

Robert King

Poets on the Prairie



Robert King received a Ph.D. in English/Creative Writing from the University of Iowa. His publications include two poetry chapbooks (Standing Around Outside, 1979; A Circle of Land, 1990) and poems in such magazines as Ascent, Kansas Quarterly, Nebraska Review, North Dakota Quarterly, and Massachusetts Review. A Professor Emeritus from the University of North Dakota, he is currently a Visiting Professor at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Read other work by Robert King published in Weber Studies: [Vol. 18.1 \(poetry\)](#), [Vol. 20.3 \(essay\)](#), and [Vol. 23.1 \(essay\)](#).

It was a good idea, it was a bad idea, it could go either way.

I was new to Nebraska by a few months and it wasn't any of my business in the first place so no one was asking me to have an opinion, but I thought I should. It was easy enough to see where the idea came from. The annual Western Literature Conference was coming to Lincoln in the fall. The organizers wanted to do something special with poetry and the idea of a field trip came up. Poets. Prairie poets. A field trip—to a prairie—to hear poets. Lincoln had a small prairie nearby and, God knows, it had enough poets, since it sometimes seems you can't swing a cat in Nebraska without hitting a poet. So someone would round up as many poets as possible, have them sit at various stations scattered in the tall grass of Nine-Mile Prairie, and shuttle people out to hear them read. Poets on the prairie, "on" both in the sense of writing about and being in the middle of. It was a great idea. Maybe.

A week before it's going to happen, I'm sitting in the Love Library's Great Plains Art Collection room where visiting poet Simon Ortiz is reading to a library-quiet audience. On the other side of the room Bill Kloefkorn and Ted Kooser sit together, the only two I've met from the Poets on the Prairie schedule which includes Nebraskans Don Welch, Twyla Hansen, Hilda Raz, and Marge Saiser as well as Kansan Michael Johnson and Charles Woodard from South Dakota. Does it matter where they come from? Yes. No. Yes.

Simon Ortiz is from the Acoma pueblo in New Mexico—"Sky City" the state tourism billboard dubs it—and while he reads some prose I think of the one winter afternoon I walked through the houses rising squarely from the single mesa rising in the middle of a valley. From every corner of town, I looked out into the air. What a place to live in, I thought then, and for a poet to be from, I think now. Ortiz announces he'll sing a couple of songs he wrote. I'm surprised but don't show it and I look around to see if everyone's surprised and not showing it but, of course, I can't tell. There's so much decorum at most poetry readings, a respectful blankness on most of the faces, that it's hard to get a fix on the responses. Ortiz sings and the words are English but the melody is pure Indian, starting high and wavering slowly down the scale. At the end of every line, he throbs the last syllable to extend it (coming-nng-nng-nng), the nasal echo, that hi-yaa one hears in Indian song that balances out the line. It's a poetic move both simple and daring. I love it, but I'm betting some of the students in the audience, with notebooks open and "on assignment," think it's weird.

Afterwards, people gather around Ortiz and I sidle over to Kooser and Kloefkorn, kidding them about not having any songs to sing at their readings. That's a problem, Kloefkorn nods wryly, and Kooser reminds his friend he can do a hog-call (Bill won a contest in this particular skill) and Kloefkorn nods wryly again. What's on my mind, though, is the Poets on the Prairie idea scheduled for the next weekend. Are they going to go through with it?

"I guess so," Kooser smiles politely and a little uneasily as if he weren't sure of the whole plan. "But I don't know when I am."

"You're at 1:30," Kloefkorn declares. "I know, because I'm at 3:30."

"You'll be out standing in your field," I venture, instantly sorry. Kloefkorn doesn't dignify this with a reaction and Kooser only smiles slightly again, a look of mild bemusement that either masks a worry or reflects an inner mild bemusement. A few others gather around

and someone says they're hoping the whole idea will fall apart by Saturday, that it will be canceled, that nobody will go. I ask why, but there's no particular answer—just a sense of uncertainty, short of foreboding but on that side of the emotional line.

I knew what I thought. People would come, although most poets harbor a small, unthought, defensive readiness for the day that no one will. And the physical logistics of shuttling people from the Cornhusker Hotel to the prairie and shuttling them back again in several waves could be solved. Then would come the problem—and I sensed trouble here—of getting people to travel around to different stations in the otherwise undifferentiated grassland.

