



**The Possibilities
of Blue Sky**

GARY DAVID



Salt River Poetry Series

The
Possibilities
of
Blue Sky

by

Gary David



Northland Press of Winona
Winona, Minnesota
1989

FIRST EDITION

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Library of Congress Number 89-62296

ISBN 1-882021-02-9

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Acknowledgement is given to "Astro*Carto*Graphy," San Francisco, 1976, for quotations in *Winter Solstice: South Dakota*

Some of these poems have previously appeared in the following publications, to whose editors grateful acknowledgment is made:

Arachne, The Black Hills Monthly, Eye of the Heart (chapbook), Horizons: The South Dakota Writers' Anthology, Green Bowl Review, Greenfield Review, The Haight Ashbury Literary Journal, Juxtapose, Kencompott (pamphlet), Kindred Spirit, Maybe Mombasa, Mid-American Review, The New Laurel Review, The Northland Review, Option, Pasque Petals, Ponchartrain Review, Prairie Winds, The Rapid City Journal, Shelly's, Sunrust, Wanbli Ho Journal and Winter.

Some selections also appearing in *The Northland Quarterly*.

The author would like to thank the South Dakota Arts Council for a fellowship grant awarded for a period during which some of these poems were written.

For additional copies, write:

NORTHLAND PRESS OF WINONA
SALT RIVER POETRY SERIES
51 E. 4th Street, Suite 412
Winona, Minnesota 55987

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

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Driving North Toward the Border

The last snow scars the furrows of winter
wheatfields across North Dakota. A stiff wind snaps
off brittle flowerheads of ditch weeds and bruises
ice puddles. A razor-quick spray shoots up and spits
like a wet cat. I stop the pickup off the shoulder
of the highway beside a mule deer
frozen dead. The moon rises full
in its onyx eyes. I try to fall
asleep on the scat. Over and over
tumbleweeds turn when I close my own eyes.
At the farthest reaches of my sight
across these plains, the windows
of a deserted farmhouse look back burnt
black as the inside of a closed matchbox.

Beyond the horizon's rim all life seems
to have vanished, cold, as candles blown out
in each direction smolder in the darkness.

The Face of the Prairie in Spring

The snow thaws at last and leaves
a gray crust across a face pale
as a full moon of bone,
Half-buried in night-thick prairie sod
all winter long, the face looked forward
to some saving grace or sign
of green God alone could stir within
the cold skin of this slope. As the face slept
under a mounting weight of white, its firm body
drove herds of sleet-fleeced Herefords
through the fierce mouths of blizzards
to somehow graze. Now the cows nudge
the face awake. New shoots of grass tickle
its nose as the chick-soft sunlight blushes
a meadow rose into each cheek.

Listen. The face is beginning
to chuckle now and call impatiently
for its body once again
to bring a shovel and a gun.

Walt Whitman Makes His Passage Through Wessington Springs, South Dakota

One of the first things he sees
is that Farmers Savings Bank (est. 1911)
no longer deals out foreclosed mortgages.
Firm as the locked forelegs of a stalled mule,
its brown marble pillars still stand
beneath the sign hand-painted in black
block letters: IDLE HOURS BAR.
In the back under a bare bulb
at three in the afternoon, the city council sits
sucking on Buds. Smudged and greasy
as spent currency, the cards are shuffled.
The deck is cut (and dried). The joker is dealt
with a straight face. At the cafe
across Main Street they talk
(plain as always) of yesterday's
thunderstorm. And then of course
you know it's a bad sign
when the only picture show in town
(El Rancho) had to be shut down
for good. The Swede who used to run the place
now has got it made, the matrons say
clucking like Cornish hens.
(His has become the biggest
porno palace in Minneapolis!)

cont.

Across the sky the cold, wet stars start to poke
their noses in our earthly business.
A German shepherd barks, Bullfrogs croak.
A newly returned robin pulls a worm
like a rubberband out of the mud.
On the coteau above Wessington Springs,
the old bard lounges in the grass. Silently
he watches over the rooftops
of the world. Drifting in the flow
of his fleecy beard, pasque flowers whisper
his poems. A John Deere discing the field below
drowns them out. He peers into living rooms
all across town. The gaudy electric
screen blooms and wilts before mesmerized eyes
like time-lapse tulips, geraniums, and daffodils.
Outside in the cool breath of pale buds
the minuscule power drills
of mosquitoes begin to buzz. The night
falling with his failing vision, the bard
can barely make out the rows of cars parked
on lovers' lane. But inside every one he knows
the green yearning of perfect bodies
is turning on the axis of the Earth's
true purpose. For the first time
in over a century of coal dust rain and rusting
locomotive wheels, he smiles wide
as over a half a world away the "rondure"
of the sun rises pure over the Ganges.

*The Risks at Odds with the
Bird in the Hand*

North through Valentine
past Mission, South Dakota
we drove east over the Rosebud
Reservation bound for Winner. The edge
of day had clouded over the setting
of the red sun. On a far-off bluff a white
boarded-up Baptist church was hulking across
the prairie like a ghost ship. (Or maybe an iceberg
blurred by the light abandoning our eyes
was on the rise.) A rusted-out Rambler
plugging past a clutter of shacks
swerved and turned in. Along the arc
of the horizon TV antennas had shriveled up black
as grasshoppers shot with pesticides.
Night broke out a blizzard and the road
slipped under the tires unrecovered
in the blank rearview mirror. Signposts present
the only signs: NO PASSING ZONE ENTERING
CENTRAL STANDARD TIME ZONE

cont.

Winner is the only place
for hundreds of miles around
hunters farmhands and cowpunchers can go without guilt and
gamble nights with the long green of day labor
away. The Pheasant Bar's got backroom blackjack with
5 card stud on odd-numbered nights while
the Peacock's got the even days and one
winnowy bleach-blonde go-going naked but
for her gold-sequined G-string. We fools thirst
fast and lose all
sense of time in this place. Driven to know
what risks fail to hold, the ace
in the hand baffles most. Coming
from the sunset, some joker might find himself
lost in the longing to play the _oldcn
Gate pinball machine (G burnt out).
But it's a sure bet even
in spite of the fact it has
no flippers to stroke.

