Under The Flyway

A Glimpse of Western Minnesota

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Pleasant Valley
Wordsmiths

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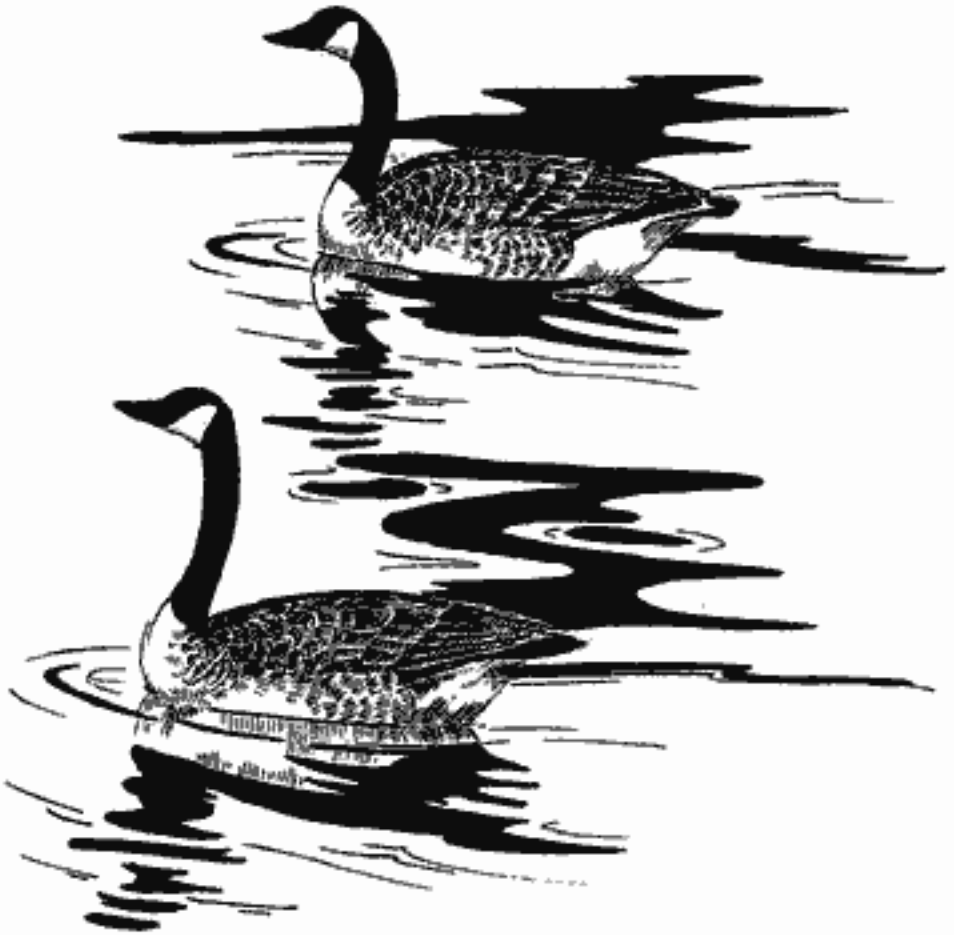
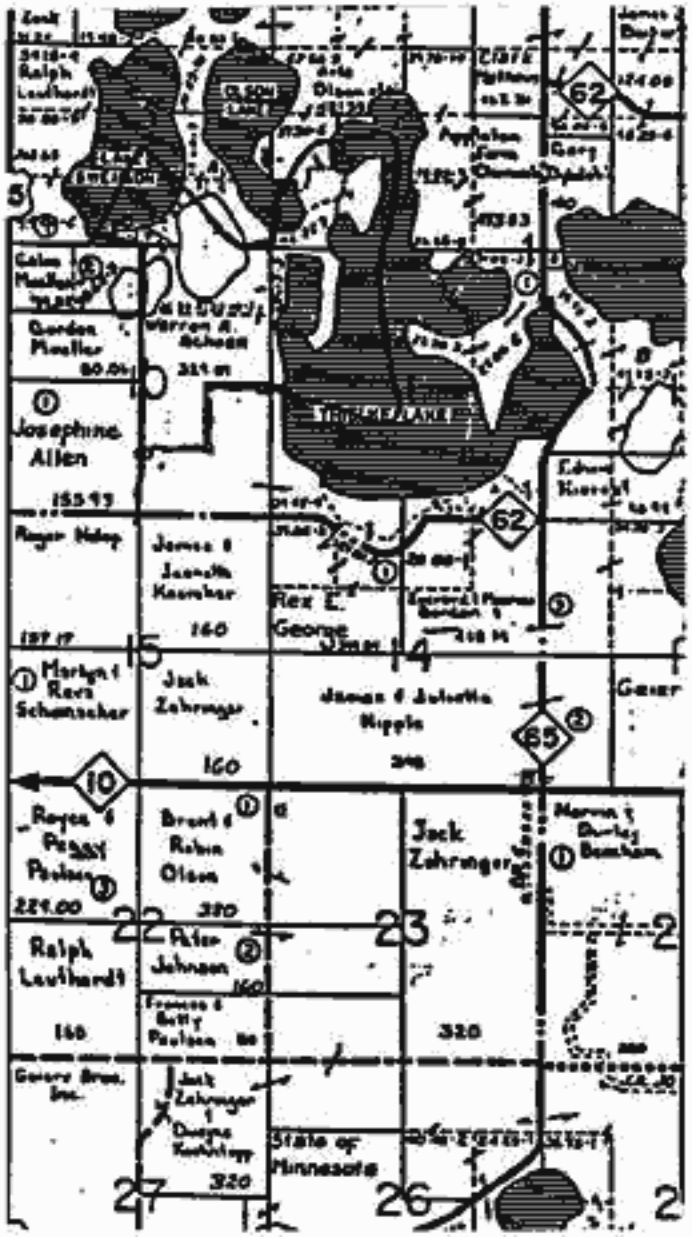
To Warren
and all that is dear to him.

Minnesota--
where in midsummer
you would like to look
into every sunflower's
smiling face,
where in fall you cannot
stay indoors
for fear of missing a single
peal of laughter
spilling from the sky.

