

GREAT PLAINS



Pattiann Rogers

The dwelling places of my life have always been on or very near the Great Plains of North America. I was raised in the southwest corner of Missouri, only a few miles from the borders of Kansas, Oklahoma and Arkansas. I moved to Texas when I was twenty-nine and lived there for twenty years. I have resided now for the past ten years in Colorado, east of the Rockies. While my poems have not always dealt directly with the landscape of the plains, I sense an important influence on my writing of that broad, flat, open, seemingly endless expanse of earth against sky with which I am so familiar.

I agree with the following thoughts expressed in *The American Heritage Book of Indians* (1961).

The plains are afloat in mysterious space, and the winds come straight from heaven. Anyone alone in the plains turns into a mystic... Something happens to a man when he gets on a horse, in a country where he can ride at a run forever; it is quite easy to ascend to an impression of living in a myth. He either feels like a god or feels closer to God.

(I would extend these remarks to apply to women as well and to include motion of any kind across the plains, even by automobile.)

While I might resist being tagged a mystic, I do agree generally with this description of the effect of the plains on the psyche. Many of my poems are about unrestrained motion across the land and the convictions and perceptions that rise from that motion. And on the plains, it seems easy to believe any single life is part of a larger pattern, part of a deified pattern. All life—whether blue gamma and buffalo grasses, or killdeer, homed lark, forbs or foxes, the white-tailed jack rabbit, purple prairie gentians, fireflies, tumble bugs—all life of the plains is encompassed and carried beyond itself in significance, even as each individual retains its own unique being.

Whether one feels lost or empowered on those very great, Great Plains, freedom is a conviction inherent to those spaces, not just physical freedom or freedom of motion, but an untethered, wind-swept freedom of the imagination and possibility. I believe in the virtue of this kind of open freedom in writing. I maintain a commitment to this freedom so easy to apprehend on the plains, and to the energy and affirmation that rise from it.

EIGHT POEMS



Pattiann Rogers

STRANGER

I allowed the stranger's stray
cat into the house. She wore a bell
and carried with her the stranger's
sense of herself, searched the premises,
intent, restless, prowling beneath
sinks and the cobwebbed mouse-tangles
of staircase closets, into hidden
cellar recesses, leaped up to the wild
sunlight of cedar and oak-motion
at the kitchen sill, she and her bell,
tipping along railings and counter edges,
sliding past the mosaic ginger jars
on the mantelpiece, dainty around
the ceramic Pierrot, St Francis
carved in white stone.

The sound of her bell, soft rattle,
soft as her motion, became the first
living bell of bedsprings, the only
chime among box and chest formations
in the static community of the attic,
the sole tone of tolling brought to silent
cupboards, dull banister pillars.

Pursing, rumpling the chenille bedcovers
and chintz pillows, she stopped once
on our velvet lounge to lounge herself,
stretched shapeless, a boneless bag
of pure somnolence. Stilled and quiet,
the bell became the soundless ring
of her sleep, a sleep so holy and harmonic
it relinquished the name of its host.

She's departed, and now nothing here
is entirely itself, nothing free
of cat taint, cat translation, cat
angle and verve. The tabletop
is a cat pedestal; curtain fringe,
cords, ornamented casements, cat prey.
The wood grain of the walls moves
like the liquid motion of cat winding
through empty hallways. And outside
the window where the cat perched
briefly, even the nesting finch I watch
is no longer autonomous, being,
in addition, finch in cat's eye,
the only finch a cat can see.

The corridors and implications
of my place, shaped by cat present
and gone, shapes cat lost and recovered.
Strange reordering strangeness-come
next time, wolf, butterfly, sloth, slug,
wraith, wind...

SPEAKING OF EVOLUTION: LUMINOSITY

For aren't we all the children
of the children of great-grandfathers
who called down lightning, who sought out
the tree struck and smoldering, who minded
the punk log day and night as if it
were alive? We are each of us the progeny
of grandmothers who guarded burning
rocks held in seashells, who cradled
coals in clay cups through windy mountain
journeys; the sons and daughters
of mothers who blew sparks on twisted
moss wicks floating in bowls of oil,
of the family of those who peeled
bark strips from trailside trees,
twined and lit the funnels to burn
as torches on rainy night treks.
We are kin to the kin of fathers

who spun wood against wood until
the smoky heat ignited fine-thread
tinder of cedar hairs, charred
corn tassels, who fanned and coddled
and spoke to the warm light coming.