***Bull in the Peacock Bar
(Winner, South Dakota)***

“Big fat rats in the bins.... Them goddum
elevators 're rustin' out
agin... Pretty damn good
train wreck down
Valentine way... Hell I
love to drive back
'n' forth through the field
with the tractor... Gotta be
gittin' the fertilizer
in the spreader right
quick... Y'know
I'm really a farmer
at heart. He kin do all
the cookin' fer all
I care!”

As she buys the house
another round, mudflaps flap
in the dry wind outside.

Prairie Dawn

Up all night brooding
an offshoot of Blake's sunflower
poem, I leave the house, make the brow
of the nearest rise and wake at last
to the first bloom of sage
over the town. The west wind sends
pine scent from far within the Black Hills
to greet the sun. Blades of grass wave
their open mouths bobbing hungry
as baby robins. Beyond this green mass
I walk a sentience of song
lingers in the air. From thickets
of milkweed the liquid warble
of a meadowlark rises
like rivers of dew to the deep
blue above. The moment wavers
like a wind-borne seed.
The moment all things flow into one

cont.

leaves the moment I try to grasp it, hold it
up to the sun to see if I can see
the juice of the leaf
sluicing through it.
The moment caught just
one time flees beyond the earth
in a bird's breath. Catch it
once more and what one is left
standing with is but in the hand:
hollow bone and mute feather.

As the sun rises, the shadows
pull me down the hill, heavy
and ready to pull the shades to
fall into a sleep deep as stone.

What It Was

Half bird, half bug
whacked my windshield
today. Too big
or too tiny for anything
I've ever run across.
It's scaly body
oozed its last
thick juices down
the glass.
Yellow and brown, its
downy wings flopped
like a man
trying to fly.
Stuck
in one of the wiper blades, it
died.
When I tried to
get rid of the thing by turning
them on, it
merely made a messy
arc
on the driver's side.
Finally, thank god, it
flicked off
into the anonymity
of the ditch—too quick
for taxonomy.

cont.

Tonight I'm still headed
for the Black Hills
on this plain known by names
other than what
it is, that is:
the inland sea. The arc
remains
in front of me. The star
(the first one I see) may be
a plane of some sort or
other. I still
will never know what
it was. It
just was, that's all.

Between that dying thing and this
U.F.O. or whatever
the hell it was, the hours
have floated away like bubbles rising
off miles and miles of
seabed. I drive on
and on
and dream of fatal peaks where
undreamed of creatures first
take to the air.

The 11th Hour

Over the high plain the midnight-blue Air Force trucks
take their time. Between F-1 and I-9
the boys get bored. (In other words, wasted.)
They smoke imported gold
or pack their noses with cocaine.
The boys who man the Minutemen
would rather be disco dancing or playing
Space Invaders. They are carrying out routine orders.
Tomorrow's payday. Their watches flash
the red numerical instant. Over the airwaves
a tune from Chicago floats: "Does anybody really know
what time it is Does anybody really care?"
The boy from Boise thinks it's ancient. They're waiting
for something far out to happen here.

A spotted eagle makes a low sweep of the fields
for something small and quick. As a slender index finger
presses the big red button, its talons grip
and snap the neck. One synchronous motion
and it's all over.

The Cartographers of the Heart

The men of Murphy's Bar Mount Rushmore
Road of Rapid City make maps. It's their Law. (The map
is a schematic of longing.) An unused napkin
is used with ballpoint-precise delight delineating
the subtle ducts the hungry air will take as it shoots
through Washington's nose. Though these men of the earth are men
of their deed, they contest hotly the rights of passage
of even a cold water main. (The heart is always the heart
of longing. What is called love is simply a complex
invention of the cerebral cortex.) These men are concerned
with deep structures the surface reflects. Charges
hidden in the Hills await their footsteps. Precarious business

is in the making. Between men and women, the High
Plain's unchanging exchange of places once prolonged
the space in time before the heart's founding. The mapping
proceeded from that day to this and will, It's well
known women in this bar make napkins and men
follow the lines they draw their blood with.

Independence Day Night, 1979
(Crawford, Nebraska)

Outside the hotel cafe the first firecrackers sputter
us awake to the parade just now getting under way.
This year's theme is "Memories." From a second story
window we see the whole town watch flowered floats
and mounted cops steam tractors and antique Buicks
frontier buckboards and Dolly Vardens cocky
kids in rassling tights bulging crotch and bust

-blonde darlings whirling batons and tassles high
-step tight thighs in time to the school band marching
down Main. The heat

of late afternoon brings rain. After the thunderstorm
that went on an hour or so too long, under the dripping limbs
of the elm trees in the park, the evening air
tongues everybody at once. Sweat fingers
flow like quicksilver everywhere. They take the place (by force
thickening the lump in the throat) of eyes. Darker places grow
damper in the green night. An itching mosquito
bite draws blood from sweet brown skin. Hot dogs
sizzle on barbecues. The bitching need
the drinkers have, drunk on beer and rotgut
coming up for more, sears its seed
deep down inside. At the dancchall a mass
of young cowpokes half-knowing (death
does not stop) the dance twirls
cowgirls like lassoes in the herd
of country numbers. Over head the fireworks scratch

cont.

the sky with all the punk-loud colors
of a hard rock lover. In backseats of beat-up
Fords and Chevys, bras and panties, and then
the pale petals of carnations undone, love's made
to bleed much too fast. A cherry
bomb blast cuts through the wet boughs.

This tough summer touching
the unremembered girls will later call
their "first time" drifts away
to be held for years as a withered melody
sighs in the breath of the elm leaves.
Even through the longest night the stiff
sap longs to rise, to free the thighs
to dance again beyond the common time
the mind's streets keep
to the songs of these trees spreading
through the falling light.

***Jogging Wibaux, Montana While
Thinking of the Late Plato***

My shadow passes over the sticky blacktop
like some stranger wary of me, keeping its distance.
A drone of tires, and then a car approaches
with a crescendo of apprehension (like the Doppler effect)
of an event that will change one's life. The driver
waves one finger as he passes. (An admonition or a sign
of openness thought so common here?) Sagebrush and yellow clover
everywhere. Waves of waist-high grass swell in the wind as I rush
past, breathing hard. A grove of cottonwoods by the creek brings back
the crash of the sea. Warbles of unseen meadowlarks bubble over
my cupped car like a fountain. No one here has any ideas
that do not change sooner or later (one way or another)

one's mind. Beyond the horizon wide as the possibilities of
blue sky, the days pass like clouds over the earth away.