The Birds





Peninsula

When I married this Minnesota hunter,
he called a headland on his farm
"the island".

Beaver lodges on the high bank,
ghost trees at the point,
gave silent testimony of past flooding.

"The island" it was,
even when the lake dried up,
pelicans and egrets snatching
the last fish from the puddles.

Later an army of tiny cottonwood trees
advanced to claim the exposed land,
soon to be plowed up by a neighbor.

An island it is again,
this year of the Great Flood of 1993,
smaller now, with more trees drowning.

Impasse

The long cycles of drought and flooding,
the pressing urges of northern seasons,
are they not enough perils
for birds in need of rest on their migration?

Man's lifespan seems longer,
recall almost doubles it,
but owning wetlands under the Flyway
is not a gamble.

The greedy lose more than they gain,
the patient guardians win:
for the cracked lake bottom filled to the brim,
and is, again, an even wider mirror to sunrises and clouds.
But alas, the growing lake has shrunk on paper;
two neighbors sold their shores to Public Hunting!

The floods have drowned the reeds,
there's no place to hide for either birds or men.

Signs are put up all over:
"You may shoot *here*!"
"Don't trespass there!"
But the first shot will scatter the birds - -
and the peace promised by the lake's recovery.

Impasse under the migration pass?

October 1993

Red Tape

How can a Government in debt,
trying to cut expenses,
and faced with helping flood victims
under the Mississippi Flyway,
still consider the plight of tiny Thielke Lake?

If one owner is receiving
Wetland Protection fees,
while the other shores are supposed to earn
hunter's licenses,
computers are mixed up
and so are the birds,
who will not be fooled to settle down
among 200 decoys bobbing on the waves.

The law says: "No outboard motors!",
but the flooded lake is now a windswept mile wide,
too dangerous for rowboats
filled with City hunters clumsy in their hipboots.

Why not call a truce
and declare the lake a Sanctuary?

Don't the geese, who even came here to sit
on the dry lake bottom,
deserve a break when there is water?

What else is Wetland Conservation
but the hope of patient guardians
that impatient human greeds be kept in check,
for many years, until Nature,
in her slower, unpredictable ways,
restores the balance.
In favor of geese.

October 1993

Dry Times and Wet

The farmer and the fisherman
are one and the same person,
but the land and the lake
have much longer rhythms of co-existence
than weeks and weekends, toil and pleasure.

A lake fringed by dry beaver lodges
and dead cottonwood trees
tells a tale of former flood levels,
even during a recent drought,
when white pelicans and egrets
came to fish out the shallows.

Then, the farmer, who paid his share
to the commercial rainmakers, lost heart
and got ready to plow up the lake bottom,
as it may have been done by horsepower before.

Three months ahead of the frost,
he thought he did good for nothing but thistles,
fastest to spread on land lost to grasses
or cattails.

His corn dwarfed by the lack of rain,
to be nibbled only by deer and pheasant,
he invited a neighbor's cattle to his fields.
Mouths can reach what a combine would miss,
and the men agreed to share
the expense of fencing.

These men, whose ancestors settled this land
only one or two centuries ago,
fenced and plowed up a dry lake
right under a sky full of migratory water fowl
looking in vain for wetlands on their way.

Then, there was suddenly plenty of snow
and the melt flooded fields and groves;
ducks and grebes in their mating plumage
were swimming in the puddles,
sometimes ducking under the new,
not yet rusty barbed wire fences,
moving into their original lake.

Plowed bottomlands quickly turned into mirrors,
reflecting sunsets, again,
while ordinary fields were still bogs,
traps to machinery.

Mating mallards were swimming under the barbed wire,
where for three years they had not been seen
in their springtime finery.

But Minnesota hunters are fishermen in summer - -
wondering just how the fish can return
to wetlands that were deadlands for two seasons?

There, and there - - another Mallard,
another Western Grebe arrives,
maybe carrying in their plumage a few fish eggs,
lodged betweeen their feathers at the last
resting spot, who knows how far away,

and all that alight here are unwittingly helping
to re-stock the recovering lake - -

One man can fill the skies with laughter
and give the sunrise, the sunset
for miles around the magic
of passing wings.

One man can make the trod-on moon
an unattainable place of yearning again
with every string of geese passing
through its quarters - -

One man can make the dead trees come alive
as they are framing, almost touching
wings on the move, whirring with the
airstream they created - -

One man can make a lake he could have drained
into a refuge for six thousand geese
through the peak of hunting season
and when it's all over,

more and more will come to stay
after freeze-up until Christmas,
filling the skies with their laughter
for as long as there is food in the cornstubble.
One good man on a farm that his family owned
for a century
can prove that it doesn't need a lot of red tape
to help wildlife
and to make a landscape a vibrant part of the
Mississippi Flyway - -

The geese have been honking their appreciation
day after day over his house and barns - -
it's time for the neighbors whose lives he enriched
to say: "Thank you, Farmer-Sportsman of the Year".

1982 for Everard Berdan

October Scene

Gone is the cover,
the combines have passed;
bleak lie the soybean fields - -

where, oh where during pheasant season
can a rooster still step boldly
out of a thicket
to glean a meal?

Here, on the magic farm,
where geese rise like swarms of bees
from the hidden lake,

circling the bean stubble,
falling in life-size,
with more and more arriving,
secure behind "No hunting" signs.

Where thousands can feed
also roosters dare fill their crops!
Neat silhouettes with raised tails
stepping nimbly past fat downy geese - -

another and another flying in with a cackle
drowned in a sea of laughter:

Safety is in numbers!

Duckboat

What should an absentee fisherman do
when he finds his boat occupied
by a nesting mallard duck?
Shake his head, cast off and take the clutch
for a ride on his favorite lake - -

Mother Duck abandoned ship for a while,
but reboarded when the craft returned to shore.
After all, her ten eggs needed warmth,
and her hormone clock was set for brooding.

The boat owners' adrenaline levels were set
for 'casting and catching', so, for several weeks,
a drowsy duck and two active retirees
had to share their boat - -
the duck getting used to the commotion,
while the friendly man's legs felt cramped,
the nest being under the steering gear,
where he usually put his feet.

