said, "Nice story
on that Tucson rodeo," Cal bought cigars,
drinks for the house,
dreamed of headlines.

At night in gray motel rooms,
he spurred the pain sunfishing in his gut,
wrote love sonnets, emptied bottles.
Every five years he'd mail
a sheaf of poems with no return address
to a writer he once knew;
give some to a girl he just met;
send them off to magazines.

One year, he turned up late
for the National Finals.
"Where you been?" the riders asked;
"You missed that last go-round."
He didn't answer, but the lean tan men
heard him that night. He told
loud, drunken, funny stories
from half the rodeos he'd seen,
seduced them into buying drinks for him,
recited poetry until his voice
whispered into silence.

Reading Cal's obituary, one cowboy
shook his head, spat gravely into dust.
"Dead before the booze wore off."
he said. "That's something."

A Poem About Fifty Dollars

Harry sits on his bed
in the Chieftain Hotel in Denver
as heat bangs in the radiators.
Outside, the cold air
breaks and breathes through cracks
along the window frame,
the sky knits grays and whites.
Harry drags on his cigarette
and studies the buildings and streets.
Then he counts his money:
fifty dollars--enough to leave town.

The stairs wheeze and crack
in the Chieftain, walls crumble.
The maid sports a pound of rouge.
The maid's important!

Rain and sleet slash the city
while Harry considers the window.
Two faces blind to its center:
one a brute; the other, conscience.

Harry plans to leave town tomorrow
but there are hours to deal with.
He bounces a cough off the wall,
scribbles faces on the fogged glass,
makes grenades for teeth.
He laughs as he erases the portraits
with his sleeve, then finally twists a beer.
Harry starts a letter.

Dear Brother:

 You hold grudges
like dogma. I am an asterisk
after a thousand page novel,
and I piss you off.

 Will be in town by week's end.

Harry

Out of the storm, Harry and the maid
sit in a bar drinking the fifty down.
Harry wishes he hadn't sent the letter.
Later, the stairs are torture.

Letters to Minnie in the Omaha Hospital #1

Wabash, Nebraska

May 5, 1920

Dear Mama,
I am writing you a letter
to see how you are getting along.
Your little chickens
are doing fine.
I counted five
since you left.
Sister likes to stay
with Aunt Frances.

Sometimes in the morning
when I get up
I am thinking
that we'll wake the baby up.
Papa shoots at the crow
every morning.
We are getting along
fine with chores.

We got done at six o'clock
last night and we were all
in bed when Papa called.
I was glad to hear
you were getting
along fine.

Mama, them turkey eggs
did not come yet.
I found about five dozen
eggs last night.
Papa shot a cat
for chasing chickens.
Kathleen Kiekler told me
to tell you hello.

That neighbor lady has not brought
them eggs for you.

Uncle Philip is going
to plant corn today.
I hope you will be better.
I wrote this in school for
I had a little time.
I hope this little letter
will please you.

The trees and flowers
are getting very green.
The grass is long
in our yard.
We had a fresh cow Saturday.
The little calf drinks fine.

I have a wren building in my bird-
house west of the house.
I have wore my overalls one
week to school and did not
get them dirty.

The apples, cherries, and plums
are in bloom.
I wish you were home.
I would like to
give you a May basket.

Your Son.

#2

Wabash, Nebraska
May 20, 1920

Dear Minnie,

I take the time to write you these few lines to inform you that we are getting along allright and that I am glad you are getting along so well.

I am through with corn planting, but if it keeps on raining as hard as it did yesterday afternoon I might have to plant again. I shure did rain.

I put out a big washing this morning, and then, came to town. I am writing this letter in Stanley's store so it will go out today, If you will make your preparations, I will come up Saturday and if everything is O.K. we will come home together.

I have planted some beans, some popcorn, some peanuts and the rest of the garden looks fine. Baby is getting fine and so are the Boys. We call up everyday or go over in the evening. Baby is always glad to see us.

Well, Minnie, I was glad to hear you had so much company then the time is not so slow. I will close for this time, hoping you keep on improving as you have been.

I remain,

Your loving husband.

Dust

The redheaded woman by the curtains
speaks in dust.
She searches for water, but dust
is a rain that falls.

She looks out on the wheat
where the sun marks its grave.
She rubs the ache of her armpits
with a rag. Her toes are
stubborn roots.

If she could see into the heart of the field
where her husband leans over
the ruin of his tractor,
she would call him back
to dream in her skin.

The hand he lifts
as if in farewell
she would meet with a silken vow.