*The Fire Sermon First Holds Water
(On My Grandfather's Ashes)*

I breathe in once and for all
time this smell of dark rotting
wood on the porch, a damp
earth odor rising underneath.
Raindrops rolling off the roof
punch tiny fists into the mud.
The last flickers of lightning
lie down in the east. Crickets
begin again. Across the prairie swells
these intense chants I could follow
all the way to sunrise, monastically
luring me on and on in
a line of little round bells, a glisten
of stars. I do not. Instead I see

my mother's father's ashes falling over the Pacific
sun and sinking and how the heart wells up wonderfully
over the black stones of mourning washing away
the smoke from my eyes. At dusk

cont.

the storm had come on so quick
I barely had time to take cover.
Alone in the house I thought
of how I'd not been with my lover in
over a red moon's span. Watching the thunderheads'
bellies boiling, their seed sluicing
the ground spread open cold by the thrusting
thirst of the grass, I rose firm and hot.
I would be the man my grandfather was. Now

the afterglow ushers a river of emptiness beyond longing filling
the night. Cataracts of darkness swirl and flow into
the sleeping earth. New life smolders beneath, waiting
for the morning star to spark
the new day into its last blaze of bliss.

Into the same fire no man steps twice.

South Dakota: The Dust Years

At the heart of the brain the plains space
out its ache. In the distance dry thunder drops
like potatoes poured from a burlap bag thudding
on a wooden cutting board. The wind flaps
and billows vague reveries of whaling ships' sails out
of the faded cotton curtains. A frayed light grays
in the parlor as an elderly man and his wife sit
rocking to the ticking of their grandfather clock
and sigh. The mid-July heat lays down a frail question
of a voice (yet calls up from all her years
a cherished blush of a love before him.... a voice
echoing in her mind) reminding one of the splitting
of kindling. Their creaking chairs, each out of time
with the other, go unheard like prayers

hushed up into the numb

burn of the sun. Miles down the road out
through a screen door they latch their eyes claw-like
onto a pickup truck. It tears past
telephone poles between each
tick, throwing a wake of dust up behind
it. One of the rockers remarks to
the wall: "That Hanson boy's at it
agin." The other nods to the floor.

Another Good Morning

Morning
driving across the High Plains.
Coffee and cattle
concerns produce
movements feeding the soil.
There is a certain
school-boyish truancy to
the toil here.
The AM radio blares
from the nearest small town
last call country numbers and facts
err the way a neighbor would
stretch the point, friendly-like
and practical—a joke that's all
in a day's play.

A Hereford steer raises its head, stretches
toward a drone in the pure blue far
above. In a corridor in Chicago
an executive excuses himself
breaking wind between the columns
of yesterday's stock market results.
In a packing plant in Omaha
the machinery of beef
production drones its automation.
The steer lowers its head
to ruminate again. Another good morning

cont.

a tanned forearm jams the gun-racked
pickup into first, burns off
a meaty beat. Hunting
through the crosshairs of space
and time, the sun draws the first bead
of sweat off a certain brow
of a breed that refuses to bow
to anyone or thing. Haunting
the movements of the wind, the sun drones beyond
hearing. Its blue catechisms chill
the red-blooded still
to this day.

The Daily River Markets'
Livestock Report

Sioux City and Omaha:

butcher hogs
slaughter steers
canner and cutter
cows
heifers
and feeders
heavy
and light sows
1-3 grade
choice
or prime spring
lambs
fat
and baloney bulls

At noon the heat
of numbers
rises
in our blood made
rich
as feedlot dung.

cont.

By this
steaming stench
of life
and death dealing
dominion
the river washes
(thank God) each day
away.

“3800 hogs
at Omaha today. Butchers
turning moderately active
after a slow start...”

***The Winnebagoes Invade
Deadwood, South Dakota***

Plumb through the Indian summer
they will parade, waving
their way through the narrow streets, race
barge or bust in to repossess
a place in the blank back pages
of a homesteader's family Bible, the gold
diggers' disclaimed lodgers, buffalo
burgers or the missing ace
of the Deadman's Hand. An inbred yen
for the meat and potatoes the olden
years raised hell with. Meanwhile

back of the El Rancho Motel, the 1876 jail
duely houses the ghosts of the daily killed. Wild Bill
as ever will show up at the Old Style Bar tonite at 8
sharp to be shot down by Jack McCall as the shots are called
from a bullhorn atop a rusty red Dodge. Nightly Jack
must be caught in the street front of Goldberg's Grocery
and brought down to the wax museum for mock trial.

cont.

From his room in the Franklin Hotel, Deadwood
Dick's taken in this show
for over a century. Deadwood Dick,
road agent, lays low, collects
dusty photos of Calamity
Jane, his beau-to-be. He awaits
his comeback, oils his Colt.
Down the street, the upstairs girls'
Green Front has been shut down
for good: "public nuisance." Chinatown
still echoes through the tunnels
under Main Street. The opium dens
charge 50 cents admittance to the tape
recorded tour through black light.
Ghost dreams of Xanadu live on and
mingle with the incense, escape
in the pockets of the Winnebago breed.
Now the announcement is made:
plain on the silent movie's marquee:

DEADWOOD DICK'S EARSHOT COMBACK!

He was last seen high
above the town in Mt. Moriah cemetery
giving pep talks to the tombstones:
"Don't fire til you see the whites
of their tires!"

A Short History of the Fall River

Across the street from the old soldiers home along
the shortest river in the country flows the hot
springs the Cheyenne and the Sioux once made
war over. The Sioux won. Only to lose the whole
of the Hills after the gold find. The river rushes
and the grass greens and the trees yearly bear leaves
still. The treaty's broken. But who knows
what savages will come to take
what can be salvaged from these Hills
black with God. The god that once lived
or died in the rough winter
hide of the buffalo has passed on—
naked and afraid.

Hymn to the Buffalo

All that's left
is an occasional
skull hung in the barn, the rare
burgers for tourists, a plateau
of crushed bones
we walk west on:
a black road.

Bundles of such relations
reconstruct the body of myth
as stuffed heads stare down
on us bellying up to the bar.

