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A LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

DEAR READERS:

We are pleased to present the newest incarnation of the *Nebraska Territory*, a review of literature from and about the Northern Plains. Our purpose is two-fold. First and foremost, we want to promote the works of plains writers. Contrary to some critical theory, we believe that regional literature has merit and universal value. Second, we want to provide a forum for discussion about these works. If you disagree with the notions of a reviewer, we welcome, and will print, your alternative opinion. We want to know what you think about the works themselves as well as our magazine.

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

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

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

Thank you for your readership and your thoughts.

Marian Vogel, Editor

IF YOU HAVE COMMENTS OR LETTERS, OR WISH FOR YOUR NAME TO BE ADDED TO OUR
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Prairie Air Show

Steven P. Schneider

Hurakan Press, 2000

32 pp. \$3.00/paper

Many years ago, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Nebraska, a friend and I drove to Denver to interview Thomas Hornsby Ferril. It was my first interview, and what I chiefly remember about it, aside from my nervousness beforehand and my enjoyment of the give-and-take of the interview itself, is Ferril's remark that as a poet of the mountains, he had to face up to the challenge of the beautiful scenery that surrounded him – that the mountains seemed to dictate his subject matter, and that was something he had to deal with in his poetry. Ferril managed to deal with that challenge very well indeed, but his remark has always stayed with me. The plains environment of Nebraska presents a poet with no less of a challenge, it seems to me. The endless sky, the incessant wind, the alternately flat and rolling terrain confront the poet with the same basic challenge: to incorporate them into his work while at the same time seeing them afresh. The dialog between poet and place is immediate, here, and necessary.

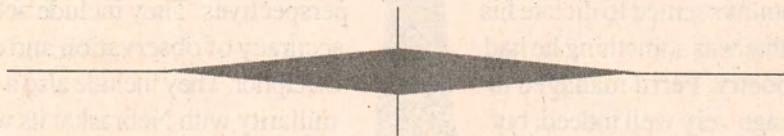
Steven P. Schneider is a transplanted Nebraskan, but he has recognized and taken on this native challenge in his chapbook *Prairie Air Show*. The book contains twenty-two poems whose formal presentation ranges from the relaxed meters and slant rhymes of a nonce Spenserian sonnet, "Spring Storms," to the loose blank verse mixed with free verse of such pieces as "Prayer/Bird-Song" and "Happiness/Spirit." The mix is a successful one largely, I think, because of the intensity of vision Schneider brings to bear upon his subjects; at no time does one get

a sense of the poet saying, "Look at all the forms I'm in command of." Rather, one has the feeling that Schneider has chosen each form because it is perfectly suited to his subject and the tenor of what he has to say about it.

It is difficult to summarize this slender volume's various riches, but I savored them as I read the poems. They include an eye always on the subject and a quiet voice capable of modulating to handle the poet's changing moods and perspectives. They include accuracy as well – accuracy of observation and of aptly applied metaphor. They include also a considerable familiarity with Nebraska: its weather, its flora and fauna. They include an openness to new experience, which is necessary if a poet is to grow – indeed, if he is ever to do anything except write the same poem over and over. They include...well, I leave it to the reader to sit down with the book and make his or her own list.

Several of the poems particularly stand out. "Comings and Goings, Early July" is a two-stepped free verse piece with a persistent, quiet lyricism. "Garden Buddha" balances its unrhymed tercets with occasional interior rhyme, end-rhyming only in the couplet it concludes with: "when the gold fireflies of evening are lit/ the Buddha is unflinching, content to sit." The collection's title poem has a masterful ring to it, and I think these two-stepped poems and the three in loose blank verse/ free verse, show Schneider at his best. Earlier I mentioned two of these latter poems; the third, "Signs," seems to me the very best poem in the book, so good that it needs to be quoted entire:

*The ash tree out front is leafless,
The currant bush out back but a few tattered bronze flags.
The raspberry brambles have been picked of their fruit.
The maple's red leaves raked and bagged.
I walk the perimeter looking for signs.
The sky is empty of geese.
Yet the sun lights up this last October day of the century.
The crickets sing in the picked-over mint.
The rhubarb puts forth new leaves.
Purple clematis flowers on the vine still climbing the deck.
If this world is a cloak for the lowest ring of holiness,
I must hug the spotted and browning leaves of the grapevine.
I must get down on my knees with the grass.*



I marvel at how easily the poet moves from the observable to the spiritual in that third line from the end, and at how quickly he returns to the immediacy of the world around him. That is what Schneider characteristically does in this book. He

looks long and steadily at the world around him, and now and then pulls back the cloak to reveal to us "the lowest rung of holiness."

Roy Scheele, Lincoln

In the Garden of the Midnight Sun

Jason Ranek

Lone Willow Press, 1999

47 pp. \$7.95/paper

In his collection *In the Garden of the Midnight Sun*, Jason Ranek has created musical paintings with words. His words roll off the tongue like moonlit water, quenching a reader thirsty for imagery and music. Ranek's poems are deeply visual and his passion for nature comes through clearly.

In "Astounded Into Song," like in many of his poems, images of water and moon splash happily through the lines:

*Your voice astounded moonlight into song
about the sun. She sings it as a bell
would sing, or like an ancient temple gong
would ring to tell the worshippers to fall.*

Ranek has written a love poem in fresh language without cavity-causing sweetness. Witness this excerpt from "What Northern Men Need:"

*I need your mouth like water
needs the moon and midnight
sun to break the horses
of its tides. I need your eyes.*

In "Learning to Live Alone," Ranek praises the curative powers of the blues:

*A record of Blind Willie Johnson singing
"Dark Was the Night" will help. Old guitar steel
held in the arthritic hands of ancient bluesmen
has ways of recomposing even silence
into prayer. Their battered, beat up songs
prove time can only be a threat when measured*

Ranek's lyrical use of words is evident in "Morning On Nottoroy Island:"

*The pebbled beach is wet with music written
and conducted by the moon: the cupped-palm slap
of water on stone, percussion
of boat hulls knocking in a cusp of breeze.*

Ranek is refreshing and natural. I eagerly await more.

Scott McIntosh, Wayne State College

The Plain Sense of Things: Eight Poets from Outstate Nebraska

Edited by Mark Sanders

Sandhills Press, 1997

56pp. \$5.00/paper

According to Sanders' Back-Word, he compiled the collection of poems in *The Plain Sense of Things* as part of his larger agenda to publish Nebraska writers. In general, he believes in Nebraska writers' works, poetics, and their home ground. In particular, he chose to publish the works of J.V. Brummels, Shirley Buettner, Neil Harrison, Larry Holland, Mark Sanders, Barbara Schmitz, Don Welch, and Kathleene West because they "put their roots deep into Nebraska's rich soil."

The collection is well organized, with the works of Brummels and West, one who stayed and one who didn't, beginning and ending it. Brummels' "Plain" and West's "The Poet Becomes a Homesteader" evoke a sense of how vast the land is and how minuscule the inhabitants of it sometimes appear or feel. This motif recurs so much in the collection that the reader often surmises that humility must come easy to people of the Plains. The poems in between the first and last seem to open naturally to the succeeding ones and evoke the "spare beauty" of Nebraska, curse or bless the weather, and above all, show the ability of men and women of the plains to "endure" and "lean into" daily life and adversity without complaint.

Brummels' "Plain" provides a kind of history of the region, using the past tense in the first five verses to depict the discovery and the cost of settling the land and the present tense in the last verse to show the benefits and the continuing costs of settling. The poem suggests that one of those costs is losing sight of the fullness of the land and "domed sky" in the rush to "square the corners" of a dwelling, plow "furrows straight as bullets" and find the "corners of our claims."