She dreams of dust and cracked floors,
loose hairs like spiders on the sheets,
and steps to a bed
where their child sucks on his fists
for the secret streams.

Single Words

Lobster, rubberbanded claws
held in place
in a too-narrow pot, swims
in the vise
of heat
and of water:

What it is is
fear
that my hands
will betray me
sooner or later,

And it reduces
thoughts to single words
clamped
between the hemispheres of my ripe
and boiling brain--

sooner
or
later--

This is me
locked
in marriage
to you, my German girl,

Fear
that my hands
will burst open
sooner or later....

I Pray the Lord

After another fight
with mother,
Father does the Texas two-step
with my baby sister,

He holds my sister tight
and glides across the carpet,
and He is always right
and his step is sure:

One long step followed by two quick
shorter ones in the livingroom
as mother locks herself in the
back bedroom again with a cold washcloth

to cover her face,
He dances with her to the music,

Martha and the Vandellas, he tells me,
from the '60's,
but I notice the dance is too slow
for the pace of "Heatwave";
and when I tell him,
he says it doesn't matter,

Nearly seven years old,
I want my father to finish his dancing
and take me to the pool
this summer day

so I can dive deep
into chlorinated water
where, I pray the Lord, there are no sounds,
where, before it is too late, I can be momentarily blind,

But he tells me I must wait
just a little longer
then turns the volume up
until it fills the whole
of our small house.

While Father in the Hospital Re-imagines His Hand

the salesman sells mother a garage full
of feed. Dust puffs from the sacks.
The noses after her business
gnaw at bags. Every complaint
grows fur and a tail.
Loneliness makes its holes.
Squeaks in the house at night
move to the garage, turn into mice
grinding through the sacks.
The small bones of their marriage
scamper across them.

She throws up her arms when she sees
the mounds of feed.
The salesman speaks quietly,
says he wanted her to have
the soft fur of security, a tail
to hold onto while her husband is away.
He says he feels trapped into
taking the feed back.
He asks for a little money,
turns his sharp face back and forth
as he loads the trucks with sacks.

The Ascension of Sandy's Drive-In

It swirled up from its lot.
Employees had buffed bins,
refrigerators to the finest hum,
shined dispensers, milk coolers.

For months mop boys vied
for visions in the waxed floors.

Fry cooks witnessed
about some Great Rejuvenator
as they hooked tubes to vats,
at breaks read cryptic bibles
about burgers,
releasing souls of cattle
at the grill.

Mothers counted how
their buoyant daughters
turned celestial,
found memos in pockets:
"No hands consort
with palms when making change."

Woody, smiling too much,
chanted over register scrolls
to a higher Sandy
as girls returned after work.
When they could have been dancing,
brandishing high heels
at all the dull senses
under the skin,
they hung around Sandy's,
cleaning tentacles
of breath from the place
to dip and whorl,
dreamy as dairy queen.

Imperfect Bounty

The curved sidewalk takes the cedars by surprise,
new snow drops from their branches.

At midwinter the farmhouse breaks its vows,
drinks watered-down light, sings,
extends bare shoulders above collapsed vines.

The season is celebrated for its flaws:

the steel ruts in the road,
the frozen windmill,
the sloppy harvest which left clasps
of yellow in the cornfield,
the dead sparrow by the porch,
the jars of fruit gone bad in the cellar.

It is this imperfect bounty,
the sad amazements,
the dark mystical beauty of doubt
that is commemorated by the long shadows
and the earth's dance through space.

Fire-Fighting Practice

I stand at the edge of the ashes.
Wind stirs them.
In the distance I see the turned earth
of prairie dogs
and the canyon stretching
its constant arc,
a view the barn hid for a hundred years.
I look down
at charred beams, twists of wire,
the tines of a pitchfork.
Collapsing, it was offered
to volunteer fire-fighters
who came from the station in town
and nudged flames toward theory.
And waited
for the moment of cross-over,
when the future can't be called back.
As ancient textures
disappeared,
hoses were strung
with the huff and grunt
of procedures,
the puzzled water unable
to account for the quarrel.
When the fire was out
dust followed the trucks back to town.
Singed weeds sway.
As a boy I watched horses
shuffle in the stalls
and sand the feedboxes smooth
with their chins,
I measured my courage by the creaks
of the ladder to the loft,
and in the granary I knew the difference
between a strip of harness
and the tail of a rat.
Now at the edge of the ashes
the land is open again.
In the distance I see the turned earth
of prairie dogs
and the canyon stretching
its constant arc.