No duck eggs ever criss-crossed the lake
before the hatchlings could swim,
and words like "hatch" and "clutch"
had other meanings aboard this 16 ft. vessel,
before the duck happened to make it
her family home.

Such a boat cannot be left "turned turtle"
for many months of inclement weather,
leaving the summer resident to wonder
if ever again, upon his return,
he would find another stowaway . . .

Almost hoping for it, as that duck had tugged
at the strings of his heart more gently
but with greater pull than all the fish
that ever bit his lures.

Land of Lakes

Lac qui Parle

A Voyageur's poésie,
inspired by murmuring waters
and a few flocks of geese,
graces the map of Western Minnesota,
just under the "bump",

so close to where Big Stone farmers often lament
about glacial potholes going dry.

Why can't we drive down there to watch
the gathering of sixtythousand geese?
Even if the engine's humming drowns out
the magic of approaching the babble
in a canoe going down the Minnesota River,
there would still be the wonder
of how a man-made lake,
that has been silent for many months,
suddenly starts "talking".

But at that time of year, when the Canada geese
are re-enacting the Voyageur's audio-legacy
in multitudes lured by flood-control dams
to a widening lake,

Big Stone fathers are busy,
bringing in the crops and watching
their own sloughs for the arrival of ducks.

Not one would find the time to take
the wife and daughters for a magical picnic
at the Talking Lake.

The same dads also turn a deaf ear to the pleas
of young sons, feeling that Refuge regulations
would be a poor initiation:

The fees, the public blinds, the drawing of lots
as to who will be called at short notice,
to be present at the checkpoint before sunrise
and crouch with landless strangers,
once a year using long-range guns and heavy shells - -

The hazards of weather and flight trajectories
are adding to the bad feeling that clean shots
seem almost impossible here, where wounded
highfliers may fall too far to be ever retrieved.

That is not what a Big Stone father wants his son
to witness, as the boy should learn to train
his dog to never lose a bird.

Let others come from far away to help
reach the culling limit, as the refuge is
crowded and prone to spreading epidemics.

So this dad keeps his son away from Lac qui Parle,
hoping for another season, when the magic
may again touch his own farm,
where he could be a better teacher:

of patience, love for the land, togetherness
and everything he had wanted to say
to his boy for the last sixteen years.

Ten Thousand Lakes

That was the time to be married - -
when your man
could put your name on the map!

Love stories are written all over
the map of Minnesota:

Lake Hattie, Lake Lizzy,
Lake Jenny, Lake Lillian,
Lake Sarah, Lake Dora, Lake Ann - -

some sweethearts of mayors,
surveyors,
but many the wives of homesteaders.

That was worth all the hardships
of carrying pails of water
or chunks of ice to melt on the stove,

to have the lake he loved
for its fish and ducks
named after someone so much closer
than the Queen of England,
the Queen of Sweden.

And today's new Annes, Lillians, Sarahs,
living on the shores of those lakes
complete with comforts and frustrations,
wondering whether their namesakes
knew a deeper love.

Best Friend

In Memoriam BJ

I did not love you at first sight,
Springer Spaniel,
for you were like a magnet,
pulling your man away from the coral reefs.

But when I saw you in action,
    pouncing through miles of cattails,
    torn apart by scents and sights,
you were like a diver in a dry maze.

Ears flapping, you would surface for seconds
    to take your bearings,
    then dive again into the labyrinth of scents - -
after pheasant.

Told to SIT & STAY in the reeds during early hours of
    duck-hunting,
you would almost burst with pent-up energy,
    eyeballs searching the sky,
then your body darted like an arrow from the bow
    when released by a shot and the equally explosive
    word FETCH!

With the daggers of arthritis in your aging joints,
you would still go FETCH,
whatever the lake did during your last years.
You would FETCH when the lake turned into a quagmire,
and later a thistle patch.
Through drought and mud and new ice,
    you would set out to FETCH.

And after the feat, your energy not yet spent,
you would stand in the station wagon,
    whining with impatience at the countryside racing past,
ready to jump through the window and check out
    all the cornfields and sloughs on the horizon,
    where BIRDS might hide . . .

This is how we remember you:
your head sticking out of the car window,
    tongue and ears flapping in the wind;
or, your inquisitive nose, eyes, and ears reappearing
for seconds above the reeds, scanning a sky full of birds;
or, in summer with no other quest than staying close
to your man, dog-paddling after the swimmer;
or in the wintertime, running in the tracks of his
cross-country skis, spoiling the run
    with your heavy paw-prints;
or, at home on a rainy day, asleep in the kitchen,
kicking your legs while re-living it all in a dream.

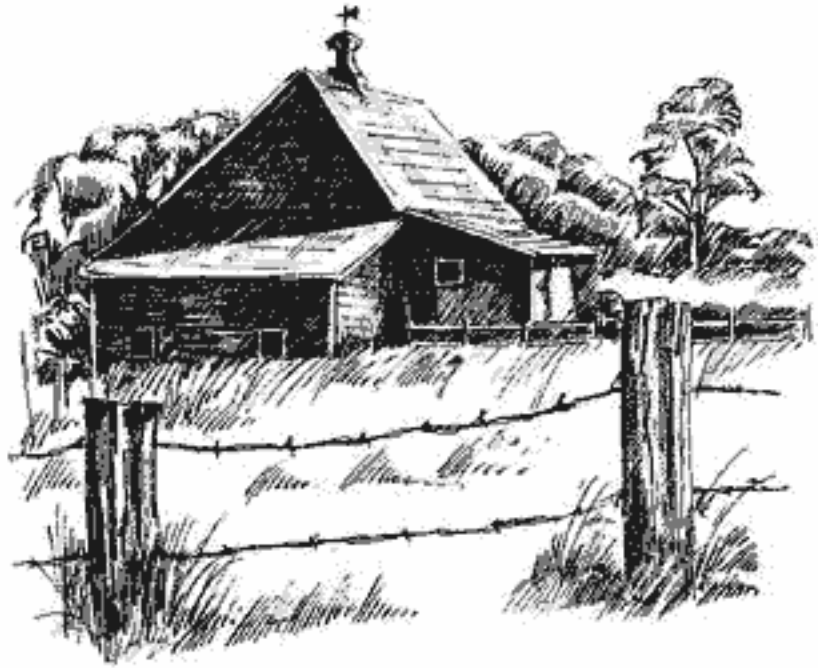
When you were sick and ailing, close to your end,
we talked about letting you have more of those good dreams.
But then came nights when you were awake and whining.
For the first time truly confined to a rug,
    you had lost your horizons.
So we dug your grave near the largest boulder
    on the pheasant run.