"Oh, they're always doing stuff at Nine-Mile Prairie," a student said, when I mentioned the program to her. "You know. Like on Earth Day? They had booths all over."

So I guessed if Earth Day had booths on a prairie, poetry could have stations. But, most importantly, and assuming an audience came and was shuttled and even—unbelievably—moved from poet to poet, I wasn't sure what effect the "open air" would have on the poem. I wasn't sure people could listen to poetry in that setting or that they should even try or that the little spoken poem should set itself up for that conflict of interest.

Walt Whitman may have urged readers to take his poetry outside in the sun and air, but there's no documentation he ever tried that with an audience himself. As a young teacher I sometimes gave into requests to have class outside on a beautiful day and heard our voices dissipate in the breeze. Students soon began to study the impressions of the grass on their bare legs or find fascination in a small branched twig and I would get increasingly distracted by someone walking past, a squirrel off in the flowers, a piece of trash lifted by wind, a sparkle of sunlight off a leaf. I don't say yes anymore but even when students ask, it's perfunctory, almost a joke.

I admit there's a sense in which a natural setting for reading and hearing poetry is—well, more natural. And compared to the formal silences of the dimly lit Art Collection room in the Love Library, the openness of outdoors was appealing. And the idea was better than the last bright idea I'd heard about. Mark Vinz, a Dakota/Minnesota writer, told me what happened one weekend in Fargo's West Acres mall (the local joke is "Wasted Acres") when an arts council set up various booths and tables for displaying the arts and the crafts. And, unfortunately, the poetries.

Unfortunately, because how can poetry, with only its language to recommend it, be displayed? American malls are designed, after all, to catch the eyes and direct the movements of the moving crowd. Large stores create color-coded lanes that wind into vague "areas," half-sectioned off niches holding their goods within uncertain boundaries. And the central mallways lead only on, designed to channel the crowd as efficiently from one store to another as possible, even if there's a pretense at minimal gathering places. Where I used to live, our mall's central court sported homey, white wooden benches in a village square of artificial ficus under the distilled shine of the skylight but, even assuming one found this illusion satisfying, there were really few benches. The purpose of the concourse is travel: senior citizens, recognizing this, walk it for exercise and the mall authority, pretending that's how it was planned, now posts modest markers—quarter-mile, half-mile, one-mile—along the wall.

So in such an environment, how would the arts fare? The visual artists had the best chance—potters could work at wheels, sketchers could sketch, the craftspeople could at least sit behind their wares and become oblivious to the crowd. But poetry could offer only spoken words that melted into the general murmur of passing shoppers or oblivious mall-walkers who had brought their own sounds wired into their ears. It was the fiasco Mark expected, an eternal afternoon of taking turns with other disconsolate poets reading aloud while passersby—passed by. "I would *never* do that again," he ended the story, shaking his head as if practicing to refuse any similar future offer. "Never do that again."

But a prairie is surely different than a shopping mall—this is my thought at the time, anyway—and the Western Literature Association Conference begins and the fateful Saturday excursion to the Poets on the Prairie draws nearer. I decide to go, partly because it seems a friendly thing to do and, as a newcomer, I want to expand my acquaintances. Poets in Nebraska know each other, the result of an art in common and a common geography. I met Ted and Bill in an anthology Charles put together and Ted later told me about Don's work. I bought Twyla's book last month from a box Bill carried around in his car and Marge is a close friend of Twyla. Hilda knows every one and she and Marge write together some early mornings. Despite such close familiarities, Nebraska poets are neither a clique of well-wishers nor quite a family, being subject to the various distinctions some writers put on such things. "I like him/her as a *person*," one may say of another or, just as easily, "I like him/her as a *writer*." But they do know each other in a chain of connections that might allow me to enter and know the others better. It's partly this that draws me to the prairie. But it's also, I must admit, because I want to see how the whole idea works, to be there however it turns out.