"The One or the Other," also by Brummels, de-

picts the limited nature of choices, "It's show up late for work or speed on ice...", "...live or...die," "whore or...love," "my dad's limp towards me or my son's quick run away." Maybe "Everything has its price," or maybe:

*Before matter breathed
only energy awaiting a name
roamed the void,
and all enhancement
trailing it down through time
is only riffs
on that profound groan.*

At the conclusion of the poem, the narrator suggests the appropriate response to all of the above: ignore the limitations and defy the odds. At the salaried he says:

*What the hell. I choose
the last of a string of tall colts,
a gray. I give the man
my number and my money.
I take my chances
on a horse I name Red Jack.*

Brummels is similarly, but more seriously, philosophical in "Sun Catchers." I won't attempt to "square its corners" and thereby ruin it, but in its subject and poetics (about which Brummels knows much and practices unobtrusively), it is as perfect and as perfectly satisfying as Shakespeare's Sonnet 73.

Other notable poems in a collection of notable poems include "The Sandhills Night," by Neil Harrison, "Dance Contest," by Barbara Schmitz

("Test" is a good poem, but with a great deal of hesitation I add it would be better without the last line), "Funeral at Ansley" and "Nebraska" by Don Welch, and "Hollyhocks" by Kathleene West.

Sanders writes that in publishing the collection he took a risk because some might think the work is "provincial" or denigrate it because of "where it came

from." I hope he was wrong. Any 52-page collection with the percentage of excellent poems this one has ought not to be a publishing risk.

Jo Taylor
Guaynabo, Peru

A New York Scene

*That night on the Brooklyn Bridge
you said that hip hop
was an absolute intricate aspect
of American poetry
prophesised by Yeats'
crazy ass
double helix time line.*

*I smiled and looked over
the East River,
"What, me worry?"*

-Dade Johnson

NEBRASKA TERRITORY

Death of a Regional Poet: Canto One

Main-Traveled Roads, 1996
27pp. \$5.00/paper

Kathleene West

Kathleene West's long poem covers a stretch of time and territory in mock tempo to Byron's epic satire *Don Juan*. West subtitles her long poem "Canto One"; indeed if we are to expect 15 more Cantos to equal Byron's output, we have a fur piece to go and a lot more scanning to do. Just as Byron's "Ottava Rima" works on half and false rhymes in English, so too does West's brand of regional Mid-American require a stretch of the tongue in order to get the sounds to come out right (or wrong as the case may be). For example, Stanza III (of the total XLVI) sets up the tonal challenge of making "phonics," "Elusive Minx," and "Trail Mix" into a parodic "Rima." It's a laryngeal stretch to say the least. And the poetic journey West has just begun.

West memorializes Nebraska's prairie landscape in irregular stretches that pan out with awesome irregularities on the horizon of the life of her heroine in

a schoolbus hurdling the bumps of poetic terror in Nebraska territory. Cataloging famous Nebraskans like Buffalo Bill and Bob Kerry, West sets her heroine (named Alpha as all good beginnings would have it) among them—a meteoric rise and fall in the political landscape, Alpha shooting through the prairie universe to stardom. As West reminds us, there is also Henry Fonda to be reckoned with, as well as the literary constellation of Sandoz, Neihardt and Cather. And so it goes on this belabored Romantic stretch of landscape that is no Grasmere, but merely grass. And you'll find West there, just like Whitman. So look for Kathleene's second Canto which will tell of Alpha's arrival at the "Town School" where she learns "sophistication and wit." And we, the readers, wouldn't miss a line of it.

She'll be riding six white horses when she comes.

William Slaymaker,
Wayne State College

Disciples of an Uncertain Season

Larry Holland

Up The Creek Publishing, 1998
46 pp.

The poems in this collection by Larry Holland deal with the harsh realities of life and with some of the grim realities in the death of family, pets, and ways of life. He puts down the difficult questions handed to those who are left behind. Holland writes about his experiences as a child through the eyes of a child, and he gives witness to the rites of his passage to the elder side of the world he loved.

Holland's poems are not about just the beauty of the prairie grass, but of what is buried beneath the

prairie. They are about the Nebraska sandhills, the wildlife, the tame life, and about the people who live on it and love it as much as he did. His poems hit you hard in the heart.

The words make you shake your head, nod your head, smile, or cry, and sometimes you do it all, as they speak to you with the unvarnished truth of life and death.

Mary Maas, Stanton

NEBRASKA TERRITORY

The Return of Little Big Man: A Novel

Thomas Berger

New York: Little, Brown, and Co., 1999
432 pp. \$25.00/cloth

Ah, yes, the return of Little Big Man. In order to accomplish this return, Thomas Berger has to raise Jack Crabb from the dead, and to do that, he must kill off Ralph Fielding Snell, the "editor" of Jack Crabb's life story in the 1964 *Little Big Man*.

We learn in the Prologue of *The Return* that Jack Crabb is still alive, just turning 112 years old. He'd been 111 years old when he spoke the story of his early years into a tape recorder for Ralph Fielding Snell, a writer who, thanks to a stipend from his rich father, could pursue esoteric topics for his pen. But Jack Crabb now tells us that after he finished recounting for Snell the Little Bighorn fight, he was "struck by the feeling that the son of a bitch intended to squeeze me dry of every incident in my entire long life before beginning his book or books . . . or paying me one red cent" (x). So, with the complicitousness of Teague, the psychiatrist in charge of Jack Crabb, they fake Crabb's death to fool Snell—Crabb staying "holed up in the room where they had the TV set" watching movies while Snell attends the fake funeral (xiii). Now Crabb is free to continue his memoirs, again speaking into the tape recorder that Snell conveniently left behind. Crabb picks up after the "so-called" Battle of the Little Bighorn and the death of Old Lodge Skins, continuing on for 432 more pages ostensibly covering the next twenty-five years or so of his life. He tells us that if we want to know about his early life, "go find Snell" (xiv). Under the asterisk at that phrase, we find: "EDITOR'S NOTE: the late Ralph Fielding Snell published the reminiscences of Jack Crabb's

early life under the title *Little Big Man*, in 1964" (xiv). Thus we learn that Snell has died and Jack Crabb lives.

In 1964 *Little Big Man* was fresh, funny, idiosyncratic, irreverent, and irresistible. The US was facing the rapid acceleration of the war in Vietnam; the American public was restless, its members challenging (or being challenged in) established pieties in every form. *Little Big Man* gave us a Cheyenne-world-alternative; it gave us Old Lodge Skins, a wise leader unabashed by deviations and disasters, unashamed of his own flaws and desires—the wisest man Jack Crabb could ever imagine knowing and undoubtedly the wisest man he would ever know. Snell, as Crabb's amanuensis, overcomes his own surprise, skepticism, and inhibiting "modern" ideas as he comes to believe Crabb's story of his participation in historical events; and though Snell tells us that he is transcribing Crabb's narration "literally from the tapes," only trying with punctuation to "indicate the breathless rush in which these passages emerged from the speaker," there is still a sense of Snell participating in the enthusiasm, awe, and freshness of experience that characterizes the tone of that novel. A Reader is created also—a participant through Snell in the whole incredible project of believing Jack Crabb, gallant adventurer and irrepressible raconteur.

Alas, the fresh, the new, the unique disappear in any sequel. There is no wise and funny character equal to the cosmic proportions of Old Lodge Skins in the new novel. We have, maybe, Amanda Teasdale, feminist and feminine, who recurs throughout this

period of Crabb's life and eventually consents, at the end of the narration, to live with him after she's lived with Sitting Bull; but she does not have the transcendent charisma of Old Lodge Skins.

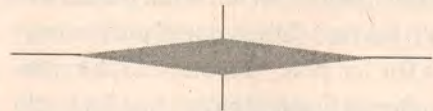
Even narrative logic has been abandoned in *The Return*. Snell tells us in his "Foreward by a Man of Letters" that "a decade has passed since Jack Crabb spoke into my machine," even though "Jack Crabb himself passed on" shortly after narrating Old Lodge Skins's death. Apparently Crabb used the abandoned tape recorder for some time, but we are never told why he ended when he did, how the tapes came to be transcribed and published, or who the "Editor" of the new book is. Since Snell's participation in the original conceit was crucial and trained us to be readers of the act of reading and text-makers among text-making, that conceit is sorely missed.

And what of Thomas Berger in the last thirty-five years? We might ask what successes, failures, disappointments, betrayals, and accomplishments does he bring to the writing of *The Return*? Would these considerations account for the more bitter tone, the scheming and contriving egocentric narrator alone in his room under the care of a psychiatrist/"alienist," and the death of Snell?