The old structures of these ritual
passions, kept deep in the genes,
in the heart—like precious scripts
preserved in the rock cellars of hidden
monasteries—these are eternal. They breathe,
alive in the seed of every coming child,
each tiny embryo skeleton bound
and forming to fit forever the bones
and powers of all past solicitors of light.

And during any cold, frightful time
when something of vision is missing,
these talents will appear, rising,
seeming of a sudden resurrected—
like inert soil opened to sun seems
of a sudden to flower—the kindling,
the watchful nursing, the urging forth
of that first slight savior of flame,
the same close kissing of fire,
as if, in truth, the earth had never
been absolved without such religion.

THE NATURE OF THE HUCKSTER

Put on his garment of rain
came swaying in silver across
the garden, his fragrance
of clarity preceding him. Put on
his garment of theft, stole
the seeds of the pecan, the eggs
of the horseshoe-crab, roe
of cod, roe of mackerel, stole
the children's gold and purple
marbles, stole breath, stole fever.
Filled his pockets with blood.

Filled his pockets with charity.
Emptied his pockets of confetti—
feathers and bones. Emptied

his pockets of beetle menageries.
Over his mantle of frost, donned
his mantle of sun. Over his
many-colored coat of deception,
put on his many-colored robe
of verisimilitude. Under his attire
of aridity, wore his thunder cloak
of deluge. Put on his robe
of celibacy. Put on his jewelry
of prostitution. Traded his
garment of frivolity. Bartered
his overcoat of constancy. Shucked
his shawl of grief. Threw off
his hood of sanity. Under his silk

cape of surrender, clothed himself
in his steel vestment of siege. Arrayed
himself in his garb of disdain. Covered
himself in his rags of spring. Wrapped
himself in his blankets of faith.
Discarded his garment of life. Donned
his garment of death. Put on his
garment of matter. Took off
his garment of light. Discarded
his garment of decay. Put on
his garment of lies. Paraded
back and forth, plain and invisible
in his ruse of apparel, hawking,
all the while, himself. Take him.

GOSPEL

Given like a savior broken
into many sharp, shining pieces
coming like rain to flat cactus
creekbeds, like a savior penetrating
the body like fresh storms of stars,

like showers of fiery, silver sperm,
a bountiful blue savior flitting
like a savior with four double wings
of sun, and a dark savior appearing
where the depth of the lake loses
its visibility, a fat, grinning
savior afloat like a sinking moon,
a savior bound like a sleeping cat
curled up like an egg, multiple
saviors piled like tangled mud frogs
in a spring pond wallow, coming
like a naked savior, like a false
savior like a false foxglove, a rousing
savior walking through himself
as if he were evening smoke rising
through smoke, a miming savior,
a repeating savior like daylight
and daylight like a savior praying
for all and any saviors of saviors.

DISUNION: MOONLESS HOUND MONOLOGUE

The moonless hound in his night
rambles can only swallow the slow,
empty revolution of the deprived heavens,
can only take into the paltry shell
of his musing the pale and worthless
crumbs of the stars, can only steal
occasionally a grey and shriveled
fragment of light—lone leaf of forest
phosphorescence, dim luminaria
of mushroom, glow bug. The petty
deeds and crimes he attempts
are piteous in their dull fumbling
and shallow vision.

Surely he's still beautiful, wandering
beneath the vacant circumference left
by the missing moon and into which his sporadic
baying is inevitably sucked away to silence.
In this time, his moonless eyes, moving

randomly here and there, sometimes turning
backwards into his head, are blind
to all but the existence of the moonless.

He can only breathe in those invisible
webs linking the faint points of all
constellations, can only lick the withered
marrow from the night's skinny ribs,
can only read his own vague intuition
of possible scripture, a past enlightenment,
a past breach and break.