On Friday, I ask Ted how to get to Nine-Mile Prairie. I thought the name indicated size but it's actually an address: five miles west and four miles north of the center, Ted emphasizes, of town. "The center?" I lift an eyebrow. City renewal projects struggle continually to reestablish the old marketplace or river front or train station, the city's actual center shifting within its various economic and social

vortices. The edges of cities are even more uncertain, a fringe blurring out into the countryside or, coming the other way, the surrounding fields and pastures fraying slowly into tatters of commercial activity and finally disappearing. Ted notices my eyebrow and ignores it; he has no desire to discuss the issue today. "Go out Highway 6," he says. "Turn right at the sign for the Lincoln Airpark and then left where it says Nine-Mile Prairie." I nod. These are directions I can follow. For this one Saturday, at least, I know "the place of poetry."

More often than is good for us, perhaps, we talk and write about the situation of poetry in America, or the place of the poet in society. There's something special—or, worse, specialized—about the concept of A Poet. It's a career not listed in the Yellow Pages where, in Lincoln at least, it would be printed between "Plumbing Fixtures" and "Political Organizations." Being introduced to A Poet, most people have the reaction a civilian might feel being introduced to a hit-man, both performers of an activity that, if not entirely secret, is rarely actually observed. They know such people exist, and a little about what they do, but it never occurred to them that they would meet one. But this uniqueness can go two ways—the poet can be at the special center of the culture or on the fringe in some specialized subculture—and both views have their supporters. It's a discussion I avoid since I can't get beyond the obvious complexity that all of us think we're at least necessary to our society, since people need shoes or an education or a beer or a computer, and that all of us also think we're a little powerless, a little pushed aside, a little toward some edge. I've heard a family farmer, an English teacher, a worker, and a stock broker speak of "special interests" in American political life and they each meant the others and not themselves. So we all live in one way near the center and in another way not and so do poets. They, too, feel at the center of things and yet are also on a kind of edge, a border between the society and something else, perhaps the something else.

So what is five miles west and four miles north of the center of a town and what has it got to do with poetry anyway? I worry more about this the week before. Is the audience being invited to observe the poets as if it were their natural habitat, like a fox or coyote on the sparse uplands or a bright-blossomed Penstemon in the Sand Hills? Even if the prairie were their subject we don't need to visit the place of a poem's origin any more than we would the actual landscape of a painting. Poems themselves take us to the place of their origin, a location which they describe or embellish or apotheosize or, if it is not a place with physical measurements, then a room in the giant honeycomb of the brain where thoughts of a particular frequency flash back and forth making the strange familiar and the familiar strange. So I am I going to a prairie to hear a poem—which could be accomplished elsewhere more comfortably and, I think, with greater attention—or to see, hear, stand beside or sit at the feet of A Poet or a poet, or to observe an exotic—and perhaps endangered—animal in its presumably natural habitat or, more simply, I am out to meet my Nebraskan neighbors and just as I went to the first block party of my life in my new neighborhood I've now chosen a party on the prairie, or maybe, and this may be most of it for everyone who comes, it's a strange idea but a nice afternoon and one wants to offer a version of moral support for the good cause of poetry.

Saturday arrives, then Saturday noon and I drive out over the multiple railroad tracks west on "O" Street, looking down on the coal trains which, right away, gets me off on the wrong foot. A lot of material may railroad its way across Nebraska but coal, mounded in its open cars, is the most visible. Driving the Sandhills one afternoon—two hundred miles, Alliance to Thedford to Broken Bow—I came on a dozen coal trains, six full and heading east from Wyoming, six empty and heading back west for more. And here below me in the railroad yards is the same sight—full and empty, reminders of the energy we need to keep this all going. A freight train winding through the prairie landscape is romantic, yes, and it is also practical, representing the livelihoods of workers, but it is also the emblem of the conquest of the prairie and the thick lines—tracks or cables or wires—that still suck power out of the earth and pump it into our civilization. In the rearview mirror the Lincoln skyline jiggles and jags and I think of the energy burning inside the buildings and towers, the electricity fizzing through a million wires to keep it going, the coal cars below me only temporarily stranded. We started burning the remains of grass digested by buffalo for fuel on this treeless plain and now take it for granted that something must be dug up or turned over to charge up our towns.

O St. becomes Highway 6 and I pass the sign for the People's City Mission, crossing Salt Creek, its once meandering flow now channeled and banked into an urban ditch sulking along behind warehouses at the edge of the city, and the edge is where I am. Lisa Knopp writes in *Field of Vision* about finding a Great Blue Heron hunting the "dirty, shallow waters of the Salt Creek in the transitional part of Lincoln, where cornfields and mega-supermarkets are next-door neighbors". There's no heron here today but this is the transitional boundary of the town, a temporary limit which keeps pushing itself outward.