You will be missed by a dozen adults and by all the kids
    who knew you by name, Black Jack,
and by several hundred woodticks that cannot hitch a ride
    on you, next summer.

All Thumbs?

After a long summer day in Minnesota,
with your Labrador's head between your knees,
there is no question
why the primates evolved an opposable thumb.
It was needed to pick off the woodticks!

Rural Scenes



Frowning Barns

Driving through Midwest cropland,
devoid of people for many miles,
you gaze at the faces of Barns:
many are sagging, looking so sad,
abandoned to rot,
while others are still standing proud,
flashing a smile of white trim
around their big mouth barn door
and a twinkle in each loft window eye.

Happy barns are flanked by silos,
full of fermenting corn stalks - -
"Sauerkraut for cows",
but the sad, frowning barns tell a tale
of foreclosures, of hopes gone awry.

Some men who lost their land
may still be driving combines
to help fill a happy barn owner's silos
and bank accounts, until that seemingly
smarter agro-operator overextends his credit
and acreage and gets into trouble himself . . .

Barn-raisings used to be get-togethers
of widely scattered neighbors - -
(with prayers, omitted in the brainstorms
of modern enterprises) - -
and the barns themselves seem to have taken on
features of human personalities.

The familiar rounded shapes of Midwest barns
bear witness to the traditions of
immigrant carpenters,
but, while driving past winners and losers,
stop to think of the color scheme:

White for the family home, to make it cooler
during summer heat waves,
as the Bedouin desert dwellers wear white,
to repel the sun's rays - -
but *red* paint for the barn, to keep livestock
warmer in the wintertime;
(as the cattle would be out grazing
during hot spells,
but needed dark cover to absorb the sun's shorter rays
while they were chewing on hay or dry corn
in their unheated quarters).

The early immigrants knew all that,
and we can only marvel at their traditions,
more so at their personal stamina,
as we pay our modern bills
for heating or cooling,
and the installments for our Four-Wheel-Drive;
feeding checks into our tiny Barn-shaped mailbox,
once a nostalgic reminder, now a little ogre
that gobbles up dreams about living close to the land
even faster than a new generation of giant combines can.

The Table

Two dogs and their hunters were crossing a slough,
to raise some hen, or, with luck, a rooster.

Far from home, on land no longer private,
but not yet public, I felt a bit lost and explored a grove - -
that's where I found The Table!
Weatherworn, it stood there, a lone survivor
of a derelict country Schoolhouse,
its masonry crumbling in a thicket.

Were those hunters ever surprised
when they returned, tired and happy,
with long tailfeathers sticking out of their jacket pouches - -
for I wanted "my find" to come along in the pick-up.
"What? This rickety ruin in a house full of fine furniture?"
"Please! Three by six feet is the perfect size
to spread out papers, and no other table
would know as much about the land that I'm trying
to understand!"

It has felt the ravages of wood-boring insects,
and the soft touch of spiders' webs.
It has sheltered small rodents.
Birds alighted on the tabletop to pick
beetles and grubs from old knots and nailholes.
This table has weathered many seasons;
it has heard the weeds grow.
It has been washed by many rains
and withstood loads of snow.

Dry spells have cracked its top, the sturdy legs
have been attacked by fungi during wet months;
seeds have sprouted all over its surface,
never quite reaching the ground.

This table had many tales to tell - -
and to town it went:
to bear a new load, of papers,
a poor translation of all its stories.

1975

New Names for Old Friends

Not many would trust their childhood memories
to the extent of picking mushrooms
in a new world, across the ocean - -

the pioneers did, and dried the fruit caps
of the ancient plant family to season
their gruel on meatless days.

Trappers and voyageurs recognized and roasted
edible mushrooms they had known
in their homelands, under different names.

As a newcomer of the age when canned mushrooms
are filling the shelves of supermarkets,
I felt right at home when I spied familiar
bumps on the snail level - -
more than in the old country,
because people here were no longer looking.

All I had to do to convince company
to share in the feast, was to learn
new names for my childhood memories:

Puffballs and Shaggy Mane were growing
along the Golf course - -
and the umbrellas of Meadow mushrooms
made a friend's farm a fairytale place.

The unpredictable Morels were plentiful
around hidden sloughs in certain years,
with enough to freeze or dry,

but these are secrets a wild mushroom picker
will keep - - until a fellow mycologist calls
from half-way across the State to boast
of larger pickings.

(In memoriam Howard Quade of Hutchinson)

Real Estate

Look at this country
where even the churches are for sale
to the highest bidder;
"The stained glass windows
may be worth something - -"
Boarded up now until
the new owner has an idea
of what to do with the House of God - -

in Reno, it could turn into a Night Club.

In rural Minnesota,
a little wooden church that has lost
its flock of worshippers
will not sit long alone among
the roaring combines.

It is taken down, and in its grove
a granite cross erected:
"Site of the Pleasant Valley Church
1890 to 1965."
That's more like it.

History's Logic

Midwest Indian tribes
and the Inuit of the North
had traditions of giveaways,
men being esteemed for
what they shared,
not what they accumulated.

They lost their lands,
their continent to races
with saved souls
but with selfish values,
missionaries and military banning
such wasteful habits - -

Yet the people of late complain
that their Government
is giving tax money away
to the world at large
as foreign aid.
It is in the soil!
A return to the ancient ways - -

and history's logic
has the the United States of America
finally praised again,
not for marvels of science
but for the revival
of Indian giveaways.
Potlatch.