Builders of the Oedipus Complex

I watch them shiver
in insulated coveralls
and purple, hooded sweats.
They fight cracked lips
and tingling fingers.

I feel for them
when it's cold
and their breath
plumes
like diesel smoke.

I know every slap
that comes from
folded paychecks
at the banker's
warm window.

They write home
and forget to
mention
growing a beard
and the drinking
until dawn among
empty milk cartons
and religious girlfriends.

Second of the Month

U aren't my landlord.
He's a fat grungy man
smoking a wet cigar.
Someone who watches
gameshows all day
and uses my rent
for beer and dog food.

I know the sound of
that squeaky foreign car
and that special
Rap, Rap, Rap,
that says, "Open up,
I own this place."

It's a monthly lease,
and U don't care.
u're a brave
Son-of-a-Bitch
coming here when the
water heater doesn't work.

i watch your tie dangle
and I think of
strip searches,
prisons,
and my mother's reputation
so i let it dangle.

U are the excuse
i give for
bounced checks,
cockroaches,
and cold showers.

I want to insult u.
Dehumanise u.
Sleep with your wife
no matter how ugly
SHE could be.

But i have a mission.
A dream of a high place
where I can crush people
like u with my smallest toe.
And You. u?
U will always be
just a landlord.

Ten Pins of Life

You offer fragments
that say,
"Try harder,"

But look closer.

I have a snotrag
and an eight pound
bowling ball
with a chip
near the thumb-hole.

These are the tools
I was given.

AND I ROLL.
And I Roll.
and i roll.

But all the good lanes
have been taken
and mine is
slanted
toward the gutter.

So I sit
on the curb
and wipe
my nose.

**In a Motel Room
Somewhere in Western Nebraska**

Through the large window
I can see clearly too many stars
to be clearly taken in.
So many nights in this distant life
have I tried to sort out to understand
what can neither be sorted out
nor understood.

As a Tenderfoot, for example,
I lay on a pallet of blanket and bunchgrass
studying the stars, the campfire
a torrid and fallen moon, the scoutmaster
in his puptent snoring. I fell asleep at last
empty-handed, in the outer space of mind I
reached no conclusion.

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

Later, as an Eagle, I ascended no higher
than the ground I stood on.
Except to wonder, as tonight I wonder,
about the backdrop that makes the glory possible:
the darkness beyond the stars,
the batter in the bottom of the beautiful ninth,
two gone, the count at two and two,
going, as they say the earth and the heavens go,
all the way around.

Raising Rabbits

Partly a mission of mercy,
part otherwise.

When the money rolls in
I'll use a portion
to redeem my parent's
faltering marriage,
another portion to bring
my sister home, the rest
for items too personal
to be mentioned here.

So in front of a jerrybuilt hutch
I watch my buddy Carlos' buck
hump like something
almost mechanical
my only doe. O life is not
really such a shitass, after all,
not for the lad who knows his
p's and q's, not for the puncher
who knows how to punch
when his spine goes flat
against the wall.

But the litter, so warm, so
animate at dusk,
lies gnawed and bloody, half-eaten,
in the morning's light. And
that's it, buckaroo, that's
enough--just another
bird-brained scheme
too lame to hold the world
together or to make
this piss-poor boy even
halfway flush. Because

I can't shake off what
I can't take hold of--
doe with its young
drooling as if saliva thick and
crimson from her mouth,
not to mention that
meager goddam difference
between the pellets for which
I sacrificed my Saturday nights
to feed her
and what comes out.

Killing Time in Jobie's and Toby's Bar in Platteville, Wisconsin

--for Kevin Boatright

Over my right shoulder
John Wayne big almost as life
watches every move I make.

Now picture this:
a wino with no teeth
gumming wine.

And this:
at the pool table a man
with crawdads in his beard
scratching on the 8-ball.

So, the woman beside me says,
speaking to the woman beside her,
what's the glue holding your
marriage together?

On a wide screen,
with the sound turned down,
two Homo sapiens move deep
into a living-color kiss.

Sex and yard work,
says the other woman.

It's a crazy hill town, all right,
plenty of hill-town men,
plenty of hill-town women.

He's a bachelor, yes,
says a voice from nowhere,
but he has air-conditioning.

Meanwhile, in another country,
a catfish high on hope
half swims, half crawls
into the murky mainstream
of East Dubuque.