I look southwest toward the Bottoms where Loren Eiseley—the most famous essayist of nature and science Lincoln has partial claim to (a local group called simply "Friends of Loren Eiseley" still exists)—played as a child in the first quarter of the century. Heavy rains flooded the Bottoms and then receded so that they became, his biographer says, a forest of giant sunflowers, a "great yellow and green wilderness" where Eiseley and other children explored and played. Most of the time, as a reader of Eiseley might expect, he preferred solitary jaunts. Years later he would revisit Lincoln, look for the pond from which he first collected specimens, and find it tamed inside the landscaped curves of a golf course. He realized that without the country club the area would have been unrecognizable anyway with suburban developments, but the fact remains, "this was all wild once, and the feeling that is left is somehow lost and bittersweet.

The pond is there. It is not the same pond." One either has the preserve of a country club or else the developers come—"one has no choice," Eiseley writes. But there are choices of development, the local paper explains, covering the latest worry of development. A few years ago, a desire for "country-style living" resulted in a number of enclaves of three-acre estates clustering at the city's edge. Large enough to require extra money and effort in extending services through or around them, and yet too small to be efficiently subdivided, they pose a barrier to expansion, the town crowding against the mock rail-fences of the landed gentry. We are caught everywhere on our borders.

And the language we use for where we live! A week ago, still exploring the town, I saw a sign proclaiming "Edgewood Village" and thought hard as I drove past. Nebraska does have villages, the town limit signs announcing their incorporation, and present-day Lincoln is a melding of several older villages, but one of them was not "Edgewood." This was never a village, and there were no woods here, and we know the phrase to be a lie. The shopping area is called Edgewood Center and, since there is really nothing for it to be the center of, we know that to be a lie as well or, worse, only a word. We are at the mercy of only words, even though we realize that the chain restaurant and bar which dubs itself "A Neighborhood Bar" is found most often as a small island surrounded by the strips and chunks of parking lots and malls, traffic eddying around it. Someone names our divisions and subdivisions, and in Lincoln we've been given Country Meadows, Amber Hills, Meadowlane, Fox Hollow—combinations of lies and disappearing territories. My own new house stands in an older subdivision called Indian Village, the streets named for tribes who have been eliminated from the state. Crossing Pawnee and Otoe Streets, I've headed west on Highway 6 to find a prairie. South of me, along Salt Creek is the hard-edged rectangle of Wilderness Park. My Saturday jaunt is becoming a darker journey than I'd planned—a matter of land and language.

I slide under Interstate 80, pass huge generic abstractions—Nebraska Machinery and Interstate Structures and Equipment—then turn at the sign for the Lincoln Airpark. To the left, the side away from town, is a suburban development a few blocks long and wide, one street winding in and then out again. But it's the sign in the field to the right that catches my attention: "For Sale: Industrial Ground. 135 acres. Zoned." The sign reads like a short-lined poem itself, two words, two words, two words, one. I have time before the poets gather on the prairie and I want to see how the earth here became Industrial Ground so, when an entry road arrives, I turn into the Lincoln Airpark, an expanse of grass and anonymous buildings that turn out to represent change as much as the Bottoms of Lincoln and Eiseley's transformed pond.

In 1942, I read from the sign, this ground was the new Lincoln Army Air Field, used for basic training and as a departure point for the war, an "overseas deployment staging area" in military lingo, and, when the war ended, a welcome back, a "separation center," the national rhythms of departure and arrival, coming home to Lincoln to then be separated. Closed in 1949, the site was reactivated three years later as a SAC base complete with bomber wings, refueling squadrons, and an ICBM squadron ("Lincoln's just an air base town on steroids," a young student from Omaha told me the first day of class), then closed again in 1966, the land returned to the city as part of its airport and an industrial park. I don't know how many industries are here; a Saturday silence lies on the blank grass that reminds me of the parade grounds of old forts. The only sign I see is strangely appropriate, even poetic—the Land and Sky Warehouse—although I know from shopping their retail outlet a few weeks after my arrival that the words don't refer to their product or their prairie location: they make furniture and they started in Colorado. I drive past a lake with stone-walled banks and a small neat island with a curved bridge, and find my way out of the Airpark, on the road for the last mile.