The crazy buffalo bulls of the north
drink from a lake of milk with stars
that float on top like ice. They wait.

cont.

Once the four legged and the two legged ran
one across the same plains, brothers
to the four winds. The killing of the former
god was a sacrifice
to the power of man so it would live
holy with all
it needed to live, together
with the knowledge the White Buffalo Calf Woman
could turn on the hunter
anytime she wanted into the mound
of worm-spun bones once spoken of.

The buffalo are a patient people.
They are brothers as well
to the whirlwind, who talks in circles
of revenging blood by blood.

Looking For Their Names

In the land of the Lakota Sioux
in the vision pit
on top of Bear Butte
when one grows light
from lack of provisions, they say
the buffalo run
wild
in the blood
as dreams. The eye
must be awake and
quicken to
the herd's thunder echoed
in the heart. An arrow
of lightning might spit
as well from the humblest
point—maybe a rattlesnake hisses
the name they say they are
fasting after, waiting for
its eye to strike
deep their darkness
 down.

cont.

This is hearsay
of an old way
nearly lost. The sacred
way all in nature
saw
fit to freely give
names
to the two leggéd
who
in turn called each one
kin.

mitakuye oyasin
“all my relatives”

Eye of the Heart

Reflections upon an empty sky cast shadows
of all the thunderheads I'd buried in anger
in my past. The blue eye
of my mind being shattered
looking glasses, I start up a second time
Harney Peak to seek out the heart
of granite—one of the oldest ways
fire is balanced within

air. After the long climb, I drink the purest
pooled rainwater I've ever tasted, and the coldest as well.
From the backbone axis of the world disk, stare
into the center of the circle of the sun; its rim
(just now kissing the horizon's rim of the world)
whirls sunwise a white arc of fire
around its heart. "See the ball moving in
the sun?!" a child says. "No, that's just the *ball*
of the sun sinking," his mother remarks blandly.

From far below the Black Hills flash (my negative)
like lightning along the black arc
of the western horizon. To the east
the tip of the peak's triangular shadow creeps
across the prairie into the deepening sky.
I raise my palms to catch the last rays
of the sun in silent suspension. In place
of a vision, I pray
for direction. At last it dips beneath and
I can breathe again.

cont.

The full moon rises on my descent, the path
flecked with mica. Mirrors by the millions flash
like the lifetimes of stars, the faces
of spirits long gone from their bodies
turned to stone. Countless reflections
flow from this looking glass of night remembering
the face of morning now beaming
the globe's backside. I carry the glow
of the sun's heart down
with me. I close my eyes and see.

A Day in Dark Canyon

We hike halfway down
the height of the canyon to hear
the rushing of the creek reflect
the rushing of the wind up here
through these evergreens. Needles of sunlight
scintillate
in each other's eyes
this late summer day. A granite cliff overshadows
our minuteness, one by one. We cling to
a warm gray slab, and hang on
to each other. Down below children
splash the water and make circles
ripple and clash. Their yells echo
on the canyon walls. We'll go no further
today. All the forest, ring by ring it seems, echoes
all the years that have ever circled
this world or will. Still, together
we are here, now. I try to store this place
for a future lifetime, sewing it
into a patchwork quilt of memory
and dream—my karmic star blanket.
You would be
an eagle you say. Me? Who knows?
Only that we are all borne
upon the water, and take to
the air, and ring by ring
disappear.

The Maps Lost Along the Way

North of the borderline is a reservation
he would sooner forget and the girl's name he could place
only as Ojibway. She had five native names some she herself
could not recall. With a fifth of rye and the full Moon
of the Falling Leaves on the rise they were silently driven
to the burning eye of night and back. By morning he found
on the backseat of the old red Ford the maps
ripped apart and scattered by their movements.

Sunday Morning Coming Down
(In Sioux Falls)

Yawning wide I open the curtains to the blur
of another gray Sunday. Some bums are starting to gather
down on the sidewalks for their Mission's morning hand-out.
The country's flag atop the Raven coat company wraps
around itself and flaps like a broken wing.
Over and over the railroad crossing bell had been beating
in my sleep, its lights throbbing like an artificial heart.
(Still no train.) Last night a ghost-dancing
tribe of red men under the mice-bitten moon broke
into the old casket factory by the river. They escaped
by paddling them down the Big Sioux toward the slaughter
house and the State Pen. In their heads the falls roared
like the half-smashed crowds at this afternoon's football games.
Once again the year is dying with the same sad sounds
of shoulder pads—the dull thud like a sledge hammer to the skull
of a steer. Out front of the Goodwill store a wino
(about my age) wearing torn tennis shoes is shaking, both hands
rattling like a piggy bank full of slugs the loose knob

cont.

of the locked door. What *were* those dreams of last night
laced by the deaf blood of the collective beast
full of lust? Or what was that bone-hard aching that
paced back and forth the streets in the burning eye
of the young evangelist? You know the one
making his stand by the pink neon JESUS
SAVES SINNERS sign straight across
from the packed Stockmen's Bar. That's where hell-bent
good ol' boys spent the wee hours with greenbacks free
as a bull's semen. Miles away their cows grazing
the far hill of the Milky Way waited. But what did I do in
unrecalled dreams that calls for repentance this morning?
What mass guilt hangs heavy as a gallow's hood over
the empty middle border. What have we done?
Or not done, where can one go when
the streets are empty and the churches full
of the collective body's bitter wine?

But maybe all this had just begun with the morning
news of a six year old named Adam
whose head was fished out of a river after
the killer at last confessed
to over fifty others already dead.
"It was *this* one that made me cry,"
he said.

White Roads Over Dakota

Broken wings of crows scattered
across the highway point to signs
of past blow-outs. Omens:
one ear of a jackrabbit
stands up deaf from its mass
of mashed and clotted fur and flops
back and forth in the wind
like a white flag. A black cat
bloated on the shoulder lies
heavy as a stuffed toy left
out in the rain. High tension wires
raise their hands like a line
of blind men surrendering to the dark
army of tears. To the west the clouds blot out
the blood-shot sunset. Night at last drops
upon the land. Someplace
along these white roads someone is closing
the lid of a widow's casket
(like her faithful Bible)

cont.

for good. Riding the edge
of the storm all day, I stop
to rest at the Middle Border Saloon.
I am still moving sitting
on the stool. The only other drinkers
in the whole bar are two old
farmers whispering of God's
country—someplace—I missed.
It's been a long time
they say. I try to drive again
but the sky cracks like glass
with flashes of lightning.
Along these white roads half-broken
spirits have come with dreams of rising
in the night. Still they lie. Still. The ground
will not give up, its gravity
growing hard in the blood
as greed. Long after we've gone
these Dakota roads recede
into the mist of their vanishing
points on the horizon. Miles and miles away

from his home, a single man
in a white motel room stands up
between two mirrors reflecting
ever smaller and smaller
in each direction the diminishing
echo of his lost way.