At any rate, Jack Crabb now tells us of his acquaintance and adventures with Wild Bill Hickok, Colorado Charley Utter, Jack McCall, and other denizens of Deadwood and with Bat Masterson, Doc Holliday, Wyatt Earp and brothers, and Jim Kennedy of Dodge. After those famous shooting sprees, Crabb gets involved in "educating Indians to be white people" at an Indian boarding school (89). Having to leave the boarding school in disgrace (he climbs out a window with no pants on), Crabb eventually joins up with Buffalo Bill Cody and his Wild West show (detouring first through Tombstone in 1881). Meeting up with Buffalo Bill in North Platte, Nebraska Crabb tells us that:

the interesting thing about Cody's optimism is that it generally started

out sounding like exaggeration, but when it was applied to entertainment it usually proved to be on the modest side. He thought his blow-out for the Fourth of July would attract maybe a hundred contestants. Instead, more than a thousand showed up. . . most everybody else living at the time in western Nebraska, northeastern Colorado, and upper Kansas. . . so in fact the local merchants did turn out to have invested in a successful venture, with what the visitors ate and drank and bought in North Platte. And [Crabb, of course] had a part in this. (198)



Crabb tours France, England, Germany, Italy, Scotland, and the Chicago's World Fair with B.B.W.W. which included Sitting Bull and Annie Oakley at various times among the performers. They meet Zulu warriors, Queen Victoria, Prince Albert and other heads of state. Crabb says, "Speaking of Indians, who would turn up in Paris but Black Elk, one of them Sioux who, if you recall, missed the returning boat to the U.S.A. the year before and was stranded in England"—Black Elk now in a hurry to get home to his Ma (321).

Crabb spends perhaps half the book telling of his travels and experiences with Buffalo Bill, and at one point he wants to:

clear up Cody's position on Indians, who as I say he greatly liked and genuinely befriended, and as I hope I have shown, they returned the favor. So how could he represent them in the show as being pretty

much the same ruthless devils as those who hated them thought they was? This is tricky, or again maybe it's real simple: underneath all the flag-waving, Bill really did love his country and believed he was showing nothing but its true history, and now . . . Indians was Americans too and could take pride in the result. . . . And in later years, when the motion pictures showed the U.S. Cavalry ride in to save outnumbered whites about to be massacred, I know for a fact that Indian-reservation audiences might cheer - if you want to take that as confirmation of his point. (397-98)

Who wants to be told these days that Indians cheered for the Cavalry and loved being in Buffalo Bill's show so that "civilization as well as show business" could be furthered (397)? Indians (and readers) are neither stupid nor childish. The possibility that Crabb or Berger is seriously critiquing the American historical mythos with irony is too tenuous to be effective. It's true that *The Return* includes strong women in the Amanda Teasdale, Jane Addams, Annie Oakley, and Libbie Custer characters, but cultural and gender dynamics are too complex and readers too sophisticated these days to get our history through crabby Jack Crabb as we might once have been willing to in 1964.

Gretchen Ronnow,
Wayne State College

From the Dead Before

Clif Mason

Lone Willow Press, 2000

36 pp. \$7.95/paper

The poems in Clif Mason's chapbook *From the Dead Before* are carefully written and structured. The collection includes several sonnets, some of which are tributes to past writers such as Emily Bronte. The poetry is serious and piercing – no tomfoolery here – just a straightforward look at the nature of life and death. On one page you can read “At the AIDS Candlelight Memorial Service” and the following poem is a sonnet called “At the Graves of Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane Cannery.” There is a lot of ground covered in these pages – a lot of universe.

These poems manage to live and don't leave the reader feeling weighed down by the inevitability of death. They are challenging and thought-provoking. Many of them are better read the tenth time than the first. The title poem “From the Dead Before” is the last poem and emanates the feeling of the collection:

*Each season rises from the dead before.
Old winter dies, a frozen derelict,
With rheumy, death-sleeted eyes and weak blood.
The spring jumps out at you, a kid, a street punk
With a switchblade for a heart, full of sass and brass.
But spring dies young, in summer's arms, his gore,
Besmirching her cotton dress, his eyes black mud.
And fall attends dead summer's funeral, last
Of her survivors, solemn, as is proper.
Each season rises from the dead before.*

This is a well presented collection of poetry that can be appreciated by any reader but especially by those who like to see a little structure in our cynical free-verse world. It is quality work all the way around.

Trenton Muth, Wayne State College

Bones of a Very Fine Hand

Marjorie Saiser

The Backwaters Press, 1999

105pp. \$12.00/paper

Someone get a permanent marker and add Marjorie Saiser's name to the list of Nebraska's literary treasures. Saiser's debut volume of poetry, *The Bones Of A Very Fine Hand*, at least qualifies her for nomination, if not induction onto the list.

The poems that comprise *The Bones...* are steeped in family, rich in texture, both clear in their meaning and clouded with allusions. They spring from the page, gripping the reader and holding them captive until the end.

Nearly all of the poems in *The Bones...* are about the narrator's immediate family: mother, father, daughter, son, uncle, grandmother, even ex-husband. The poems illustrate permanence through tradition; through heirlooms and character traits.

Several of the poems show the cycle of life. In "Washing The Walls," Saiser scrubs her daughter's walls to prepare for her new grandchild while her daughter sits idle. In turn the unborn baby rests in his mother's womb:

*Nobody
will love him as she does, watching his progress
over the pole, the strong winds at the higher
elevations, the crackpots in the airports
with guns and axes to grind,
nobody assigned to the child as
she is assigned.*

Saiser's daughter also plays a key role in the poem that inspired the book's title, "I Tell Her Of The Downy Gentian." In it, the narrator describes a country cemetery, which when left unmowed for a summer, blooms with the beautiful downy gentian. The roots of the gentian reach deep into the soil, like fingers reaching into the past. The book's cover is a painting titled, "Downy Gentian, Grasshopper" by artist Wendy Jane Bantam.

Many poems in *The Bones...* are about Saiser's father. She writes about his suits, his habits and his death. In "Becoming My Father" she imagines a deer taking on her father's spirit shortly after his death:

*Looking back before she jumps the fence
she says nothing
as he would say it.*

Saiser has been waiting a long time for this moment, and *The Bones Of A Very Fine Hand* has been worth the wait.

Bruce R. Nelson, Omaha

NEBRASKA TERRITORY

The Breeder of Archangels and A Requiem for Stanley Smith

Don Welch

Main Traveled Roads/Sandhills Press, 1999

20pp. \$3.00/paper

The first time I heard Don Welch's poetry was at a UNO reading several years ago. He followed Bill Kloefkorn who, looking like the illegitimate offspring of Albert Einstein and a horse, gave a typically flamboyant reading full of pig calls and colloquialisms. I was, understandably, a bit thrown off by Welch. It was a cruel move to have Kloefkorn read first because his poems are best followed by a trip to the local tavern and Lynrd Skynrd on the jukebox, not one of the most eloquent and thoughtful of Nebraska's poets. Like the late William Stafford, Welch's poetry is touching and original; a Hallmark card where sentimentality and didacticism are replaced by vibrant metaphors and a complex musicality.

His poem, "Requiem for Stanley Smith," the finer of the two offerings of this book, is a condolence card to anyone who has lost a love, or lost at love.

*Not everyone can be informed by love,
nor every word worn and measured by grief's tongue.*

And later:

Your shadow, smokeless, stays upon our tongues.

The language of this poem is remarkable. Welch's use of alliteration and rhythm is almost consistently masterful here.

Welch is poet enough to understand that it is far better (and safer) to ask the hard questions than it is to provide the easy answers:

*In absolute light are the hard still puzzled by soft ways?
Like the wise do they know what to give in to?
What are pure rhythms?
How many souls make up the inexhaustible winds?*

Unshadowed, what are the givens?

These are complex thoughts which rank among some of the most rewardingly rhetorical questions in literature. While washing in Welch's requiem it is easy to hear echoes of Roethke's "Things I Steal from Sleep" or Dylan's "Blowin' In the Wind."