"Nine-Mile Prairie," the sign points west, and I turn off onto an unnaturally broad and solid road. It feels like an avenue approaching some sacred site but in a mile I have come up against a locked metal gate, the chain-link fence with prison-style barbed wire slanting on top between me and the anonymous bunkers and buildings beyond. I turn into the small parking lot on one side, get out, and discover the trail to the prairie heads off south, along the prison-camp fence. I've still got time to leave again, I think. I'm alone here and I didn't promise anyone I'd show up. It's a mistake for me to be here and for others to pretend there's a place called a prairie next to God knows what's been left behind by the Air Force or pretend that there's something important enough in poetry to lure me out of town. And just as I think I might be able to escape, here comes a car and Ted Kooser gets out with a lawn chair under his arm and says good-bye to his wife behind the steering wheel and I'm in it "for the duration" as my mother used to say, a common phrase in WWII. Ted's dressed in informal poet wear, a light blue denim shirt and jeans with a narrow beaded belt and moccasin loafers. He introduces me to a young man named Genoway, who got out of the car and is now standing nearby in jeans, a tan T-shirt, and a black baseball cap with "Camel" on the front. "He's also a poet," Ted says, so I'm meeting another one, at least getting to know the neighbor kids even if we could be choosing sides to play war-games on this ground.

A woman from the Western Literature Association drives up and offers them a ride and, since I'm standing beside them, me. We bump along the two-track road, the dry autumn grasses on one side, the prison-camp fence on the other, and Ted tells me about the bunkers beyond the fence, huge grassy humps with concrete doors. After the war, a hundred or so of these prairie acres were "converted"—that's the word we use, you understand—into a bomb storage area. The bombs are gone but, since large bales of hay sit between the bunkers, I imagine a farmer wheeling his tractor around them and wonder what he thinks. Then I wonder—a little closer

to home—what I think, coming to hear poetry around the bunkers.

Our van tops the hill and stops in a parking circle mown out of the prairie which itself seems to be a strip of land between two pastures not a quarter mile wide. The Lincoln skyline is dominantly visible to the east, and I'm taking in red and white water towers, microwave relay stations, towers and buildings, the capitol dome, all of it, trying to hide my disappointment, like a savvy kid over the wrong birthday present. It's only nine miles from an ex-Air Base town, so what did I expect? I don't know, except I wanted more "prairie" than I find here. The issue of the place of poetry in America is turning out to be nonsensical. There seems to be no such place as a "place."

Now we're out of the car, and the woman from the Association explains the battle plan. They've set up stations along the broad swaths cut through prairie grass, stakes with a red ribbon leading to one station, blue to another, and yellow to a third. The poets will go to the end of their path and sit at their station—a blanket for each station has been provided—and read as the audience comes by. Then she gets back in the van and leaves. Well, I tell myself, it's a pleasant afternoon and Ted is always amiable so it will generally be all right if someone, at least, comes. We walk the mown trail to the red-ribbon station and he unfolds his lawn chair and sits down. I sit cross-legged to the side, looking up at him, silhouetted half against the Big Bluestem which is reddish and half against the big autumn sky which is bright blue. I don't say how strange this all seems since I figure he thinks so too and doesn't need to be reminded. It's a matter of being a performer and you've agreed to do it and the stage is too small or too large or the mike doesn't work and none of that matters. As long as someone comes.

Hallelujah, someone's coming. Two young women approach over the hill and it turns out they know Ted so there are introductions again. There may be a few others soon, they promise. Is it time to begin? someone wonders. And, my silent question, how would we know? We hem and haw collectively for a few moments and a decision is made. The blanket is spread and Ted settles back in his lawnchair and picks up his latest book. I realize I've wondered which poems one might read on the prairie, so another motivation for coming here is to see what they pick and what that can tell me about the place of poetry and the places of poems. Should the poem echo the landscape, or vice versa? Sitting in grass, does one read a poem about grass and why would one? And if one doesn't, and doesn't on purpose, why would one do that?