A Country Artist

You had to duck when entering
his little house (on the Prairie),
so low hang the dry strands of Indian corn,
which he grew from black or green kernels,
every year hoping to harvest smaller ears,
thinner cobs, more mottled varieties.

He was immersed in retrospective
and his hobby reflected a longing
to recreate the past. Not in words,
as so many elderly do, but in strains of plant genes.
He was retro-breeding not only corn,
but also web-footed barnyard fowl,
until he had green eggs to surprise
young folks at Eastertime.

He liked to teach the lore of prairie plants
and Indian crops, and gave away the tiniest,
prettiest gourds for many square miles around.

Long winter evenings he spent recreating
the songbirds of vanishing hedgerows,
repeating their poses and chance meetings,
their nesting and feeding behavior over and over,
later to be filled in with water colors,
during another snowy day.

He was not able to complete all these scenes,
but he was driven by a need to convey
to the next generation what he had seen,
on his farm, through a 500 millimeter Tele-lens
he had built himself from a German tank gunner's sight;
always adding to his paintings what he could
still see from his window,
while housebound with Phlebitis.

All around, farmers were looking to Seed Companies
for better, bigger strains of corn,
bulldozing fencelines to make room for progress.
Only teachers took their flocks to Ernie Strubbe's
little house, where children could see
how things used to be - -

Many more than he could have fathered himself
may have picked up the gist, the seed of
retrospective, nowadays called Eco-conscience,
a powerful antidote to careless exploitation.
Soon, perhaps, strong enough to stem and reverse
past abuse.

Auction

A lady wrote and published
a short poem,
the essence of deep sadness
that touches everyone present
at an auction.

I clipped it and saved it in a chest
that came from Sweden,
more than a hundred years ago.
If ever that chest has to go to auction,
whoever finds her poem
will understand
her feelings and mine:

The auctioneer's singsong
"Gimme two, gimme five, gimme ten"
firing up the bargaining instincts
of a browsing crowd,
while a grieving family huddles on the porch,
watching their cherished clutter
dragged out into the dust.
Children poking in baskets and boxes
of keepsakes - -
housewives fondling the carved fronts
of cupboards they would love to polish
in their own homes.

For how long? A short decade or two?
Until the vicissitudes of fate
may tear another farmhouse apart
and its accumulated collections
of Indian pottery and arrowheads
are put under the hammer,
along with modern appliances.

The auctioneer's singsong
is like the chant of an ancient cult:
Doomsday's abracadabra - -
and when the buyers' trucks are loaded,
the bereaved are suddenly left
in a silent yard,
with only some rusty tools, unbid for.

The farmer himself was spared the pain
of having to watch the unravelling,
but the sun is slow to set
for a proud rural homemaker,
who still clings to threads of their
lives' tapestry, touching doorframes
in the empty house, and the tree in the yard
where the children had their swing.

Adult voices are calling her
out of her reverie: "Mother, please, let's go!
We have your clothes and photo albums,
and the kids are asleep in the station wagon."
Startled, she drops a last thread,
but also feels drawn into a new web - -

and on the long ride to the Cities,
she dozes, exhausted, while snatches of dreams
are surfacing in her subconscious to haunt
her waking moments: Nursery rhymes
and High School days, all mixed up.

Given a couple of months
to adjust and get her bearings,
this rural grandma may yet surprise her family
by not going back to Kindergarten,
but straight on to College!
And her grandchildren will benefit
by her stronger genes,
and - - in shorter hours of her presence - -
find a more powerful role model,
who can tell better stories
to capture young minds.

The Innocent Giant

In his combine's air-conditioned cabin
filled with the sound of country music,
the lyrics of which hold the only philosophy
he cares to listen to over and over again,
the agro-operator of the American frostbelt
is only trying to feed his family,

and yet, against the odds of climate and weather,
of failing crops and rare seasons of plenty,
he is taking heed of science and markets
and, listening to Western lyrics,
will do what is best:

for his family, for soil conservation,
for the wildlife in his State.
Idling land, after a surplus,
trying to grow bumpercrops when grainbins are empty.

All the while feeding, against all principles
of letting them fend for themselves,
hungry nations in the frostbelt of Asia,
where farmers were getting only refresher courses
in a failed philosophy that did not allow for a man
to owe an air-conditioned combine to a bank
while feeling and acting
as if he owns it.

1978
(revised 1993)

Winter Fire

"No, we can't have roast suckling pig,
we are raising hogs - -"
but the piglets kicked over their heater
and roasted themselves;
two dozen squeals stilled.

One singed sow got away to a neighbor's farm,
to freeze there,
a trail of foxes leading to the larder.

The others, in the sooty remains
of the pigsty,
waiting for the insurance man,
were covered by snow, uncovered by wind,
and pecked at by chickens all winter.

Until the spring melt, when something
had to be done about the smell.

This Minnesota farmer did not watch
the price of pork after that
and his wife served beef and chicken,
beef and chicken for two years
after the fire.

The youngest daughter winced in class
when the teacher mentioned Charles Lamb's
"Dissertation on a Roast Pig."

Snowbirds

After their sixtieth winter,
Minnesota people tend to fly South,
as the Purple Martins do,
with an urge to return.

Hitting golf balls on the greens of Gulf States,
they will talk about ice houses on a frozen lake,
and the windchill they are missing
to ease aching joints
makes their minds itch for the lost adventure
of shared hardship.

Most will return in time to put up
their own Martin houses;
others will arrive to pick wild asparagus.
Some may visit grandchildren on the way,
but when the corn is knee-high on the Fourth of July,
all will be home to greet their childhood's summer.

These are the days when parent Purple Martins
are coaxing their nestlings to fly,
when you have to stop and watch every neighbor's
Martin house in a rural community
where people still call you by name
after you have been gone a long time.

It's the place where, in your mind's eye,
the crops of yesteryear are - - in a wink - -
super-imposed on a modern soybean landscape:
"Remember when flax tinted all these acres blue
to rival the sky-blue waters?"