As always in Welch's poetry, is the marriage between the inner life of man and the outer life of the natural world. Welch refers to his poems as "animalizations" and what he is most concerned with are "the country things of Nebraska." In his best earlier work, *The Keeper of Miniature Deer* and *Carved by Obadiah Verity*, Welch seeks to not only find man's place in the world, but to explore as well his relationship with it and in it. Welch is a poet who understands how far man has retreated from

nature (that is, the nature mankind has not developed for consumption or comfort), and he seeks to recombine, or even better, redefine man's role as controller, observer and participant. "The Breeder of Archangels" (a type of bird; Welch is a notorious bird lover and they appear in many of his poems) is an alarmingly slight "short story." It can be read as the memory of the beginning of Welch's love affair with birds, but I am hard pressed to find any deeper meaning to the story. It is a story that wants very hard to be a parable for something, or a fable (at least it presents itself as such) and yet it never really finds what it is looking for. Perhaps it is its brevity.

Welch has said that "the older literary world often vied with contemporary subjects. I eventually married the two worlds in poems about animals, imaginary animals. Knowing about history has led me into bestiaries of all kinds, and knowing about living animals enabled me to hold onto a realistic base."

Welch has opened up some of the more interesting bestiaries of Nebraska poetry with his "animalizations." "Requiem for Stanley Smith" is guaranteed to stay, like Stanley Smith's smokeless shadow, on both your mind and your tongue.

Eric Hoffman, Omaha



My Link to the Plains

Larry Holland

Main-Travelled Roads #3, 1996
22pp. \$2.00/paper

Larry Holland wrote this book in essay form using excerpts and passages from the writings of his friends, acquaintances, and favorite authors who put words to paper in a way that he agreed said it best.

He uses a quote by Wallace Stegner, referring to the emigrants traversing the Platte Valley on their way West: "They (the emigrants) were at the border of strangeness."

Holland writes that he was born only forty miles west of the border Stegner referred to. In that place, he was marked by the land, by the seasons, and by the colorations of the earth, wind and sky.

Again using short writing examples of Stegner, Holland says that Jane Coleman, Linda

Hasselstrom, Paul Zarzyski, and David Lee are all writers, as he himself is, who don't deal with make-believe. They write what they know and it rings true.

Holland speaks of the land and of the people tied to the land and his connection to both in this essay. He writes his images so that you can see them when you read the words. He shares his love for the grass country and the Nebraska Plains in his poems and says, "a writer of and conditioned by the Plains finds the words in his territory, in the things he's come to know as his life."

Mary Maas, Stanton

NEBRASKA TERRITORY

Bitter Creek Junction

Linda Hasselstrom

High Plains Press, 2000

70pp. \$12.95/paper

Linda Hasselstrom grew up where a person was known as a "hand" if he or she were a good worker on the ranch. The even better hands were known as "good hands," and that was about it for praise for a ranch hand. You take what you can get and live with that in ranch country. You learn to pay attention to subtle things, the forgotten nuances in daily life, to get some texture into a life where the land can be unforgiving and harsh as it presents you with a sunset you want to remember until you die.

Bitter Creek Junction shows just how good a hand this poet is and just how well she knows her poetic terrain. Linda Hasselstrom can take you out by that haystack where the deer hunter who was a poor shot and a poor sport leaned to catch his breath ("Haystack: May Afternoon"). Caught his breath and then decided the deer was a goner anyway and to hell with it. And she'll make you smell the sweat and pipe smoke left there by the hunter who did not deserve his prey.

There are moments so numerous no short review can begin to do justice to the life behind these poems; moments in which Hasselstrom takes you by the arm as if she was showing you around the ranch and says: here, and here, and here, and here. Here is where the young kid who grew up wrong got twisted by a dad who didn't know what to teach a son ("Where The Stories Come From"). Here is where a woman stores her memories in the kitchen with helpful jam-making dead aunts ("Making Chokecherry Jam"); here in the chair where her husband waited out the nights before the cancer killed him ("Reading in Bed"); here on the hill where she buried the remains of an animal her husband killed before he realized the reasons behind

his kill made it a desecration ("The Cost of A Badger Hat"); here in the drawer where she drops one more sachet that will pull her back to summer when the fragrance hits her square in the heart ("Widow's Homemade Sachet"). Pull her back, as she is always pulled, to times she can't let go of, no matter if someone may think it's not "right" to grieve a friend all the rest of one's life, avoid a stretch of highway where she died, as in the unforgettable "The Empty Highway, The Unwritten Poem."

Quarry through the rubble of one's life, you're going to hit a few unpolished stones. Those rare few in this collection hunch their shoulders like little rough rocks you find out on the prairie someplace and you know they are just waiting to have someone polish a little shine onto them. Hasselstrom could have used a little sanding and polishing on a couple poems here and there, but the great stone in the poem "After Your Funeral" that moved into her life when her husband gave way to cancer more than makes up for the few lesser ones.

One concern I have about the book revolves around the riveting title poem and is not a concern about poetics but about the philosophical or ethical issues of writing poetry. In this poem a woman who has suffered a years-long abusive relationship finally makes the decision to end the abuse by killing her abuser, which is narrated in the poem. Given that the events of the poem must surely be a fiction (based upon millions of sad realities) which the poet created in order to make a statement about how we mistreat each other, I wished that the poet would have chosen to guide her character out of the sordidness of her married life without resorting to violent means. I hoped that this strong and humane poet was going to find another way out of

so this poem could have served as a starting place to guide us out of the labyrinth of violence rather than to leave her character and us trapped in it, violence begetting violence. Maybe in another poem.

Bitter Creek Junction is a powerful read, in a beautifully produced book by High Plains Press with a striking slipcover and beautiful layout inside. I can guarantee you one thing if you read this book: you'll never look at the daily things you do the same way again after you visit this

poet's territory, where her dad keeps hollering for you to "Make a hand!" You'll realize, when you contemplate the night heron with this good hand, that you are always close in this world to breaking through to what's important, and if you can just pay attention long enough and write it all down as well as Linda Hasselstrom, you will be at last, someday, ready to receive it.

Greg Kosmicki, Omaha

Message To The Nurse Of Dreams

Lisa Sandlin

Cinco Puntos Press, 1998
149pp. \$11.95/paper

Robert Frost once said, "Poetry makes us remember what we didn't know we knew." Much of Lisa Sandlin's writing in the short story cycle *Message to the Nurse of Dreams* has the lyricism of poetry, and her memorable characters are continually coming to (and thus leading the reader to) delightful and sometimes remarkable epiphanies which remind us of what "we didn't know we knew."

In the shifting world of late 1960's South Texas in which these stories are set, her characters, both blacks and whites, make tentative steps toward understanding each other. In the process, they discover or rediscover that they can't connect with someone else until they connect with and tell the truth to themselves.

The story which gives the collection its title illustrates this truth. At its outset, the main character, a ninth-grade girl at newly integrated Port Sabine High School, ponders these questions about a black classmate: "Are you or are you not the basic same as me? Could you consider yourself my friend?" Probing to find a common language, these two begin talking, somewhat accidentally, about their dreams. The white-girl narrator, whose first name we never know, tells her classmate one

of hers. However, she doesn't tell all the truth. So, when Johnetta Pierce, her black classmate, does, by revealing how a picture she is then drawing is about one of her dreams, the narrator feels compelled to be honest. She thinks, "I couldn't bear to lie because lying was not within the boundaries we had established, at least so far as I knew . . . 'It was a true daydream,' I yelled at her."

So begins a tentative friendship, in which these two nurture each other's dreams. Theirs, though, is not an easy, syrupy, sappy, nor long-lived coalition. They seldom co-exist comfortably. Their classmates, who have not risked such attempts at understanding or dialogue, and their own insecurities keep them a definite distance apart. Yet when they meet after a two-year period of separation following high school graduation, the narrator rediscovers the intuition that Johnetta, although removed from her, still remains in her heart.

In the other stories, equally poignant revelations occur. This book has much to admire: wisdom, wit, and humor, combined with a fine flair for style and drama and a finely wrought sense of place.