Ted opens his book, leafs one page, and starts, "So This Is Nebraska," the title an absolutely appropriate observation to begin with and I'm enchanted. Inside the poem, it's a Sunday afternoon in July where the gravel road "rides with a slow gallop/over the fields" and the speaker has his hand out the car window, gliding in the air that rushes past. Times like this, the poem says, you feel like that abandoned pickup sitting off in the hollyhocks. You feel like letting things go.

You feel like waving. Indeed, at these evocative moments, "You feel like stopping the car/and dancing around on the road". Instead, he says, you wave "and leave your hand out gliding/larklike over the wheat, over the houses."

Ted's poem metaphorically gets us to where we are, out in the country or a version of it, and he follows that with "Shooting the Farmhouse," a poem inside of which sits an abandoned house holding itself together for awhile, but at the thin edge of extinction. A group of pheasant hunters arrives to finish the process, flushed themselves, full of beer and ammunition, by blasting out what's left of the windows. After they've left the poem, the newspapers that were used to pack an old woman's dishes "begin to blow back and forth through the rooms." So Ted has driven us out to the prairie and shown us two familiar sights, two sites of the past echoing in the present. From where I'm sitting, I look up at him against high grass and then the two-thirds of the world that is blue sky. I know if I stand up, I'll see the Lincoln skyline, but I don't stand up, and I wonder if this is escapism—hiding one's head in the grassland—or how life is lived. After all, the native grass around me, doesn't care there's a pasture or a cornfield a hundred yards away or the skyline of a city beyond that. But then—yes, it does, I think. Or if not "care" it's certainly been affected by the people living nine miles away and maybe its birds and its creepy-crawly surface life is affected by having a cornfield next door.

New things to think about. The first van has arrived and, attracted by the sight of our small cluster of humans, down the mown path come eight people and another poet, Mike Johnson. Now, instead of four friends listening, it feels more like a group. We're large enough to count for something, we fit in with each other. We go together, too—with our tweed, denim, plaid and canvas we look like a cross between an English Department picnic and a Nature Conservancy field meeting. Mike's a bit more western in a black denim shirt, ink-blue jeans, and cowboy boots decoratively sewn in gray and green. He's probably supposed to be somewhere else, he admits, shifting a little and looking around, reluctant to move. Imagine leaving the only gathering of people on the prairie to walk down a mown swatch to your proper station and sit alone in the Big Bluestem waiting for someone to come. Ted offers a solution, that they take turns reading poems. "Dueling poets," he adds with a mild smile.

Mike agrees, taking out his book. He squats—one knee higher than the other, true cowboy style, the posture one uses around the campfire or hunkering down to read a track in the soft earth—and reads a historical poem about the western expedition of the Grand

Duke Romanov, lightly thumping his words for punctuation. He finishes and there's a pause. There were pauses after Ted's poems, as well, but suddenly I'm noticing them and realize they usually feel awkward to me. What are we supposed to do in the expanding silence at the end of a poem read aloud? I've not answered that, after years of attending poetry readings. Applause after each one is inappropriate or at least impractical. Silence may be called for but I've always felt the need for some transition out of where the poem's taken me back to the world of the room of the reader. I shift in my seat sometimes to help bridge that silence. I try to murmur some "Hmm!" softly so as not to intrude but loudly enough for it be heard by myself. I wish the poet would pause and then say something to bring us back together. I wish we could all shake our heads and sigh "Amen!" or get up and dance, grinning. As it is, and outside, where a "Hmm" would hardly survive, I nod my head—"imperceptibly," I'd think—and, as do my students in a class outdoors, study the grass which has the look right now in the sunlight of fierce, blonde wire.

Mike reads "The Day William Stafford Died" and all the poets, and probably all the Western Literature Association members here know Stafford's work or knew Stafford. I imagine a deeper silence around us for this one. I bow my head, again to the glistening yellow grass, and drop out of this poem to think about Stafford.

Soon the woman from the Association comes up. Another poet is waiting at his station, she informs us, with no audience. As one could expect, people were attracted to a place where other people had already gathered, a kind of tribe settling itself on the prairie, the end of a small migration. Mike suggests bringing the other poet up here. This is not the answer the woman from the Association would like, but no one has figured out how to manage this part of the process. Were we expected to listen for ten minutes and then move on to another poet? And why? Were they expecting so many people that each station would be respectably attended? But even so, when would they have moved? Or was this really, after all, only another version of Poetry in the Mall, a little shop set up on the plains—a mown swath instead of color-coded carpet—for people to walk by, eyeing, or 'ear-ing' The Poet? I knew this wouldn't work, I tell myself, glad at least that I'm not involved.