Modernist Poetry

I grew up with the idea of
understanding the Masters.
I'm no understudy
now. I read really "good" stuff
maybe the guy next door could've written.
I don't go thousands of miles
to sit at the feet of a lion
in some sun-lit piazza.
I'm just another American
at odds with his country
going nowhere.

Another gray tomcat
got run over on the highway
today. They tell me
a few bobcat are still
running free
way back in the Black Hills—maybe
even a mountain
lion or two but
I doubt it. These days

I'm up to nothing
new. I make
a living (as they
say) and don't
pay taxes. I
get by. Lying
with the best of them, my tracks keep

cont.

going deeper and deeper
into higher and higher
ranges of silence. Pine and granite
stand somber as mourners
who can't forget. My lines, at times
intractable as madness in the blood, flow
through darkness a faint cat scent
farther and farther

back. Then a day will come
(as if I'd found a door
in the side of a hill
found on no map)
and they'll stop.
No trace of bones.
No ground broken.

***Making a Day of It In Belle Fourche,
South Dakota***

What a beautiful day
for a walk in the park. I take
the tongue
of the big cast iron bell and
make it sound. I play
with a fork in the cafe
on State Street and
make it sound, which
is not so beautiful
as the waitress who
slipped it to me. I play with
a word (or two) and make it
resound
in a poem, which
is neither more nor less
beautiful
than the day
the bell the fork or the girl but
makes its way
into the world of sound
objects nonetheless.

*Giving a Poetry Workshop
in Corn Country
(Bridgewater, South Dakota)*

This is the kind of town
where folks wave at strangers.
(Out of midwestern openness
or the legendary wariness
they've always had for outlaws?)

I am the kind of man
who would rather visit the grave
of the mayor's father on the blue hill
than sit and chew the proverbial fat
down at the Wildcat Cafe.

This is the kind of town
where secretly incendiary poets make
front page news. Next to my picture
is the story of a serious young man
who forked over 16 of his hard-earned dollars
for all 4 copies of the satanic bible
and then torched them outside the bookshop.

What are folks to make
of this strange man, this poet
talking to himself
among cornstalks and combines?
What have I to do
with their lives or their livelihood?

cont.

In both directions Main Street ends
in a stretch of empty sky that arcs
like two dry question marks.
In the tedious wind of night
brittle, blighted leaves rattle. Row after row
silent cobs continue to grow
their unharvested suns.

Make the Man

Pick up the name back o' the belt, hand-tooled
plain. The pearlbutton stud climbs down
from his truck, shotguns loaded on the rack ever cocked
back o' the brain. "Ain't grinded the gears
since I got 'er," he brags
in the doorway of the diner. Hardhat
coffee-strong busts out: "How cum
y'ain't workin' today, Gary?" Puberty gawky and stiff
as Sunday suits, black hat and cowboy boots
can't ever hide the good ol' boy. Yellow bill Cat
caps and muddy overalls roughly idle
at noon, in circles at square tables (full
meals hot under forearms and fists) they swap
incredible tales of daily labor. Homey wives sit
and chit-chat, their ruddy cheeks stuffed
with the freshest gossip in town. All the same
they all grow wild
heat or mute babies in their bellies. Outside
Fall winds blow and rattle (like wooden nickels
in the ear's cup) the golden cottonwood leaves. The drone
of the Burlington Northern line hones down its tracks ever
on time. The old stories of Newcastle carved
out of the Black Hills are burned deep in the warp
of the billboard on Main: "The Hanging of Diamond L. Slim Clifton"

cont.

“....for the murder of a young couple, Louella and John Church, Slim's neighbor's and friends. People throughout northeastern Wyoming, angered by the grisly deed, stormed the jail, took the prisoner from Sheriff Billy Miller at gunpoint and dragged Slim to the bridge. Masked men slipped the noose around Slim's neck and dropped him from the bridge, neatly decapitating him. Such was vigilante justice.”

Such is such history. Which leads one
to wonder, what crime unwritten
was committed before the killing by whom and why
it is forgotten if not forgiven. Now

the Law is neatly registered for all
to heed in big day-glo letters on the wall
back o' the drawer:

NO
OUT OF TOWN
CHECKS CASHED

***This Hill, These Rocks and
Trees, This Sky***

Swearing to make the next hill, I stop
to take a breather. On top birch trees shiver
beneath the sun... the glaring eye
of some tyrant I remark
to myself. The blue of the sky
has gone beyond all dimensions only to return
without saying a word
about the pointlessness of my intentions. I
have come to gather smoke (kinnikinnik and sage)
I remind myself. Upon this steep slope
Ponderosa pines stand mute
as Trappist monks. With their backs turned
away from me, their heads are hidden
by evergreen hoods. With all their might
they are trying just to see if they can stare
their Lord straight in the eye. Eyes shut, they see
nothing of this world. Encrusted with light
green lichens, a granite slab lies
on its stomach like a long-extinct lizard.

cont.

Whispers of the stiff scrub oak limbs evoke
a passage in some book—something to do
with Druids, and their long-forgotten rites
I can only wonder about.
This hill, these rocks and trees, this sky
filled with breaths I take
and take without making
the slightest difference—one
sweaty creature among all the others, and beyond:
the next hill, other rocks and trees, other skies
my bones alone will ponderously make
their way under.

Walking in an Evergreen Forest

With my wallet, watch, all maps and words
left behind at the car, I start out but to find
I've been loaned a pair of eyes
from a creature long dead and gone
to stone. It is a gray, overcast day
a million still suns before man standing
over flint and tinder, with great pains, began
to make use of fire.