Dan Holtz, Peru State College

On the Rez

Ian Frazier

Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 2000
311 pp. \$25.00/cloth

In his sixth book, Ian Frazier shares, in an extended fashion, his fascination for the American Indian, particularly the Oglala Lakota of the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.

He resents the word "wannabe" in its usual connotation of adopting Indian spirituality, collecting Indian art, going to powwows, or being adopted into a tribal family. Instead, he uncovers what to him is new dimension of the attraction to the Lakota life. "That self-possessed sense of freedom is closer to what I want; I want to be an uncaught Indian like them" (5). The egalitarianism, disregard of titles, and individual freedom he is drawn to is, of course, a commonplace attraction for outsiders since the beginnings of the global colonization of indigenous people, and is thus not some new kind of insight. Frazier also proclaims that the attraction of the Oglala life style for him is caused by another factor. The Oglala Sioux reservation, actively or otherwise, continues to resist the "modern American paving machine." That is, in its isolated—the term "bleak," he points out, is often used—wind blown, frontier-like, gritty, everyday, poverty level, elemental struggle to get by, we can find the "bed rock" of "actual America" (15).

At the same time, he recognizes a residual greatness in the culture, which has many eminent leaders and heroes: Crazy Horse, Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Spotted Tail, et al. One of the contemporary examples presented by Frazier, which leads to the most dynamic pages of the narrative, is SuAnne Big Crow, an Oglala teenage basketball star and celebrated role model killed in a car accident in her teens.

That much is expressed in the opening chapter of the book. Then we are introduced to Le War Lance, a long time friend of the author. War Lance is a hard drinking, manipulative, story telling, trickster-like, vagabond ne'er-do-well. In a somewhat rambling, often disjointed, narrative—a sort of combined travelogue/journal/political and cultural history—the author then shares his many intermittent encounters, on and off the reservation, with War Lance. Neither the author nor his "bro" War Lance is painted in any sort of heroic strokes. The author shares his own inadequacies and annoyances as well as War Lance's misdeeds, constant drinking, and occasional lies. We follow their encounters with lots of trips for buying beer in White Clay, a notorious border town just south of Pine Ridge, with War Lance's endless requests of the author for money, and with War Lance's mostly wild fantasies and yet with poignant insights sprinkled in.

These events are also laced with ample realistic details of reservation life and its denizens. The author recognizes the nature of "Indian political life in its tendency to descent into mind-numbing complications and small print" (62), and on several occasions tries to correct what he calls "a long series of too-simple images pasted over the reality of Indian life" (82). That crusade is probably the rationale for devoting twenty-two pages in chapter five to an ambitiously broad but consequently inadequate overview of various chapters of American Indian history, which, in effect, is a distraction from the focus of the overall narrative.

The author commits several minor errors in fact. First of all, the Pine Ridge Reservation consists of eight districts, not nine as Frazier states (184). Five reservations were carved from the former Great Sioux Reservation, not six (39). The Black Hills were taken specifically under the Act of 1877, which the author does not mention in his summary of the Black Hills case (39). The author also stresses that the jingle dress "is a ceremonial Sioux [sic] garment that goes back at least to the fur trade days" and that the jingle dress is worn in a "traditional women's dance called the jingle dance" (103). Both comments are simply incorrect as the dress has been borrowed from the Ojibway/ Anishinabe in the last two decades, a fact widely recognized in Indian country.

Finally, it has become an ungrateful position in the wake of postcolonial literary and cultural theory to assume the role of the outside visitor who portrays a Native/indigenous community in any sort of authoritative manner. The perspective of the real or fictional historical visitor who provides objective and fresh insight into a culture—one can think of Montesquieu, Crèvecoeur, de las Casas, Lewis and Clark, Catlin, and many others—has become suspect and viewed with suspicion especially by the members of the visited culture. In fact, the term "visit" is itself part of the problem. "Living that life" is an expression I've often heard from grass roots Lakota people to legitimize the validity of com-

mitment required to present an authentic perspective on their culture. Whereas Frazier certainly commits to visiting the reservation repeatedly, he stays in a motel in Chadron, Nebraska. On several occasions, when War Lance and others come to visit Frazier at home, he is annoyed by the intrusion as if he would like to be part of the Lakota scene when he chooses, but not have even his supposed friend(s) intrude into his, an attitude and behavior which troubles the author himself (158-59).

At the same time, Frazier deserves credit for his vivid portrayal of the people, the problems of reservation life, but also the family fabric that holds the people together. He avoids declaring the perspective of an authority or offering any solutions based on his analysis. The only suggestion he offers at the end of his book is for the "rest of us Americans," and that is to "again consider the possibility of returning some or all of the stolen federal lands" in the Black Hills of South Dakota (277). He is providing his readers with his personal journey into a culture to which he is drawn for its ability to persevere in the face of pervasive adversity and for its essence as a model for human freedom, heroism, humor, and hopeful imagination.

All in all, *On the Rez* is worth the reading.

R. D. Theisz,
Black Hills State University

For My Son in a Motel Room

Greg Kosmicki

Sandhills Press, 1999

32 pp. \$3.00/paper

Greg Kosmicki's book *For My Son in a Motel Room* speaks of the maturation of himself through his son. Kosmicki's poetry is both a tribute to his offspring and a self-actualization of who he is as a father. The poems are full of admiration, frustration, and triumph.

What I appreciate most about the poems is that they grow as the author does. In "I Wanted to Draw A Picture of My Son," Kosmicki revels over how he and his wife conceived a masterpiece. He says:

*still and all it is amazing
how that one unravaged
sperm found its way...*

Next, along with the marvels of parenthood, he experiences the complexities as his son becomes an adult. In the poem "Late Evening of April in '93" Kosmicki asks:

*does he have to curse me each night
as he ascends the darkened stairway
to become a man?*

Finally, Kosmicki approaches the stage where he reflects on his past behavior toward his son and reaches a plateau of understanding. Like many parents he realizes the mistakes he has made and resolves to correct them. From the title poem, Kosmicki makes a declaration by saying:

*If I had my life to do over again
I would be more patient with him.
I would remember what it took me
3 kids to learn.
But none of us is given that chance.*

*I will do it now.
This day too will be the past.*

Through this book of poetry Kosmicki reveals his soul's yearnings toward his son. As a father who dedicates himself to embracing his son, he strengthens the bond that exists between them. He also realizes that being a father means he has to let go enough to allow the boy to become his own man.

Patrice Troutman,
Wayne State College

The Plains Sense of Things: Eight Poets from Outstate Nebraska

Edited by **Mark Sanders**

Sandhills Press, 1997
56 pp. \$5.00/paper

To understand this collection of works by writers dubbed "outstate Nebraska" poets, one must first define outstate Nebraska. At first glance it would seem to mean any part of state not included in the boundaries of Lincoln and Omaha. That is the definition editor and Sandhills publisher Mark Sanders states in his back-word. But outstate Nebraska seems to mean more than that. Outstate is state of mind, a place inside each poet that is untouched and fertile. Outstate knows no bounds. It includes the urban and suburban, the rural and sub-rural, the wilderness and the wilding. The scope of outstate Nebraska stretches long past the Missouri River; long past the Colorado and South Dakota borders. It is carried in the hearts and minds of those who lived in it.