. . . "and when the sunflowers were turning their heads
to the light for miles?"
. . . "I could never stop watching the wind
making waves in our wheat . . . "

No wonder that on this stage of personal re-runs,
returning Snowbirds are willing to stand heat and bugs
in a much better mood than elsewhere . . .

And this is why the Martins came:
seeking the longer days of Northern latitudes,
where light stimulates both gnats and birds
to have more offspring.

Some Cliff Swallows are staying South,
raising only two young per clutch,
with luck twice annually . . .
but the migrants' challenge is an inborn urge
to return to the very same Martin house.

Just as the human Snowbirds feel compelled to return
to the same frame house on the prairie,
the same cabin on the lake, where reunions
with classmates and the sharing of memories
make all feel young again.

Hometown and Beyond

Ice Out

It was quite an event before
The Ottertail Power plant
warmed the south end of Big Stone Lake,
with geese sitting in the open water all winter.

Since the plant has been dismantled
and shipped to Guatemala,
the lake is once more frozen solid
for five months.

The tilt of the planet's axis
and the Northwest wind, Keewatin,
now called Alberta clipper,
once again deciding the dates.

Ice-out may vary like Easter
(the first Sunday after the first full moon
following the vernal equinox).

A warm wind will start eroding
the holes cut by ice-fishermen,
the cracks widening until loosened slabs
come crashing down, piling up on the pier
and clogging the river outlet.

until a rise in temperature and wind velocity
sets the lake free,
to be again a mirror of the sun.

Few are the oldtimers who remember
their grandfathers' accounts
of what lake ice meant to the region
before year-round refrigeration.

So the ice goes out,
having been used only for recreation.

when once it had been cut and loaded
onto railroad freight cars,
the rest of the harvest stored
under sawdust to be handy all summer long
for cool drinks and home-made ice cream.

Too Soon

Looking for wild asparagus,
I came upon a granite memorial in the brush,
with inscription Silvia Svenson* - -
birth date only, blank for death - -
a stone mason's handiwork toppled
between discarded plastic wreaths
and rusty buckets.

Cemetary vandalism?
Not at all, she's fine and loving,
the good bad girl,
maybe happier now - -

she left her stove, her table, her bed,
her last name like a stranger's,
herself she toppled her monument,
ordered too soon - -

Afraid of sharing a predictable future,
she chose not to lie with him
here, under the sod,
under the recurring glacier
for all eternity.

1978 * name changed

Mourning Doves Mourning

The upstairs bedrooms in the old white frame houses
were like alcoves nestling in the green canopy
of the Elm trees, planted at the dawn of the century.

Generations of Mourning doves cooed
in their branches and squirrels used
the safe, shady highways across yards and alleys.
Through decades of Depression and Wartime,
the Elm trees kept growing,
hiding all scars that the old houses suffered.

A small town is as beautiful as its curbside shade trees,
and the people never complained about all the raking,
pretending to enjoy a better view of the lake
through bare branches, and yet they were
impatient for new budding.

But while they were again as snug as bugs
in their featherbeds behind the dormers,
or - - on hot summer nights - - discarding quilts,
sleeping fitfully on their screened porches,
the Dutch Elm disease crept slowly across
the continent.

It started on the East coast, slowly spreading
South, then westward, but whatever the bad news,
people always hope: "It can't happen here!"
One home owner recalls the date when he planted
a new sapling and the local Weekly warned:
"The Dutch Elm tree disease has reached Minnesota!"
That was twenty years ago.

Formerly almost harmless bark beetles
had been infected with a noxious fungus
that stopped the sap flow.

The sons and grandsons of the people
who had planted the trees that shaded their
family homes went to war against the fungus:
Year after year the tree doctors came
to drill holes and inoculate the ailing Elms
with gallons of fungicide. It seemed to help - -
More children, Mourning doves and squirrels
grew up to enjoy the green canopy . . .
until the fungus infesting the bark beetles
developed strains resistant to the poison,
or the old trees could take it no longer.

After that, the budding ceased.
The bare branches of winter remained
throughout the summer, and the chainsaws
sang their shrill tune, so much sadder
than Mourning doves' cooing.
More piercing was the sound of root-drills,
going deep under the sidewalks.

The little town felt stripped - - exposed to the sky - -
but at least it was over. Other townships,
farther North, were still facing the ordeal.

Some people tried to plant young Ash trees,
which also seem vulnerable to an incurable disease;
perhaps the whole area is reverting to
prairie grasses, rejecting a short century of comforting shade - -
as all our gardening and cultivating
is but a split second in the long cycles
of glaciers and natural ground covers.

Only the elderly had time to mourn.
The present generation of parents too busy,
commuting 50 miles to work,
and the grandchildren, with their eyes glued
to school computers and home video games,
don't even miss Tree houses for day dreaming . . .

Theater of Seasons *

For the second time,
nation-wide acclaimed touring companies
had to cancel Minneapolis performances
for lack of attendance,
complaining that the prairie metropolis
should confess to lack of cultural ambition.

The absentees, reading such harsh words
after a couples tournament
on a 200 miles distant golf course
or, after two hard days' fishing their favorite lake,
don't feel bad about it - -

for who would sit indoors
watching somebody else's ego trip
while you can be outdoors doing your own thing?

Here, where even late show seems like matinée
when the sun sets at 9:30 p.m.?

And as the days grow shorter,
there is hunting season!
Now we're too tired for the late show,
as we have to get up with the birds,
and we would really feel out of tune
missing a sunrise
when the geese are honking.

They have never cancelled a performance
for lack of attendance - -

A faithful audience we are
to Minnesota's Theater of Seasons.

* So aptly named in a 1952 contest
by the late Cecil Kaercher of Ortonville.

Midwest Dream Cleaners

The bookmobile comes every week,
but the Dream Cleaner's truck
parks in Main Street only
twice a year - -

People come running,
bringing their pillows,
feeding soiled down (or foam)
into the truck that tumbles
old dreams clean and stuffs them
into new ticking.
All nightmares gone,
sweet dreams to come,
no more tossing and turning
until the down, the foam
have again absorbed too many
unfulfilled wishes turning sour.