If a woman were near, we would (I would
hope—could only hope) warm our bodies
and reflect on the beauty
of this cool evergreen forest
in each other's eyes.

But I am by myself and its eyes burn
an ancient unpredictable flicker. Flashes
of rutting thunder in the loins
and their outbursts, wet and blinding, mingle
with scenes of bared eyeteeth preying upon
a pair of hindquarters, the torque and terror
caught and knotted to one grisly bead in the brain, the blood
pounding it's taut drumskin: "Escape! Escape!..."

cont.

The wind rushes through these evergreens whispering
like all the weary spirits enduring the exodus
of evolution. But I am brought back
alive, but one man
alone. And no beauty exists
without the kiss
to rouse my blood laughing
like pure springs from this stone.

Moving

The rooms are emptied of all
the laughter, lust, rage, and love
is harder to conceive of
(like children) with age.
It would never have worked
out, we say, again and
 are sure
of ourselves, one by one. And our years
boxed away with all those paperback novels
we never finished
come back undone to clutter the lawn
covered by the dry leaves of late Fall. And the feeling
one should be moving on
 lingers, mingles
with the scent of their burn, slow and bitter. We hesitate
a second in the hallway, then go out
to face our lives alone, full
of the chill gusts of wind moving in
our skin, burrowing to find bone.

The Sinking Season

"A bathysphere..." you said
 "... of love!"

I say as we dive out of our heads
and bathe our senses in the lake
and take nothing for granted in giving
up everything. Floating like the first breath of Spring
(our sighs mingling in the low sinking sun)
earth air and water all fuse into one
sphere of ecstasy we roll back and forth in the space
between our thighs. In this moment we make
as one movement our place in the rushes of time. But then

while the marble-white clouds swirling over
swallow the angled light, and the lake
turns a slate-gray, and the fish sigh
in the thickening of their blood, or belly-
up and die, I look once and you're caught
in an eddy of red maple leaves and drawn
away. I look again
at the flat reflection
my face casts down on the water
flecked with ice.

*Lines on Turning Thirty
(September 28th, 1982)*

The year that's come and gone is colder now
than winds that shake these yellow leaves to fall.
I long to learn what lines would sing but how
(when lovers' faces fade in my recall)
could airs of Spring replace my wintry tone
of voice. And colder still I look for love
beyond the turning year I face alone.
Before and after reigns the ice above
the tyrant Time's undone refrain: nothing,
nothing remains the way it was or is
what we expect to see. The seasons' ring
around the sun is neither hers or his.

Yet thirty autumns fail to sing me lines
that love will ever lessen its designs.

Going to Seed

The sun just going beyond the piney ridge, gone
for the day are all the hickers threading the underbrush
of gold and scarlet, ochre and russet, the fading arabesque
rug of Fall woven into the hillside, timbers
of the old Rochford mine on Rapid Creek falling
into its century of dust, the unproductive silence
of acre upon acre of rotting leaves of paper
birch and aspen, their cold acrid scent, the aching sap
of my summer-worn limbs resting, warm in her sleeping
bag, down-soft and green, rising to my woman's hand I come
along with everything else going to seed, going beyond
myself a moment, this sunlight like May wine in my mouth
stirred by woodruff, guttural groans going into the blue
and gone like a stag elk looking into the deep
shadows the woods make, its heart at last honing in
on the bone-sharp crack of the hunter's gun.

Hymn to the Evergreen

The evergreen needles
glean nothing
from the seasons. Below
the grass has turned
brown and brittle.
But these trees have all closed
their eyes like a little town
boarded up for the winter.
We come & go. They stay
and sow their way.
A cone is a dark code
the centuries have kept
from the cold.
In the Spring their bark flows
vanilla and turpentine.

cont.

“Valentine” and “serpentine”
mean nothing
to their heartwood. Their roots
old as a rattlesnake's blood
go deeper
than any tongue.
A bud is a word.
A leaf of gold
is a whole book.
These evergreen have long forgotten
how to read.
Their needles
no longer
need to know
now.

Dying Reflection

The late autumn afternoon floats by
slow as gossamer in the butterscotch sunlight.
Bugs swarm above the lake like dust motes.
The flutter of an unnamed bird, the splash
of an unseen fish are all that's heard.
I face the falling fire, a chill whisper
of a wind at my back. Tonight a cold front
will move in, bringing snow the reports say.
As the double sun sinks into hillside and lake
I am content to balance on the edge of day
the harvest of all that's known of life or light
with the grief the moon of ice has sown
among the bones that forever remember nothing—
not even this one afternoon, its false sun dying.

First Sign of Winter

Cacophonously honking and cackling
a gaggle of Canada geese
wings its way southward.
Over the far hill this graceful angle floats
like a curling whisper of soot
rising from a dying fire—
then, out of sight.
A chill scurries up the spine.
The low sun grows cold and thin.
Out of the gray sky
a few flakes of snow start to drift
like bits of ash into the dark
heart of the eye. Covering everything in sight
the first sign of winter
softly sifts its silence.

As the Year Falls Off the Kitchen Table

A mug of black coffee steams on the edge
of the graying plains. A sun the color
of dirty yellow wax burns
a hole in the west. The first snow came through
weeks ago and melted
within the hour. We cling to the border
of tablecloth and talk. We are well seasoned
and wait for the white to stalk us. In our beds

sheets freeze sweat on our dreaming bodies. Once
in the great white belly, we wander where
all dimensions go beyond us. The only color
seen thaws from the eyes of another. We feed on this
till the first green blade cracks the ice and we swim
through miles of prairie grass to a house where
one can finally breathe in a familiar scent
of eggs frying in an iron skillet.

Waiting for the First Cup

Zero or below.
Water pipes ice,
Out of coffee. Thoughts
crusty with the salt
of sleep in my eyes.
A late model mind grinds
death bed breaths and
finally turns over.

I drive cold to town for vittles.
To the east the prairie hills are frozen wide
strides of some frost giant gasping
the infinite blue in
a dead heat for the finish
line of the horizon. Each chimney top
of Rapid City blows out
a dry ice dragon

breath. Back home the Black Hills are stonc-faced
eavesdroppers on the bebop bassline trespassing
the turntable. The percolator (by god) perks!
I make my breath echo each black surge.
At last I take the first sip and the sun slips
on the icy hills and falls
below
zero.