The poets included in this collection range from life-long residents, the late Larry Holland and J.V. Brummels, an out-of-state transplant, Shirley Buettner, and Nebraskans in exile, Sanders and Kathleen West. Just as broad are the experiences they bring to its pages. Barbara Schmitz invites us into her home for some tuna casserole, Don Welch calls us out to hear the wind on the prairie and Neil Harrison celebrates the earth's bounty. Holland's contribution to *Plain Sense* reveals him to be a man of great common sense and warmth. He seems a man trapped between his inescapable past and the irrepressible future. Witness "Home School" in which he remembers his mother butchering chickens:

*Years have left me to puzzle
how some have come vaguely to think
real pillows and comforters are stuffed
with the gutless stuffing hollofil,
how gizzards grow in clumps on styrofoam, and fowl
hatch frozen in plastic sacks.
I've been marked for life,
a warm Sunday-after-dinner feeling
that my mother taught me
sharp knives and small matters,
like giblets.*

Sanders, in his contributions, sees a Nebraska on the decay. Perhaps it is his justification for being so far away for so long. "Bladen, Nebraska" offers a bleak look at a small town long past its prime:

*It's the dying who stay. Anguished
by the barbs of death and debt, old farmers
are weathered posts. Gravity
pulls the ladies earthward - see them
bent in their gardens, the avalanche of their bodies.*

NEBRASKA TERRITORY

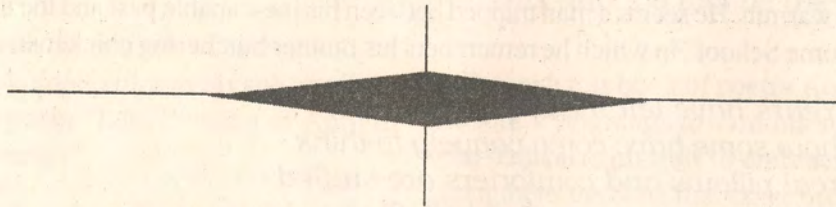
But hope and jubilation are just a few pages away in Plain Sense. It is West who does it best:

*As my mother and her mother before
buried a spoon beneath the house
to charm the malevolent troll
I force my fingers deep
and the seeds descend
little saviors that wait for rain
to burst their sepulchers
and transfigure the plain.*

We are here to grow.

Most of the poets in Plain Sense sprang from rural and small urban settings. Many were educated in the larger cities before returning to what they love: the land, the space, the freedom. What is important to understand is no matter where these poets reside they will continue to be "outstate" Nebraska poets.

Bruce R. Nelson, Omaha



Full of It

*The moon is full.
A wide shining eye,
unblinking.
Over-glowing
with insanity.*

*The moon is full,
Full of lies for
fools and lovers.*

—Scott McIntosh

NEBRASKA TERRITORY

The Plains Sense of Things 2: Eight Poets from Lincoln, Nebraska

Edited by **Mark Sanders**

Sandhills Press, 1997
56 pp. \$5.00/paper

The second edition in the Plains Sense series taps poets from Nebraska's second largest city and arguably its center of literature. Lincoln boasts more poets, essayists and short-story writers per capita than nearly any city in the states. Thus it is fitting that Sandhills Press publisher Mark Sanders chose the capital city as the source of the book's eight poets. Like its predecessor, this volume is filled by variety of styles. From the curt, humorous musings of Ted Kooser to the labored beauty of Marge Saiser's odes to family to Roy Scheele's mythic prose.

These poets mainly come from small towns to which they cannot return. They stay in Lincoln as reluctant captives only because they have nowhere else to go. The Nebraska of their collective childhood is gone. Though he is a Kansas native, Nebraska State Poet William Kloefkorn perhaps said it best in "Leaving The Home Place:"

*[G]oodbye, hello, come back, don't
for Jesus*

*Christ's sake ever
leave me;*

*you are the only one on earth who
understands.*

Perhaps no Nebraska poet has a soul as delicate as Twyla Hansen. The former Nebraska Wesleyan horticulturist contributed nine poems to *Plains Sense 2* including "Just Before Dawn:"

*[H]is leathery face and arms,
aroma of supper and sweat and soap,
his old-fashioned wire-rims and old country
references, hold-over from the last century,*

not embarrassing me now-

Hilda Raz's section is a first for the *Plain Sense* series: A group of poems with a common theme. She writes of teaching the damaged children of outstate Nebraska. From "Fast Car On Nebraska I-80: Visiting Teacher:"

*The girl in the front row
who daubed her eyelids purple
wrote about the-one-who-is-gone,
meaning her sister. And wrote
about the-one-who-did-it,
meaning her brother who shot the gun,
whom she ought to hate - and doesn't.*

The poems featured in *Plain Sense 2* equal its predecessor for its appreciation of the outdoors and all things rural. There is talk of garden, of John Deere, of sparrows and chickens. For these eight urban poets, there seems nothing more enjoyable than a stroll in the woods or a wheat field waving under a westerly wind.

Bruce R. Nelson, Omaha

The Plains Sense of Things 3: A Tribute to Larry Holland

Edited by **Mark Sanders**

Sandhills Press, 1999

44 pp. \$5.00/paper

When Larry Holland died in car crash in March 1999, his death rocked Nebraska's literary community. Holland, a widely respected poet and essayist, spent many years teaching at Northeast Community College. During his years in Norfolk, he helped established the Elkhorn Review and the Nebraska Poets and Writers Festival, the forerunner of the Nebraska Literature Festival. It is a fitting that the third installment of Sandhills Press' Plains Sense series, should be a tribute to Holland. The previous two volumes were devoted to setting up a forum for the rich flavor of Nebraska poetry. Holland's submissions in the first Plain Sense are some of the book's brightest moments. His works in Plain Sense 3 - Two letters to Sanders, and three poem/recipes (for an upcoming Sandhills publication) - showcase Holland's humor and culinary skills.

The majority of *Plain Sense 3* are tributes to Holland by his friends - fellow poets, teachers and storytellers. There are the humorous, (Neil Harrison's "Island Lake" and J.V. Brummels' "What Be and Ain't in Omaha) the heart-wrenching, (Don Welch's "Home to Your Home Place") and the celebratory (Barbara Schmitz "To Celebrate a Friendship"). Each writer does so in their unique voice and phrasing. Joan Hoffman contributes three essays about Larry. And Montana rodeo poet Paul Zarskyski's posthumous letter to Holland is included. Other writers included are William Kloefkorn, David Lee, Twyla Hansen, Sanders, Red Shuttleworth, and Don Welch.

Holland comes across as modest and earthy in

his writings and what others have written of him. To have so many of one's peers gathered in praise and celebration would have made Larry blush.

On the *Plain Sense* series...The advancement of Nebraska poetry through the Plain Sense series is a notable feat made even more special because it was accomplished across three state borders. Sandhills Press publisher Mark Sanders has lived in the Lone Star state for many years. He teaches English at the College of the Mainland in Texas City, Texas. In choosing poets for publication in these books he looked for Nebraskans with deep roots. He recognized that that is what made them extraordinary. And in doing so, he opened himself up to criticism for publishing only homespun poets. But what could have been a weakness was the strength that holds the series together.

The fraternity of the poets in these volumes are unmistakable. These writers' paths cross as often as they can. They dedicate poems to each other, they respect each others opinions, but still maintain their individual voices. As Sanders admits in his back-word of the first *Plain Sense*, there are many poets who he did not, but could have, included. Perhaps in the near future he will consider a volume dedicated to the Omaha poets of which there are a growing number and a second book of outstate poets who multiply faster than buttonweeds.

Bruce R. Nelson, Omaha

Fitting Ends and Other Stories

Dan Chaon

Northwestern University Press, 1999
241pp. \$14.95/paper

Imagine that you were injected with thiopental sodium (Sodium Pentothal™) and interrogated about your family. Image the level of truth you might reveal. Truth that both exposes your family's adamant self-myths and illustrates the sheer force of the bond that ties you together. You may tell that you love them all, or that you hate them, or maybe just one of them. You may tell that you want to hate them, but that the tie that binds and chafes does not loosen. Neither does Dan Chaon's grip on his subject matter in *Fitting Ends and Other Stories*. Chaon's stories are about families, and the characters in these stories stare into the white hot center of these families and tell what they see. All but one are told from the perspective of either an only child or the most taciturn of the children of a nuclear family—the quiet one, the one who seems to have little or no ambition to break away from his parents or to forge his way into the world. Older siblings are more dynamic, often in less than positive ways, and parents' actions loom large.

Clouds and ghosts hover over and around these families. What has already come to pass is often dark (a brother's death, a mother's institutionalization, a car wreck, etc.) The present is usually gray, and the future is as ominous and threatening as the storm depicted on the book's cover, approaching across rolling fields. But the present and pending gloom that surrounds this collection does not read like melodrama. Most of these stories are skillfully rendered and compelling tales related from deep inside the walls of family constructs.