Mike almost shrugs and reads another poem—"Jesse James"—whom, in his crouched position and black shirt, he more and more looks like to me. Ted follows this with "The Gilbert Stuart Portrait of Washington"—one of the more famous pictures of all our childhoods, and the most famous incomplete one. Some of us who had that poster of a painting in our early classrooms smell wood floors and chalk dust and some people imagine the plains outside the school windows and some people imagine the mountains but we all remember being faced with the pale enigmatic visage, the slightly sissy lips, of our Country's Father and we have a small jolt of poetic recognition as Ted ends, "Before us always, he who could never tell a lie/kept his jaws closed on the truth." At the last words of the poem, in lieu of applause, a grasshopper surprisingly close to us suddenly winds out a blast like the Emergency Broadcast signal on radio.

The woman from the Association still flutters at the edge of the group, still visibly worried, and a new plan is formed. We all collect ourselves up and troop to the other station where a few other people have finally gathered by this time, beside a small shallow ravine laced with cottonwoods and sumac, its fringed leaves half red and half green, caught in this transitional time we have chosen.

And this is Don Welch, at last, my first time meeting him although there are too many people for introductions and I've become a member of the audience and don't mind it, sink into it as a release from responsibility. Don—light blue denims and shirt with shiny, black boots—reads now and there's a poem about aspen trunks from a photo by Ansel Adams and then "Roundhouse," a baseball poem. Then Mike reads "Carrie Nation" and in all the people spoken of in the poems and all the places and all the times, I've fallen almost completely out of attention, as my students used to in the promiscuous open air, and I'm overwhelmed and no longer know where to look. The air is winning out over the words, the grass is winning, the land and sky are winning.

There seems no connection now between the poems and the world around us, or no integral connection. The wind announces itself much more loudly in the cottonwoods in the ravine—the leaves dry and half-varnished, like an antique being stripped of cover, a yellow and tan skin part splotchy disease, part natural autumn death—and the words of poems begin to get rustled around by the breeze. One listener lies on his back so either his eyes are closed and the words mingle with the hush-hush of grass and the cottonwood leaves that are now rattling more fiercely, or his eyes are open straight up into the sky and the poem is making, out of the cloud he sees, a car, a windmill, a hope, a fear. Another listener sits looking quizzically up as if the poet were a wildlife lecturer demonstrating the plumage of a dead bird for identification. Maybe one is thinking Why am I here?

Don pulls a page from his sheaf and reads a poem dedicated to Marge Saiser and Twyla Hansen and, as he finishes, two young women appear over the rise of prairie and come down the mown path toward our station. Don greets them and they are Marge Saiser and Twyla Hansen and he says how amazing it is that he just read a poem dedicated to them and here they are and someone in the audience—some of whom have accepted their roles as strangers at a reunion and some of whom feel like in-laws now gathered into the family—suggests he read it again, "Dropseed and Sage," and he reads it again and everyone seems happy.

There's the feeling of a changing of the guards, now that some new poets are here and, although Twyla's going to read a poem, she's still standing up so I use my sense of the transitional moment and slide to my feet, murmuring thanks to almost no one in particular and heading back up the mown corridor of grassland. I've stayed just the right time for me—this is how I think of it. Another poem or two and I'll have to stay longer, longer maybe than I really want to, more for politeness than poetry. I imagine, as I make my way back along the prison fence, Marge's vivid language, Twyla's observations, and Bill's deceptively nonchalant story-telling. I'm leaving the afternoon in safe hands, whatever my own problems with the idea.

I stop at the entrance to Nine-Mile Prairie to read the sign I couldn't read when we drove by. It's really only a parcel of prairie, having shrunk to a little over a couple hundred acres, but still one of the largest pieces of virgin prairie left in eastern Nebraska. For forty years, the plaque says, it's been a laboratory for studies in plant ecology, most of them under the guidance of J. E. Weaver whose thoughts on the grassland are quoted on the entrance sign. "One is awed by its immensity, its complexity, and the seeming impossibility of understanding it and describing it. But after certain principles and facts become clear, one comes not only to know and understand the grasslands but also to delight in them." Back by the parking lot is another sign dedicated, though it doesn't say why, to Marguerite and Neil Hall which calls the landscape I've just been in a "memorial to the Past, a joy to the Present, and a legacy to the Future."