Under the Big Top Sky

It's been said, more
or less, South Dakota is
the lion's mouth and
"Oohs!" and "Ahs!"
reverberate
from both coasts.

I stole this
and made it
my own, like the guy who paints
over hot cars and takes off
the serial numbers.

I drive the lion's mouth.
The engine purrs.
There are no houses
on this road. A snowstorm knocks
down the high wire act. I'm running on
empty.

Orion Snowbound Between the Sky and the Earth

Backward through the telescope he walked
across the prairie. He imagined himself
cross-haired against the horizon. He walked on
in awe. In all that frozen space between
himself and the eyepiece, he thought he saw the face of all
he believed the Deity to be. In reality, it loomed always
just beyond the next low bluff. Dusted with pastel-blue
snow, the High Plains were a mirror frosted over
by a breath of heaven. The sun fell
off his left shoulder and back through the deep
blue. The sky emptied. The hand holding
the mirror thrust upward, and Orion collapsed.

in the deep snow. Now his tracks are the only reflections left
hunting the Great Bear through the night.

The Jealous Country Celebrates Its Holiday Season

Nearly unseen a gray ash sifts through the streets
(smell it) of this little town to settle at last
on the slumped shoulders of the Black Hills. One sees
no corporate monopolies or heavy industry here save
the incineration of sweat or the ever present counting
cows under bucks under the Baptist-blessing sun.
Matrons in black sack overcoats rummage
through Salvation Army barrels, stump-stocky
arms down a flurry of thumbprints—so many weary
afternoons of dandruff and dust. Outside the snow falls on
nothing moving but the tinsel-hinged angel wings
in the wind. A lone Indian is set adrift
down a whiskey river no white buffalo has ever
drunk. There is no one on the streets

who will sell you one red rose or wink
or hawk hot tamales or even mustard-smothered
soft pretzels. No one to give either
those bald-faced Hare Krishna chants wrapped
up in peach-colored pajamas or eat fire
and spit back Adam's rib with an apple in the mouth
of a lightning-greased Lord's Prayer.

cont.

The bank's time and temperature flash
the only facts of life the Law
allowed to loiter on this corner. Cold
or late, early or hot, the interest which
(out of earshot) lust shoots
drops below zero. A cowboy
goes about his business of doing nothing
but what he is. His hair is close-cropped
as West River prairie grass, dust-grazed
and stiff. The wind-swept sidewalk
is just for walking, the broad Main Street
just for Ford or Chevy pickups, whatever
your brand of man. And of course the stores
are yours so long as the buck passes. For the class
of '84 still rules the watertower watching
over the town. Steel-bound (by God) above, the dark
flood is borne. Curse its name
and drown.

Passing On Through Faith

Scurrying cross the north-south highway
desperate whispers of ghosts
disperse in a swirl of snow. A few gray birds
peck away at the roadkill—then veer off
like a pale hand waving
from the first pickup that's come along
for miles and miles. Across the numb plain
the rumps of black angus are fleeced white.

Just outside Faith the graveyard bares
its bleak hill to the boring winds. The crucifixion
carved in marble hangs heavy
over the stones, heavy as the heart
in the throat the days they bury. Some dumb hawk
in the town tavern is always ready
to take off. Its stiff wings spread
high over the heads at the bar are covered
with dust. Somewhere out in the field deep mud
is slowly seeping up through hollow bones. The wind drones
"Fly home, fly home..." Seeking the dark
wet below, dreams float
down to earth like the white feathers
of the snowstorm passing on
through Faith, South Dakota tonight.

cont.

After the ritual late news
behind their bedroom doors the women of Faith
will lay down their creamy bodies
as dutifully as warm milk
their cows give them each morning.
And still their children
play at making angels
in the snow—the blinding, wet snow.

Winter Solstice, South Dakota

I

Dusk in Deadwood
drops quick. The sun
slips over the canyon's slick
west rim just
before 3. It's 13 below
(the radio had said) and
falling. The furnace has been dead
all day. I huddle in the kitchen
in front of the stove. The world
is still, so still. A forest of frost
blazes across the window.

The sun stands still
so far away.

I've been looking at spots
all day. On the map
the date of my birth
the planets had cast
shadows of my fate on the earth.
Today east of Phoenix
looks best.

cont.

A bird with smoking wings
touches down in the desert, turns
into a man and starts walking
toward the lights of a little town.
There they are singing
and drinking, eating
the red worm
and making love. There!

Still, so far away.

II

Tonight
the long darkness lays
itself down to sleep
like a layer of coal.
Cold. The crossing
of Mars and Saturn
hovered off the west coast
the afternoon I was born.
“Women become insistently dominant, and
men coarse and cruel.” The shadow
it cast that day forever
falls over
Deadwood. “... this area could be good

cont.

for those engaged in the roughest
sort of livelihood—miners, laborers, steelworkers,
pioneers.” For me, a poet, now
(the same as a hundred still suns ago)
how to stay
warm takes all
the mind’s heat. For me, the line, here
with Uranus on the descendant:
“... you identify yourself
and individuality by your inability
to relate to others...”

I huddle in the kitchen
alone. The blue flame sputters
like a hermit muttering to himself.
I strike a wooden match
against the wall. My pipe smokes
like the wings of a bird rising
off the floor of the desert

so far away, still.

The Season of Sleep

Under the streetlights the snow keeps sifting
its white powder of sleep. At the window
open just a crack the wind chill
as alcohol cottonswabs our skin. Sweaty
from making love, we fall into the dark
blankets of sleep. The snow keeps piling up
all night—a thick white wool
covering everything. The lack of warm, rife odors
in the deep winter drifts
makes us forget life for a while.
All our old flames are blown out. The seeds
of white oblivion are everywhere, fluffy and wet.
The air is full of fleecy sleep.
We are empty. Like dark earth
covered with snow, we wait.
Cold and alone, we slip
into each other. The snow keeps falling
like lovers falling
asleep all over town.
We are together and
alone with each other, or just alone
with the snow falling
all over town, the snow
falling like lovers
closing their eyelids
all over town.