Waitress

She's the one from my long-neglected
Trilogy of the Lost
I most remember,

the one whose face, given
half a chance,
might sour milk,

and I confess that at first glance
I covered my cup
with my left hand

until the steam
became too much
for skin to bear--and

when I raised the hand
how the steam
obscured to dignify the face:

that, and what I
came to realize morning
into morning: white teeth

of her crooked smile,
swift motion
of a milk-white apron, fist

pale with its vessel of drug
like the warm dependency
I dream of

always there. Until
one morning it wasn't,
in its place what I had nothing

better to do than to notice,
myself in a mirror
behind a shelf of tobacco

and blades and candy,
between us nothing to obscure us
into dignity, half of us gone

to God knows where, that other half
deep in a field
of way leading on to way,

and every now and then, at its oddest
hour, unable
not to remember.

Snowstorm, Late October

Jesus did the unexpected:

Satan's holiday got canceled.

--letter to the editor

Green maple leaves go ashen as fall temperatures
take a dive. On campus, a Bobcat backs up,
makes another angry swipe at stuck-down sleet,
the grounds crew tired and cold, once again
pawns in some nature power-game. Is it good,

or evil? Jesus has gone and done the unexpected--
school called off, young adults turning to mischief--
dorm rooms flowing now with cheer. Hallelujah!
Halloween only temporarily postponed, certain
to rise again from the depths of its underworld.

Down in the heating plant gnomes adjust the gauges,
spewing heat from the belly of the boiler to far, far
corners. Carved pumpkins smile their crooked teeth
into snowland, young ghosts and goblins count the days.
Satan's holiday? Alive and well. Branches moan and

creak in the wind. Across town, my mother
shivering shuts doors to unused rooms. Nothing I say
can ease her rattled mind. Tonight I'll see her
hiding in the basement with lights out, faith
going bewitched, wondering into the dark.

Bike Ride

In the narrow band of dusk
I ride away from duty
toward the city bike path,
pockets of cool air
lifting the blanket of summer,

and suddenly I'm afloat
on balloon tires
taking the county dirt road,
feet propped on the handlebars,
eyes clamped tight, it's a

Look Ma! No Hands!
kind of night
going down,
down past the cornfields, milo,
down to the Bell Creek bridge

with its rickety boards;
and if I make the hump,
veer to the left to avoid
the rotten planks, I'm in:
survivor, member of that rare club

that stays upright,
starts the upward climb
over and over again.
If not...

Love One Another

was all
J.C. ever wanted
but somehow
when I was growing up
Presbyterian
back in Burt County,
His message
got jammed, got choked on
Blacks,
whome we did not have
and Jews,
who made money selling clothes.
Suspicious.
We went to church every Sunday.
Indians
remained liquored and lazy on the
reservation.
In 8th grade, Mother forbade me a
Japanese
penpal, saying they annihilated Americans.
Perfect
attendance got me a Sunday school pin.
Love One Another,
but not, my brother was warned, a Catholic girl,
straw
that snapped the string at this blind follower's
back.

At Roundwind, Late Summer

This prairie, mounded with glacial rock,
stands silent and dry against a flat sky,
quartzite bluffs rising bold above a broad valley,

everything as far as we can see speaking
for itself: rural, immoveable.

Same as the folks, meanwhile, who have gathered,
Manfred himself sparkling--*have some of these
tomatoes, they came out of my garden*--the genuine

article, ripe and juicy, the essence of sunshine,
soil and seed from the earth of S.W. Minnesota.

And happy we are, too: food and drink too plentiful
to be completely consumed, as is the night--its talk
and readings and music lasting just long enough

to wish for more--then moonrise, the Milky Way,
the unbroken silence of the stars, and ah--

the sweet beginnings of your Northern Lights.

Father Poem

neighbor Ted
yells again
at his brown-eyed girls
to Get down
Stop running
Get out of my life

grueling job?
tight underwear?
always it seems
he's having
even on weekends
a Bad Day

I want to yell back
Lighten up
For chissake
they're only little girls
they're only playing
little girls grow up

I want to tell him
of my own sweet dad
how he once held me
his little girl
who had a little curl
how I looked up to him

never scolded
instead taught me
so many
Important Things
like how to laugh
how to love

trees
birds
stars
the land

men
women
how he made all
the difference

Burt County, 1957

When my brother tells me
I'll soon die if I don't stop
clearing my throat I'm a goner.

Imagine yourself age eight paralyzed
to the burning mattress of fear,
a lump the size of Kansas rising
just south of your throat, lodging
there for the duration of the summer.

