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Selected Poetry

Aaron A. Baker

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SELECTED POETRY

By Aaron A. Baker

A MOVIE IN OUR TOWN

The street lights made an amber glow
on old buildings on that last night
they made a movie in our town,
which they called Stony Flats,
and almost everybody on Main Street
was dressed like a pioneer.

Old kerosene lanterns and candles
shone in the doors and windows.
The town lawmen wore their bright stars,
and people on the sidewalks stepped
around the Comanches who had blankets
wrapped around their shoulders
as they sat flat on the ground

There were a wooden Indian and candy-colored
barber pole, and peanut vendors, and a little
crowd of boys and girls chasing one another
in the roped-off street while waiting
for the action to get underway.

Suddenly, a bright spotlight made
the children leave the street.

Then Rex Allen, the cowboy star,
came out of the darkness--and like
Will Rogers began to twirl a rope
into a large and larger circle. Now his girlfriend,
Clara Bow, stepped into the light, and Rex
circled her with his rope as she kissed
his horse, which had followed her.
The horse knelt in thanks, and everybody
and his dog clapped hands.
The director nearby hollered, "Cut!"
It was a sound picture and he didn't
want applause just yet.

My father thought the whole business of movies
was a fake--especially after he found out
much of this scenery was taken around Medicine
Park in the Wichita Mountains. And, believe
it or not, as far away as Turner Falls in the
Arbuckle Mountains. Rex Allen and
Clara Bow had spent a honeymoon there.

Or maybe that was Roy Rogers and Dale Evans?
Anyhow, sometimes when I see a full moon
over the prairie, I think of that old western movie
made PARTLY in my Oklahoma hometown.

HOW SUDDENLY AN OUTSIDER, RUNNING

Stark and blank
the old house
stands without doors or windows
letting the wind sweep through the empty
rooms.

A dog has left mud-caked tracks
across the front porch where he had
detoured during a sudden
spring shower running ahead of a quail hunter
with shotgun. My mother's ghost may have
chased the dog away with a broom as she stood
in the doorway.

All the other floors are swept clean
on this early, windy morning. I see my father
talking to strangers as
the old family farm fades away
like the end of a silent movie and the
red dirt country road can't take me away
fast enough to erase
childhood memories.

THE WINDMILL

I saw it in a lone windmill: Another time,
another place. The broken windmill stood on a
lonely horizon on a windswept prairie. The wind
used to turn the metal blades to lift the water to a
parched land and for drinking water for the
white-faced cattle and their owners and hired
cowboys; the cool, hard water almost just
dribbling at times into the metal stock tank at
the base of the windmill tower; sometimes the
water splashed over when full, making a little
oasis of green grass around the tank.

Sometimes ranch-hands, stripped to their bare
skins, would jump into the tank to bathe on
evenings after work, especially on Saturday. I
had never seen naked men before--white bodies,
brown faces from the sun. The windmill creaked
and groaned, and the men laughed and splashed
like little boys and threatened to throw me into
the water with my clothes on. I saw it today in a
lone windmill now broken

Another time, another place, and a small boy's
eyes.

BASTIONS

THE PROFESSOR

He gets his room and board at our house. There he is in deep study (For a moment you might think he's asleep.) His finger is following the last lines Of a page of poetry: His head bends close to the lines As the light is dim in the room. Perhaps he is reading of an adventure, Or an account of a love affair, Pondering a phrase, "Oh, God I love her." Dreaming of a personal experience In Oklahoma, absorbing a neat phrase-0- A warm word spoken by himself: Oblivious to the humdrum task of grading Papers, or of having to meet an eight o'clock Freshman English class in the morning.

THE TORNADO

This tornado . . .
I see it drop from the clouds while I am looking northwest toward Mount Scott in the Wichita Mountains. It, I mean the tornado, is a twisting white funnel, white because the sun came out behind it, as it moved across the plains toward our house. No birds are singing this April afternoon. The thunder has ceased as the tornado sweeps along destroying a vacant farm house, knocking a large cow pond completely dry: frightening horses in a pasture as I watch with my parents standing at the door of a storm cellar. Trees are uprooted in its path like spindle-sticks. A man comes along our road in an oilfield dray wagon, unhitches the big-footed team, and joins us at the cellar door. The tornado suddenly lifts as it turns north of us in a wheat field. There's a flash of lightning with the late sun still shining, and faraway we hear a calf bawling in the sudden, earthly stillness.

THE QUILTERS

It is a pretty quilt.
Clean. Framed. Little stars pieced together
With bits of colored cloth from dress scraps.

And the four women sitting at the quilting
frame,
Two on each side, making tiny hand-stitches,
And talking about friends and neighbors.

Occasionally, one of them gets up out of her
chair,
Walks over to get a drink of iced tea,
Then sits down again.

I see my mother with a thimble on her finger.
She squints as she threads a needle.
I remember Mom with her hands in the air.

WHEN I WAS LEARNING GEOGRAPHY



Time seemed endless, and the world appeared cozy, as the lady teacher turned the globe of the earth on her desk, asking questions; and with the open windows, the room smelled like April that day when I learned geography in the seventh grade.
I was the only boy in a class of girls, surrounded by desks, maps, erasers, pencils, chalk. The teacher pointed out places of green, yellow, blue, and red--places in Europe. The United States was a jigsaw puzzle of color. Oklahoma was pink or pale red like an Indian blanket, and water on the globe was always blue. Sometimes the girls laughed when there were dumb answers given the teacher.