Making a Living

I

This evening even the Black Hills are
earning their name. (Not a star
to be seen.) The darkening
sky flecked with ash
of snow tears the eye.
On the hillside Ponderosa pine
knuckle under, roots clutching
stone like a mother
her dead son. Grief in passing
the dead-end of the year
down the narrow canyon.
Day after day the wind
needles prick the heart. The eyes
blinded. Upon the ice-
slick highway a stiff
porcupine. Hit
and run. The sun
gone
under the hill. Still

cont.

I am riding
out the winter in
a stuffed armchair. The ice
in my glass of sour mash
clinks between blizzards
of thinking linked to nothing
and the brittle silence
of dull metal doors. Metaphors
for everything come hard.
My heart's become a fist
of an old man gripping his bones
against the cold. He keeps knocking
but nobody's home.

II

It's not just
the isolation that comes
with this poor weather
that gets me. It's not even
the cobwebs and dust
my own indecision collects
inside this low-rent room.

cont.

No, it's the frost
that breaks
into cracks and corners
my thoughts. Caught
like a slow fly
weary of winter inside
its own drone, I hear
my right ear ring. (A bad thing
is being said about you, they say.)
Through windows thick as ice cubes
I view the blur of a world
of wonder out there somewhere
in the distance. (Was it ever
Spring? Were my bloodlines ever known
to sing in streams of sunshine
warm and clear in the canyons
of abandon?) But here, still inside
this run-down apartment, the papered walls
of my life's work fade
with the light. Still I am

sitting. I try to write
moving lines for a play
on words. The blank page
is my stage. This evening
the audience has gone
to sleep
(or maybe even to make love)
in front of TV's yawn.

cont.

Outside the Black Hills pay
no attention to what we do
or say. Literally, poetry means
"to make" something. I've made it
my life, no matter
how few will ever love me
or even know me for it. Still

I am living
a making
and going
for broke.

Coming Home

for Anita

Coming home to
the Black Hills, inside me
begins to thaw. The skin
of your inner thigh. Snow feathers
the pine trees. Inside you.
Soaring hillsides of gold
mist. My muscles start
to melt. Your skin
of gold missed. With each mile
closer to home, I relax. Ice
thaws, slowly slipping
down window panes.
My solar plexus
shines. Your crystal
throws deep rainbows
through my eyes. Inside me
water ripples. Soft gold
trees shine. Down. Floating
home. Rainbow pine. Coming
on your inner thigh. Feathers
my muscles. Your soaring
eyes of brown begin
to mist. My skin
of ice melts
with each mile.

cont.

I relax. Pain slowly slipping
in the snow. Down. Window eyes
your soul's rainbow. Slowly
home. Flowing. Coming to
ripples of hillsides. Water feathers
your inner thigh. Stroked fur on
our kitten's throat begins
to purr. Solar coming. Closer
to home. Coming

to, I like coming home
to the Black Hills. Like
coming
home to a woman
of pure gold.

Coming Home Again

Under the full snow moon
the Black Hills murmur in their sleep.
Upon cool white sheets
they turn over,
Like a lover
they've been waiting
for a long time
for you alone
to come home.
All through the night
the curves of shoulder and belly
are rising and falling
like the slow round breathing
of waves far out at sea.

The Possibilities of Blue Sky

We took the first dirt road
out of Deadwood. (The one that lurches
through birches and aspens
like a wounded mountain lion.)
The fist of the sun unclenched
and the trees' white knuckles gnarled
by the grip of zero or below echoed
this flowering of fire. Knots
one by one untied themselves inside
our own trunks. Pale arms of snow
crusty as rock salt clutched
the melting shadows of winter.

Each breath we took swelled higher and higher
parabolas of exhilaration. Toward the top
of the wet hill we worked up
a sweat. Then the cleansing wind
strong as the first Spring blew
out through the circle of our lips
the long, low "o-o-o-o-h! . . ."
—leaving the air with a whispered whistle
faint as a distant train. The sea
of the High Plains curved
toward the eastern horizon: the eye
of the camera's slow focus from close (through
the blur) to far. Clouds swirled

cont.

like the steep-sloped swoops
and whorls in the waves of grain
the woods unfurled within. Their fingertips
fluttered florescent-green flames
of butterfly wings breaking forth
from their furry caterpillar catkins
for the first time. We sat on scree
and watched the sky unfold
moebius strips moving in circles
across the prairie: one side
the blue of above, the other
the new green spread out below
this inland island the Black Hills

seem to be. In the poem the possibilities of
blue sky open up on the line
of the horizon. The vanishing point
is an evergreen door we dream
through time. So go ahead, open
and vistas beyond death unfold
untold wonders in the blossoming
rebirth of breath.

GARY DAVID was born in Lakewood, Ohio in 1952. He received a B.A. degree in English literature from Kent State University, and was a composition instructor while doing graduate studies at the University of Kansas. He has also worked a variety of odd jobs in New Orleans and San Francisco, and has traveled the Great Plains circuit as a country-western musician. In 1984 he was awarded a \$1,000 fellowship grant for poetry from the South Dakota Arts Council. He has lived in the Black Hills of South Dakota for a decade, and has taught with the Artists-in-Schools Program for five years.

He has published five chapbooks, a most recent being *Eye of the Heart*, a series of personal and historical poems of the Black Hills. His poetry has also appeared in a number of publications including: *Horizons: The South Dakota Writers' Anthology*, ed. Linda Hasselstrom and Nancy Iversen, Lame Johnny Press, 1983; *Peace or Perish: A Crisis Anthology*, ed. Herman Berlandt and Neeli Cherkovski, Poets for Peace, 1983; and *Planetary Mysteries*, ed. Richard Grossinger, North Atlantic Books, 1986. His work has also been printed in the following periodicals: *Akwekon*, *Arachne*, *The Black Hills Monthly*, *Clay Drum*, *The Cottonwood Review*, *Credences*, *The Difficulties*, *The Green Bowl Review*, *The Greenfield Review*, *Juxtapose (The Vermillion Literary Project)*, *Kindred Spirit*, *Maybe Mombasa*, *Mid-American Review*, *Multiples*, *The New Laurel Review*, *Option*, *Pasque Petals*, *Permafrost*, *The Ponchartrain Review*, *Prairie Winds*, *Salthouse*, *Shelly's*, *Sunrust*, *Truly Fine*, *W'Orcs*, and *Wyoming: The Hub of the Wheel*.

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\$ 6.95