Nobody in these small towns
has a bad conscience,
but the subconscious is doing it
to the heads seeking rest
on those pillows that have
to absorb the sweat of the whole world
through TV,
and all printed daydreams
the bookmobile brings.

No truck comes to tumble
baffled minds.

1976

Lake Freeze

Up on the moraine overlooking Big Stone Lake
that fills the bed of Glacial River Warren,
lives a lady who does not believe
in recurring ice ages - -

looks out her window on Armistice day
through the blowing snow of the earliest blizzard
since 1940,
sees the Northwest wind, Keewatin,
whip the muddy waters into crested waves
pounding the shore, glazing the rocks,
their spray blown high into the trees
instantly freezing,
every new coating adding to bizarre ice sculptures - -

Sees the wind-whipped waves trying to run from Keewatin's fury
and being thrown back, ice crystals slowing their fall - -

- - goes to do some chores,
and when she returns to her window,
sees the waves now sluggish, weighted down by slush,
patches growing, turning, pancake ice forming,
yet moved by the wind, scalloped in places - -
and all of a sudden solid, gathering snow.

The lady in the house up on the glacial moraine
saw it happen on Armistice day 1982:
an expanse of water a mile wide and thirty miles long
frozen in less than eight daylight hours,
wild waves stilled,
to rest for five months or more.

And as she went to turn up her thermostat,
she did not worry about recurring ice ages
but said, "That was a bad freeze-up, no good
for skating or cross-country skiing, all bumpy."

Bad Start

New Year's Eve - -
midnight fire on Main Street!
Please, not in our small town
with so many stores empty,
for sale - -

Not the ladies' fashions, please,
all the nice things we should have
bought our loves for Christmas
and didn't, waiting for mark-downs.

There go all the manmade fibers,
melting . . .
Not the music store, please,
guitars, their strings untouched,
glowing red and snapping with
a mournful sound in a crackle
of varnish - -

hollow black forms that throughout
the New Year our sons and daughters
could have hugged and fondled - -
if we only had given them guitars
for Christmas!

Dirty icicles in blackened lots
for the rest of a long winter - -
and who will restore those new gaps
in the smile of our Main Street?

We were ready for a facelift,
for a brand New Year,
now see what we've got:
ten steps backward to the starting point.

Ethnic Recipes

Minnesotans have a way of watching
newcomers' reactions to Lutefisk,
and whoever does not join the local
"Meatballs opposition", has got a foot in the door!

On summer evenings, when the sun sets at 10 pm,
the catch of Walleyes is being fried to a crisp,
but even if some still remain in the freezers,
the early sunsets of November are heralding
country Church dinners of pioneer fare.

Air-dried on wooden racks lining miles
of Scandinavia's shores, sides of salted
Atlantic Cod did not spoil on long ocean voyages.
Soaked in lye, and rinsed a lot,
they turn into a glassy, slippery dish,
that, for some, goes down easier than Salmon.

But you have to learn the ritual
from an octogenarian aficionado,
who knows how to time the poaching,
while the potatoes and carrots are boiling,
while the Swedish milk sauce is thickening
and the Lefse are warming to be spread
with butter and sugar.
Not to forget the Fiske mustard,
biting hot to clear your sinuses!

If the newcomer at your table happens to be
an Exchange student, like Lakshmi from India,
she will say: "Your Lefse make good Roti!
My mother soaks dried Scottish Cod in milk
and curries it for Roti filling."
At another Lutefisk dinner, Lucia from Italy says:
"This is the same stoccofisso my grandmother
serves à la marinara! You know, in salsa pommodori,
with pasta! My country is so famous for
Spaghetti sauce and Pizza now, I can't imagine
what my ancestors ate before Christofero Colombo
brought the Tomato across the Atlantic . . ."

Chocolate brown Mandy, an Exchange student
born on a Caribbean Island, tastes her first helping
of Lutefisk and exclaims: "This is like my aunt's
Saltfish pie, since she makes it with Irish potatoes
and milk - - but more often we have Codfish fritters,
to flavor our tropical tubers and starches.
And when we don't want heavy food, we make *Boul Joul*,
a spicy salad, using all the crunchy greens
we can grow, adding Codfish, marinated in lime juice
and coconut oil, with a dab of red pepper sauce
to replace your hot mustard."

"Why", ask the Lutefisk diners,
"why are your people using Scottish Saltfish
on an island that knows no winters?"
And Mandy quips: "Why are *you* eating this
while you have a choice of frozen Trout or Salmon?"

Ancient recipe collections helped to write the history
of Minnesota, (and of many other places in the New World).
Even near lakes or sea-shores there are months
when the fish won't bite;
dried fish from the Old World remained a staple,
the more welcome when its flavor revives pleasant
childhood memories.

The hardships of ancestors blissfully forgotten,
modern folks share a meal, speaking the
same language (lingua),
their tongues' (lingual) tastebuds comparing
memories of old traditions.

What a reunion, with only one little flaw:
Lutefisk arrives in Minnesota very late in the year,
when people want hot Church dinners - -
so how can we ever have a cold salad lunch like
Mandy's *Boul Joul?*
A few of us might fly down to her island
for a visit and a taste!

The Old Osteopath

Himself frail and one of the last of his profession,
he held office in a small mainstreet building
with leaking roof and peeling wallpaper.

Those who entered, bent with aching backs, did not mind,
would not let him close shop and retire.

Into his late seventies they called on him for help - -
Young giants, bulky farmers who had lifted hogs or barrels,
strong country women who had tried to pull barbed wire out
from under the sod.

With slipping discs and pinched nerves shooting pain
up and down their spines,
they came limping to the frail old man.

Himself wheezing, he would handle them like puppets.

He would cross their arms over their chests
and apply pressure, with all the strength left in him,
making vertebrae crack and muscle spasms pop.
How they dreaded the sounds, counting moldy spots on the ceiling.

Standing behind, he would pull their heads,
cracking neckbones.

He made people aware of their skeletons,
and moving from head to feet,
he would tell them that their legs were not the same length,
from misuse and bad posture.

He would try to set that right.

Pushing one bent knee toward the chest, he would turn
a giant on his side and bring the hip over,
applying all his weight.