This landscape of lack exists within,
exactly like the reality shaping
his loping form. Even if the black
bowl of his hollow heart should crack
with sorrow at midnight, there could
never be any moonlight shining
from within to illuminate the unique
pattern of his grief.

In the consistency of his privation,
as he ceases his shambling to pause
inside the space of this absence,
as he reveals, by so being, everything
he cannot possess, I know and understand
his pining, for I am the lost and shattered
moon over which his missing shadow
once passed.

AND MOTION IN PHILOSOPHY

We say we move miles across desert
ice and black volcanic sand, down
numbers of leagues into the night
of oceans and caves. Marking
units and distances, we say
we move an hour among damp
spring grasses, two days
along canyon roads and creekbeds,
country lakeside borders.

This is the way we move,
because we pronounce this to be
the way of our moving.

But maybe in truth we pass through,
not just miles of forest, but a testament
of trees, neither walking nor riding
but moving as sun moves in one
steady procedure through underwater
weeds, or as music moves making
time and space of the void.

And perhaps we move as well
through ardor, entering it
and leaving it as if it were
an incendiary city with gates.
Perhaps we cross the seven
parameters of bliss as if each
were a circular river to ford.
In bed asleep we might approach
a settlement of inner union
where it exists in a thousand
strange measures around the earth.

All facts of the body, we know,
are composed solely of light
and its speed. Therefore, travel and time
and a single blood corpuscle
of breath in the heart must be, in myth
and song, one and the same.

While considering the consecrated motion
of winter moonlight across a vision
of white in the mind, it might be possible
to discard all one's clothes, step in
and move with a conscious speed at will
through such a current of God.

REITERATION

This contract is not singular.
It is present in each shaft
of the chickadee's chestnut
feathers holding to flesh. Part them
on the wing or on the belly down
to hot skin and touch the document.
The bonds of this contract are plural
and solitary, present in coon paw
and river print, in swallow and scat,
in rain falling on dry leaves,
like time in meter, chord
to arpeggio to chord.

Its terms are forest ashes and crystal,
scarlet persimmon and blood, the cave
and sunlit chamber of winter, wind
across corn tassel and granite.

One might believe this contract
to be invisible, invisible where
the disappearing points of the urchin's
spines appear as the motion
of the sea, where the shifting
reflection of the water willow
and the wavering shadow of the water
willow merge and part, where truth
and lie first draw together and link
from pre-death to presence.

Like anise-pleasure contained
in the seed-size dry fruits
of the fennel, so the binding
signature is contained in the agitation
of poplars taken by wind, in the sucker—
tipped tube feet of the slender purple
starfish, in the release of midnight's
cry by root cricket, by poaching owl.

Again and again, inside the purity
of tone in the ear of the mind
of the bell caster at his fire,

this signal tolling will continue
to repeat itself. Like the pause
of the winged ant stopped, extinct
and unbroken in rock amber, this contract
remains its own reiterated event
from coming to coming.

Here is my hand on it.

WATCHING THE ANCESTRAL PRAYERS OF
VENERABLE OTHERS

Lena Higgins, 92, breastless,
blind, chewing her gums by the window,
is old, but the Great Comet of 1843

is much older than that. Dry land
tortoises with their elephantine
feet are often very old, but giant

sequoias of the western Sierras
are generations older than that.
The first prayer rattle, made

on the savannah of seeds and bones
strung together, is old, but the first
winged cockroach to appear on earth

is hundreds of millions of years
older than that. A flowering plant
fossil or a mollusk fossil in limy

shale is old. Stony meteorites buried
beneath polar ice are older than that,
and death itself is very, very

ancient, but life is certainly older
than death. Shadows and silhouettes
created by primordial sea storms

erupting in crests high above
one another occurred eons ago,
but the sun and its flaring eruptions

existed long before they did. Light
from the most distant known quasar
seen at this moment tonight is old

(should light be said to exist
in time), but the moment witnessed
just previous is older than that.

The compact, pea-drop power
of the initial, beginning nothing
is surely oldest, but then the intention,

with its integrity, must have come
before and thus is obviously
older than that. Amen.