Long after his breathing from the cot
goes steady, his jaw in the dim light
deadly serious, I shift on my screen--
porch mattress, wide awake, the air
meanwhile a muggy absence of sound.

My brother in his stupid wisdom
has told me even more than he knows
and thirty years later I'll remember:
how we all stare into the same darkness;

the sooner we accept it, the sooner
these restless bodies can sleep.

**Sopia Starling Sees Figures in the Snow,
Colorado Territory, 1874**

We had pushed the horses
through withers-high drifts all day,
hands numb with blue-brittle cold.
Mr. Sprockett cursed the snow
that could slide away;
the smashed carrion of our bodies
feasts for grizzlies in spring.

I had to get to Denver
to meet the train for New York,
or forfeit my fare paid in advance,
and then the ship back to England.
We floundered--trout thrashing in a creel--
dusk a deepening crimson: sure death
unless we found a shack, a ranch outpost;
but with night descending, we could ride
within ten feet, and never see it.

Eyebrows stitched with frost,
I spied two trekkers plunge and rise;
faces pale as sails of abandoned ships.
They laboured under packs,
passed us without a word.
The sky was smudging into layers of ash.
Wind spat stray flakes at my face;
those two travelers had disappeared.

"Did you see?" I gasped.
He nodded, my impatience a flame.
"Do you know them?" I snapped.
"Us," his voice barked like a shot,
"if we don't find that cabin fast."
Fear danced down my spine;
the sun was sinking like a ship.
Then I saw them on the snow-bank,
the shack a dark square beside them.

"John!" I stabbed with a forefinger.
We urged the horses toward the shelter,
no else in sight; no other footprints
tamped down in the snow drifted
half-way up the one oil-skinned window.
I took those visitors for a sign
I need not fret about consequences
if our bodies merged one last time.

**John Sprockett, Colorado Territory,
to Sopia Starling in England, Late 1874**

Dear Sophie,

The takings've been good this year,
beaver and fox traipsing into my traps,
begging to be turned into ladies' coats.
I could have one stitched for you,
pretty as the stars that night snow finally
stopped falling hard as shattered glass.
To send it would make me feel
you were still cuffing me,
making me recite the poems I learned
without bothering to try--
my one talent that's got nothing
to do with killing.

I've not been altogether good:
some bully-boy said you were too generous,
only he didn't put it that nice.
I grabbed him and a whiskey bottle both;
the two naturally colliding.
He went for his gun, and I for mine.
His blood-blind shot killed a whore.

"What if she were Sophie?" I thought
as she died in my arms.
It took four trappers to keep me
from putting a bullet into my skull,
kicking that dead slanderer's head in
while I howled like a Cheyenne brave
that's disgraced himself in battle.
Everyone swore it was a matter of honor,
still, I see her cloudy eyes staring up,
hear her mutter about wind in her hair
on a beach one clean morning,
a boy named Charlie, his lips salty.

I warned you I was no damn good,
your company the only thing that kept me
from murdering one-half the territory,
accidentally killing the other.

Willie Leeson Awaits Trial for the Murder of John Sprockett, Gold Creek, Colorado Territory, 1877

I done it, and not even jerking on a rope
like a spider over a flaring hearth
can keep men from saying I killed Sprockett!
If he hadn't slapped me in full view
of snickering saloon whores
and told me to "leave gunplay to grown men,"
I wouldn't be waiting trial,
so I got to thank his discourtesy
for making me immortal.

"Not that we're not grateful to you,"
Sheriff Casey spat a squished scorpion of chaw,
"for getting rid of that murdering horror,
but we can't have boys killing white men
over a slap in the face and a good joke.

I'd waited for Sprockett in Smith's Livery.
"Sprockett!" I shouted, my first shot winged him.
More shocked than hurt, he called,
"You'll have to do better, friend,"
but I spun him like a tumbleweed,
sent him down like a calf resigned to the iron,
his head buried in straw and horse shit,
heaving like a sow in a breach-birth.
I put four more right into his chest.

Still, he took Satan's own time to die.
If I hadn't been anxious to make sure
I would've heard Casey, drawn by the shots.
But he had his .44 to my head,
my Colt arm in a hammerlock.
"See Sprockett gets a decent burial," I smiled,
"and reserve a generous plot for yourself."
Then Casey cold-cocked me, the joke on him,
having to haul me on his jellied shoulders.

Time drags like sleeping lizards
while I wait on the circuit rider,
but one dime novelist's already taken
my life history. I thanked him,
pocketed his cigar for politeness.
"My boy," he sang friendly as an angel. "Thank you!"

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