A theme that occurs in a few of the stories is

one of longing for a past version of an older sister or a wife, or even a parent who has settled into complacency and domesticity. In the collection's first story, "Spirit Voices," on his 27th birthday, Robert laments the settling that seems to have embalmed his life and the lives of his wife and sister, "They should want to run off with dark-skinned lovers, I thought, they should want to do crazy drugs and wander through strange cities after midnight." They don't and neither does he, so when his sister-in-law does, Robert is sympathetic.

In "My Sister's Honeymoon: A Videotape," the narrator visits the home of his older sister, her husband, and their baby. He stays up late, drinking beer and watching their honeymoon video, looking for traces of the sister he used to know. "There was a time, about five years ago, when my sister was once wholly the person that I must now use the pause button to locate." Now, while he sips beer on the floor of her living room, she is "asleep in the next room, falling heavily through some sad dream."

A similar change troubles Scott in "Going Out." He and his father both attend AA meetings, but while his father regrets his past, Scott remembers and misses the father who was less penitent but more interesting. "And sometimes, his father told him, when the lake was very calm and clear, boats passing over could see the steeple of an old church down there under the water. He must have been stone drunk then, Scott knows, but it also seems that he was more whole then than he is now, that something great was happening, and Scott had sat there, believing him,

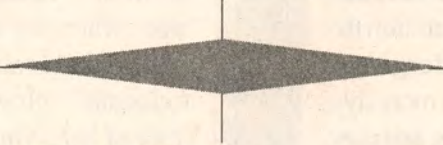
staring over the edge of the boat.”

The world that Chaon creates for these characters is grounded on the plains of the Midwest, in a town called St. Bonaventure, Nebraska, or Chicago, or at a truck-stop in South Dakota. Life's forces tend to humble these characters until they succumb to the lives laid out by their parents. The characters gravitate into these tracks, but not comfortably and not without pondering and envying those who seem to have escaped.

Of the characters who do not settle, however, most do not fare well. In “Chinchilla,” the only story in this collection that does not come through the perspective of a young male, the young girl, Arlinda, “had known for a long time that her mother was not like a real mother.” Nor is Arlinda's grandmother like a real grandmother. “She already knew that her mother and grandmother shared their pills. She scorned them for thinking she was too dumb to notice. She had decided that they had the same illness.” Arlinda's mother does not change, does not give in to the force that subdue other wild souls in Chaon's stories, but hers is not a tale of victory.

Possibly the best story in this collection is less specifically about family. In “Rapid Transit,” Alan Lowe, fresh from college, founders in his new job in the city. “He looked like he was from Nebraska, people had told him; a redneck, as someone had once unkindly put it. Standing there, he was aware that each of his co-workers had probably developed an unflattering version of him in their minds.” If not, the reader will and should probably enjoy the process of doing so. Nobody seems to like Alan. He is not quite likable, but close enough that the reader will hope for the chance to look more kindly upon him. Chaon does not allow it, but neither does he allow Alan to sink too low in the reader's esteem. Alan is one of those characters that only a mother could love, or a family. Without his, he is lost. Domestic stories, family stories, stories about siblings or about Nebraska—however they are described, these are stories worth reading.

Ted Roggenbuck,
University of North Dakota



Wet Dimes

*She watched his taillights
twinkle and flicker out
in the distance.*

*Pain dripped
from her eyes,
splattering her shoes
and spotting the pavement
like wet dimes.*

—Scott McIntosh

NEBRASKA TERRITORY

Covenants

William Kloefkorn and David Lee

Spoon River Press, 1996
135 pp. \$9.95/paper

Covenants is the kind of book that marks literary history. William Kloefkorn and David Lee, arguably two of the best poets working in the language at the dawn of this new millenium, each contribute a book-length collection to this single volume. Regular readers will not be disappointed, and new readers are in for a double dose of the kind of rare surprise that arises from the discovery of true voices and generous visions.

That these two should be paired in a single volume should not be a surprise, however. As unique as their individual voices are, they share considerable common ground. Each grew up in evangelical Christian churches, an obvious influence on Kloefkorn's early collections and a consistent influence on Lee's poems to date. Each authored ground-breaking and very popular first books: Kloefkorn's *Alvin Turner as Farmer*, a classic of the small press movement of the early 1970's, and Lee's *The Porcine Legacy*, later that decade, which showcased poetry of stunning originality. Both are poets capable of great good humor. Lee's settings are entirely rural; Kloefkorn's largely so. Both remind a reader of Sam Clemens in their use of personae (though Kloefkorn has abandoned this practice in his later poetry, and Lee's speakers are left unidentified in his recent work).

And it should be no surprise that these two poets appear to have developed a close friendship, often reading together. (Just how and where they met remains unclear.) In fact, it is at readings that these two poets shine most brightly. Lee offers more in the way of performance (he has claimed that he enters a trance), a high-energy show that relies more on recitation than reading, but Kloefkorn is a reader of the first rank. The poems of each are poems of voice, and though the voice of each is unmistakable on the page, it is in the hearing that all the brilliant modulations, nuances, and subtleties are cast in strongest relief.

Listen to the gentle invocation of Kloefkorn's title poem:

*Here is the story I might have heard,
more likely dreamed: the woman
after the first trimester*

*required by village covenant
to compose a lullaby,
to sing it daily then*

*to the gathering child, only
from memory and in deliberate
isolation,*

NEBRASKA TERRITORY

*the man not permitted to listen
until the infant had been delivered
and pronounced both whole and*

*welcome. And this is a ritual
I'd go to church to live with,
solace in the belief*

*that not so very far away
always a woman sits singing her own
creation*

to that small creation breathing

Not only are the usual qualities of voice here, but we find Koefkorn's frequent concerns here: children, mothers, community and continuity; the place of "ritual" and song, a hope of "solace."

Lee's voice is, like his reading, more flamboyant, utilizing as he does a dialect to explore the perversities and trials inherent in the human condition and, conversely, the resilience of humans. When Lee moves away from dialect in his earlier collections, it's usually to speak through the mask of "Dave," a more-or-less proper, well educated and not paradoxically somewhat dense character; "Dave" stands a little above the human crowd and a little distant from his own humanity.

The main character of "Labor," Harold Rushing, "would rather farm than eat." The narrative voice here, and in most of *Covenants*, though unidentified, is essentially "John," an early Lee creation:

*I seen him of a summer
On a tractor holding his dinner
In a bucket and waterjug in a tow sack
Hanging on the fender in his other hand
7 butterfingers in his shirt pocket
36 hours without no sleep
six and ½ days on a week
till he had to drive up to town
to be a Campbellite elder on Sundays
where he could get some rest
If they didn't ask him to offer prayer*

Rushing,

*. . . died when he's 62
in his field bucking bales with a 18 year old
hired hand driving truck for wages
of a heart attack that Doc Kitchens
sed was such a stroke it could of busted in 2*

NEBRASKA TERRITORY

*he torn the front of his shirt off
beat bruises and knuckle spots
all on his chest where he tried to get to it
they said he'd of strangled that heart to death
if he could of got his hands on it . . .*

In the day of poetry slams and the resurgence of coffeehouse readings, Kloefkorn and Lee stand as models for young poets who rely heavily on voice. That critics, specifically, and the academic community, generally, have been slow to lavish the kind of attention on them they deserve is perhaps understandable: Academics are married to the printed page. What's disheartening is that so many seem unable to read the music, to give their own voices over to the score presented to them. A young man currently enrolled in a graduate writing program (University of Nebraska at Omaha) complained to me recently that his workshop mentor critiqued poems only in terms of metaphor. Since his poetry relied more heavily on voice than metaphor, he was having a tough go of it. His question, spoken in tones of extreme frustration: "What would she say about Kloefkorn and Lee?"

Indeed, one might wonder what such a professor would make of a young Walt Whitman. Certainly, Kloefkorn and Lee are as adept with metaphor as any poet. Each offers, beyond that relatively minor if sometimes intriguing wordplay, a generous vision of humanity's possibilities spoken (and written) in a voice of wisdom and authority.