Both signs are true of the prairie and of poetry but I'm caught between the conventional, what-sounds-good sentiment and the ragged, holding-on-by-your-fingernails feel of these small places. This is after all, a "preserve," an ecological niche held onto stubbornly, and I'm standing near thick bomb-storage vaults looking east to the state capitol, the First Bank building, a water tower, an elevator and mill, all this from a shrinking acreage of prairie caught between the pressure edges of commerce, agriculture, and war. Memorials, joys, and legacies may not stand a chance against bombs and subdividers and plows.

"This fragment," Twyla writes of the prairie, perhaps reading it right now on the prairie behind me as I turn onto the road, "this ancient nuance" which goes on and goes on to "yield its unsung hay." Poets on the Prairie will be over this afternoon and a few weeks from now, I've read, the Friends of Loren Eiseley are scheduled to meet here for a lecture on the grassland. On the grassland. A small tattered parcel serving as many purposes as it can, a kind of sacred ground, a ceremonial circle, a setting for Earth Day and for poets, a study plot for scientists. I'll probably come back by myself, I realize, and I start to feel, turning south toward Highway 6, at least a little clearer about coming out here in the first place.

It's not the primal expanse, not that absolute grand system of the heart of grass, burned and resurrected, swaying and holding sway between all four horizons. But if this landscape has been cut up, fenced, plowed, dumped, developed, and converted—shrunk to our size—we need all the more to visit small places that still hold the echo of that larger place. And poems, it seems logical now, are small places with an echo of the larger space of life, a lyric moment in time, small but pure, one returns to again and again. We know that major ecosystems exist (there are five in Nebraska—this one is Central Tallgrass Prairie) but we know they too divide and subdivide into a patchwork of matrixes and niches, a crisscross of corridors and paths and edges and there's a complex purity about each one.

If this landscape is one of "borderless edges," as Twyla writes, maybe that's what I have to get used to, both open space and yet the sense that things are bordering each other, ambiguous transition zones where life complicates itself. Plants of different species meet along such edges and animals use them as pathways, a foray into another world to then retreat, the way we use poems as corridors to follow into a different place for nourishment, refreshment, even play, and then move back into the familiarity of our original patch or hollow.

I'm driving back from my prairie afternoon toward a patchwork quilt of poetry, a town visited by poets Simon Ortiz, Martha McFerren, and Marv Bell in the same few weeks. The Chaparral Poets of Lincoln, a group of mostly older women, meet once a month to read and talk about each other's poetry and on alternate Fridays graduate students and instructors gather at Duffy's Bar on "O" Street for "The No-Name Reading" to hear each other hold forth from the small, carpeted stage given over at night to bands with names like Begger, Raw Nerve, and Starla the Nudie Dancer.

"How can we locate ourselves," writes Don Welch, "if not by the things we live by?" And what things we live by. I pass the Airpark with its Industrial Ground, its Land and Sky, for sale. Behind me is the sacred prairie and laboratory, ahead of me the skyline of Lincoln with its Indian Villages and Eden Parks, its Rolling Hills and Knolls, and it's hard to hold all this variety together, it's all edge and border to me, with no sense of separation, a collection of field and patch and swath, a jigsaw puzzle with no sense of logic or overall composition, and what things am I living by?

And then I see them ahead and slow the car. In the narrow swale of grass between the uplifted road and the industrial ground two blonde teenage girls are picking sunflowers along the fence. It is not the great green and yellow wilderness that Eiseley knew as a child but they are still picking sunflowers. They are laughing and talking to each other, perhaps happy at what they're doing, perhaps

considering it a foolish thing to be doing and happy at that. They stagger in the uneven ground of the wild ditch, lurching from one wondrous plant to another, yanking at the rough, thick stems. They lay the long sunflowers in bundles in their pale, young arms, not thinking of home. The sign just beyond them says "Lincoln City Limits."

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