Yes, the buds had burst in the trees outside, and I didn't know where in Africa that the children were slaves, or why a president was dying in North America, or cared much, as a little girlfriend passed me notes. Her eyes were deeper than the color of oceans and her hair was a rich blond like Idaho, or the Gobi Desert.

Suddenly, everybody was looking at me, for the teacher was asking me a question, which I had her repeat, about the Bering Strait and the Little Diomed Island or something, and the girls giggled, except my little Marie. The teacher had seen her pass a note, which I slipped into my mouth, and chewed up the secret quickly. I blushed with the good feeling of an international spy destroying the evidence, and was saved by the school bell, though there was a formal scolding later, on that day I was learning geography--along with the first pangs of love, when I was in the seventh grade.

GRAND DADDY FISH

A memory I have of being eleven is following the footsteps of Old Les as he carries a mammoth catfish, which bumps against his legs, as he trudges down the railroad tracks on a shortcut for home.

I heard them call Old Les a simple man. He was getting along in years--about 49, and lived with his brother's family after his mother and father died. They were good friends of my parents. We often went fishing together. Old Les had been trying to catch the grand daddy of all the catfish, he said, that summer in the lake above Eagle Creek.

Now he had the stinking old king of a fish, and it weighed him down like a sack of gold or potatoes. It was a king and Old Les the slave. I lagged along away behind that August day, knowing that my friend would get his picture taken with the fish probably in THE CLINTON DAILY NEWS, and maybe even THE SUNDAY OKLAHOMAN, and some would say a simple fisherman outwitted a lot of wiser anglers.

I was proud of my friend, except this trip meant that summer was over, and school awaited anybody who was eleven "Hey, kid, come on!" Old Les called, "You and me, we did it!" I shouldered my fishing pole and stepped up my pace. It kind of made me feel grown-up and important. 🐾

(AARON BAKER, although he has been a frequent WESTVIEW contributor, ceased writing for a time because of the serious illness and subsequent death of his wife. He is a poet and a retired teacher and newspaper editor. He is a graduate of OU, where he was influenced by the late Dr. E. E. Dale--noted Oklahoma historian and poet--and by Weatherford native Dr. Walter Campbell [Stanley Vestal, English professor who wrote about the Old West]. Aaron has written two books of poetry--MAKE ROOM FOR THE INTRUDER and SOMETHING WILL COME TO YOU--and is currently working on another. Although he is now living in Shreveport, Louisiana, he remembers with much nostalgia his growing up in Southwestern Oklahoma.)

AFTER-DINNER AFFLICTION

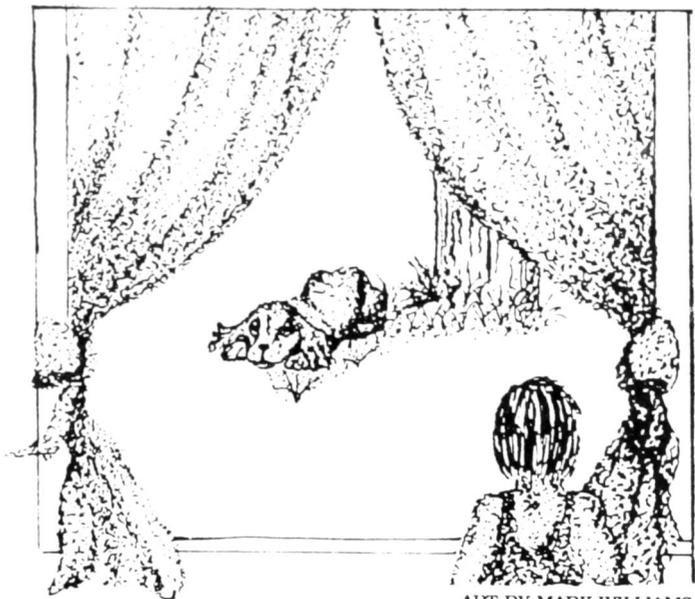
By Margie Snowden North

Ole Rattler was lazy,
as dogs are in the swelter of summer,
and he spent his days stretched comfortably
under the Paradise tree by the house.

Mama, little Ransom said,
how come Ole Rattler lays around so much?
Oh, guess he's got spring fever, son.

Papa in the fields since sun-up
comes into a dinner fit for a king:
beans and cornbread and chow-chow,
a big slice of onion, a quart jar of iced tea.
Stretched out on the floor afterward
without his shirt he goes sound asleep.
Mama keeps the flies shooed off
and listens to Hank Williams
singing blue love-songs on the radio.

Mama, little Ransom asks, pondering,
How come Papa lays down so much?
Does he have spring fever
too? 🐾



ART BY MARK WILLIAMS

(MARGIE SNOWDEN NORTH of Erick is a loyal WESTVIEW contributor. Her novel, TO CHASE A DREAM, which deals with the same Western Oklahoma setting as this poem, is available from the author: Route 1, Box 87; Erick, OK 73645.)