The most enigmatic poem of the collection is Kloefkorn's "Sustaining the Curse." It stands at the end of Kloefkorn's section and, so placed, serves to introduce Lee. Lee reports that Kloefkorn 1) suggested they do a book together; 2) supplied the title; 3) had his poems already written, including presumably "Sustaining the Curse." The poem is uncharacteristic in its darkness, and I quote it in its entirety, along with its lengthy epigraph, for the questions it raises:

Rona, a woman who may have lived on the shore of the Kaipara Harbor, went to get water because her children were crying at night. The moon disappeared behind a cloud and Rona cursed it because she stumbled in the darkness – so the moon came down and took her up into the sky, where she is still to be seen on its face.

— Maori Legend

*And still to be heard are those cries
from so many bewildered children.*

*many of them nonetheless destined to
survive. Rona, you were right to have cursed*

*but wrong to have cursed the moon.
Did the moon obscure itself? No,*

it was the cloud that provided the
obfuscation – or, if not the cloud,

the breeze from the west that
moved the cloud, or the low-pressure

belt just off the shoreline that
shaped the breeze that blew the cloud

that obscured the moon. Even so, moon
in its loftiness should have seen

what you were about, what you intended,
in turn should have done whatever

moon might do to enlighten. But no,
moon takes you instead to its face,

giving you life everlasting while
so many bewildered children lie

crying for water. Well, let them
cry. Let many of them survive. And let

some of these in their own eventual
darkness sustain the curse.

Certainly, the poem comments on the human condition and suggests something about the poet's cultural role. One wonders if "Sustaining the Curse" is a "covenant" that binds Lee. Those who care deeply for American literature would do well to listen to what Kloefkorn is saying.

Jack Brown
Paradise, Wyoming

How to Get Out of the Body

Barbara Schmitz

Sandhills Press, 1999

96pp.\$12.00/paper

Barbara Schmitz's latest work, *How to Get Out of the Body*, is a collection of poems that leave the reader smiling, in question, and just plain uncomfortable. The poems range from memories of her mother to Schmitz's vision of dying and going to hell. Such a dramatic shift in topic is hard to get used to.

Schmitz is shockingly honest and, at times, brutal. "The Smell of My Grandma's Toilet" is about just that – her grandma's toilet. She uses words like "rotting," "decomposition," and "decay" to pull the reader into the bathroom and smell the stench. It does indeed tell us that Grandma is going to die. It's unpleasant thoughts like these that seem to fuel Schmitz's poetry.

Though Schmitz uses death as the topic for a great number of her poems, I feel the best section of this book is the third, "One-Way." This section is a collection of poems dealing with death and

parents, but they aren't the harsh, unsettling poems you might expect. They are calming, subtle, gently honest, and touching. They softly describe the experiences of her father losing his eye, her father-in-law's battle with a stroke, and her last dance with her father. The third section really saves the reader from what may seem like certain doom. It is a breather from the rough honesty that penetrates the rest of the collection. This break prepares the reader for the final section, "What Will You Take?"

Schmitz is so extremely fearless and honest that it makes one wonder what she would choose to leave out of her work, if anything. If one were to meet the author, they would know very intimate details of her life. While this could make some people uneasy, we must applaud such fearlessness, for when we read this book, we receive Barbara Schmitz.

Melissa Prokop, Wayne State College

Goodnight Nebraska

Tom McNeal

Random House, Inc., 1999
258pp. \$12.00/paper

Tom McNeal expertly creates and accumulates a collage of characters in *Goodnight Nebraska* who either dysfunctionally, capriciously, or resignedly cope with their human, or inhuman conditions. McNeal's protagonist, Randall Hunsacker, survives a hand-to-mouth existence and a violent adolescence in Salt Lake City. Fate or McNeal's skillful plot manipulation transports Randall from Mormon town to small town. Randall is an introvert who harbors a country-fair amount of simmering hostility toward life, particularly life in Goodnight. He's a part-time mechanic and gas pump jockey at the local garage, and he's on the high school football team. Randall's hard hitting tackles on the gridiron gain him fame. The town gossips ask who's the new player? Some people who live most of their lives in small towns are inveterate gossips who obsessively have to know everybody. And they have to know everybody's life history. Goodnight's gossipers are no exception to this rule. Randall's background remains a mystery, and local gossips circulate outlandish rumors about a criminal record. Eventually they label Randall a punk.

McNeal's portrayal of Goodnight's gossips comes close to Jane Smiley's depiction of small town Iowa gossips. In her novel *A Thousand Acres*, Smiley lumps town gossips into one pernicious bunch. McNeal provides readers with two disparate groups of gossips: the local women's group whose members subtly meow, pry, and make abrupt judgements about their neighbors. And then there's the "good old boys" at the Eleventh Man Bar who comprise a rumor mill that routinely gets down and dirty with their gossip and cruel comments. Randall doesn't have much of a social life

so he occasionally wanders into the bar for a Coke. Because of his football prowess the good old boys welcome him aboard. Frank Mears is leader of the pack, and he's Randall's alter ego. Mears is a sadistic bully; an obnoxious extrovert who says and does whatever he wants to anyone around him. Randall and everyone else in town either detests, fears or grudgingly respects Mears.

Mears' crowd regularly sits at a table removed from farmers and family groups that come in for an occasional burger or brew. In a bit of twisted synchronicity, Randall's future father-in-law, Lewis Lockhardt, stops at the bar for a quick sandwich while Randall is sitting at Mear's table. Mears spots a 13 year old girl who's looking for her older brother. He stares at the hapless girl, grabs his crotch, exudes sexual hostility, and brutally bellers, "Old enough to bleed is old enough to butcher." Instead of leaving the table, Randall's embarrassment turns to false bravado, and he laughs louder than the rest of Mears' crew at the cruel comment. Shortly after, he's ashamed of his laughter. Meanwhile, Lockhardt turns from where he's seated at the bar, and glares at Randall, and forthwith blames him for the incident. Several times thereafter Lockhardt mumbles "someone should or someone's gonna shoot that boy." Actually, they should shoot Mears, but that's another part of the story.

Depictions of farm life make up a sizable portion of McNeal's story, too. However, some of his knowledge about farm chores seems to be vague or, at times, downright inaccurate. He writes that his protagonist Randall is ready to start drilling corn. Rural readers could get the impression that McNeal doesn't know squat about planting corn,

because most of us ruralies know farmers plant corn with a corn planter. Farmers may plant soybeans with a drill, but never corn. *Faux pas* aside, McNeal provides readers with colorful patterns of his characters' lives and bizarre nuances of human behavior that combine to form a vivid tapestry of small town life.

McNeal's brief preface to *Goodnight Nebraska* foreshadows the angst and alienation that hounds some of his characters. After reading the preface which is excerpted from Wallace Stevens' pensive "Yellow Afternoon" one gathers McNeal's book is going to be about the futilities and cruelties of small town life. A large part of it is. This is high-class soap opera. McNeal adroitly introduces and intimately acquaints readers with his diverse cast of characters whose lives generally become tragically twisted. The author sets Lewis Lockhardt's wife, Dorothy, in a *Bridges of Madison County* type mid-life crisis affair with a traveling salesman. It's interesting to note that an impressive number of McNeal's female characters end up either verbally or physically abused, or demented,

or dead. Depending on your point of view toward this book, at one time or another you may be glad, or mad, or sad that you're reading it.

McNeal has an ability to delve into and ambivalently illustrate the emotions, hostilities, and pathos of his characters in *Goodnight Nebraska*. His mythical town is by no means Lake Wobegon. It's a town populated with losers and ordinary people who watch their hopes and dreams diminish. Small town USA encompasses the whole of our nation. We still cling to mid-Victorian and neo-puritanical notions about gender roles and sexual orientation. For some, the American dream becomes the American nightmare. We're still the gunfighter nation that favors violence as the answer to domestic and foreign problems. The people of *Goodnight Nebraska* aren't much different. Is it a good read? You bet. Take it along on vacation. Lend it to your friends and chew on it with coffee or a brew, but watch out for Frank Mears.

Mary Jo Raff, Creighton

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