There!
Panting, the old man let go,
and the patient rolled off the bench with confidence
restored in his frame.

Something had snapped back into place
and the nerve squeeze was eased.
Farm and family would function again,
but the old osteopath sat there spent,
wheezing and wondering why he couldn't use his last strength
out in the open,
hitting a golf ball, watching the geese fly over the lake.
Sometimes he did, but not often enough.

You cannot retire in a declining profession
while people are in pain.
They do not train many young osteopaths any more,
so he worked first 5, then 10, then 15 years past his retirement,
asking small fees to set lovers, farmers, fathers right.

When he died, he left a radius of a hundred miles
with people wondering what to do
when the biped ailment hits again.

The Woodcock Lady

In her seventies, she travelled to Antarctica,
to watch the penguins, on a Christmas cruise.
Come Spring, she invited shipmates
to her new home near a golf course
that once had been her late husband's estate.

Amateur movies of penguins and seals
were soon forgotten, as her guests
marvelled at her personal Woodcock Museum!

The dainty woodland birds were present
all through the house,
in the most life-like poses taxidermists, carvers,
painters and engravers could achieve;
her stereo revived the eerie sounds
of their sunset aerial Spring mating display - -
but her guests were most impressed
by a story their hostess had to tell:

The couple had been observing, netting,
ringing and releasing Woodcocks
over the years,
contributing to knowledge and conservation.
But when her husband's health failed,
and her son was too busy in St. Paul,
the Woodcock lady recruited new helpers
through her church's charity program:
"Selling her talent to the next generation!"

You might expect couples in their sixties
attending, but in fact, many people,
much younger than that, were willing
to pay $250 each for charity and a chance
to understand what Minnesota would lose
by reducing woodlands and "Timberdoodles".

An afternoon in her private museum,
an early meal of commercial Quail and their tiny eggs,
preceded a walk to secret places,
where she threw the net, while the novices
had to learn how to disentangle
the sharp little toes without breaking fragile limbs,
without being stabbed by sharp long beaks;
how to slip a ring onto a tiny leg,
how to hold the warm struggling wonder for a moment - -
and let it go - -
then to listen to its mate's "Painting call"
from way above.

Many went home to cherish those moments,
having helped not only their church
and a septuagenarian passing on her love of the land - -
but having helped themselves,
and their own yet unborn,
future caretakers of Minnesota's biodiversity.

April 1978

Hunter's Wife

We don't need another pheasant - -
we don't need another poem - -
we have too many!

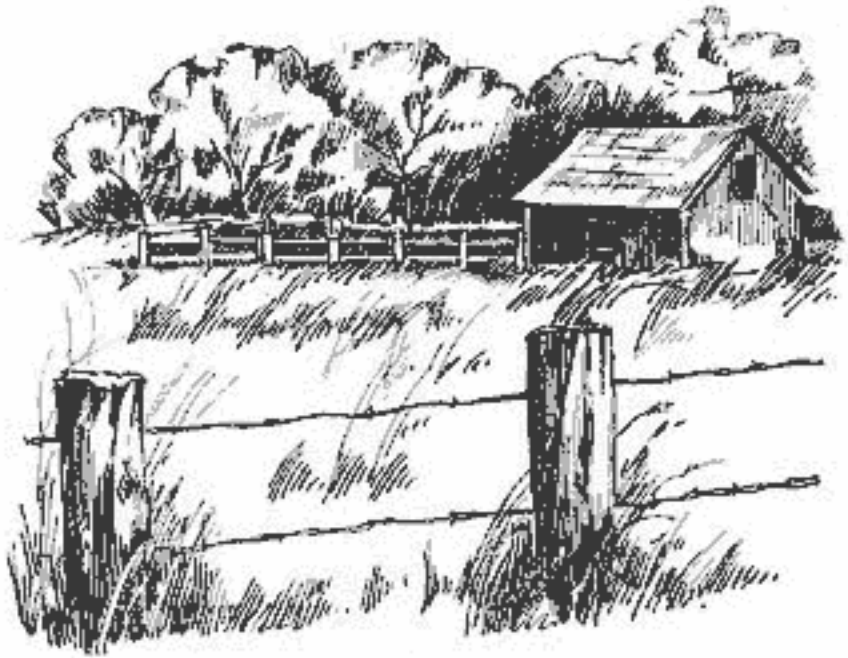
You lost the rooster that took all your time - -
the poem that took all mine won't buy a chicken.

But you'd rather go hunting and I'd rather sit writing
than anything else.
It's the same inbred need.

Hunting season is only two months a year,
while writing season is not restricted;
so you have the harder part,
living with a poet.

You can freeze your pheasants
while we go cruising,
but I will take my papers along.
And it is very likely that, upon our return,
the pheasants,
done in a slow oven with mushrooms and cream,
will be much better than the poems.

1977



Autobiographical Notes

Vera G. Schoen has published two books of her German poetry at age 21, in 1955. She then became co-editor of nine books of Natural History, which had a multi-language circulation. During the same period, she published her own series of twenty animal photo-books for children, translating her German-rhymed versions into French prose.

Having travelled widely on five continents, Vera came to Western Minnesota in 1975, to join her husband, Warren, in a life closer to the soil, with side trips to Alaska and Antarctica. Both being active scuba divers, they published, in 1988, the first Anthology of Divers' Poetry, *Voices From The Deep* (ISBN-0-915-180-30-8).

The present collection, *Under The Flyway*, reflects her concern about the future of Wetlands Conservation, which found support during drought cycles and may lose it after recent years of flooding.

Catherine Hearding is a native of Minnesota, residing in Stillwater with her husband and two children. She received her B.A. degree in Zoology and Botany from the University of Montana, Missoula, in 1974, and has been working as a free-lance artist since then. She specializes in watercolor painting with an emphasis on nature subjects.

Eva C. Magnus was born and raised in the Chicago suburbs. In 1987, she received her B.A. degree in Graphic Design from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa. Currently, she is starting her own business creating Web pages on the Internet. Her email address is emagnus@ix.netcom.com.

Meadowlark

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