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“Lying, Laughing and Dancing Around on the Road”
Approx. 2,525 Words

Lying, Laughing and Dancing Around on the Road

The eastward wall of my tent is sun-drenched. It glows greenly, the canvas already growing warm. Three crickets have climbed from the thick pasture grass to bask on the wall: their shadows are soaking through, black and clear, even the feelers distinct. From other tents the voices of early risers drift toward me. I don't want to get up; but soon the tent is too hot to do anything else, and I get up. I dress and unzip the tent flap and climb out into the light-rinsed Saturday morning air of the sandhills.

So this is Nebraska.

I have mostly avoided writes conferences. They seem so much like jousting tournaments: all those romantic sensibilities armored against the stinging critiques, their visors clamped shut and the bright plumes flying. This is an outsider's view, of course. And there have been times when I jealously watched my friends drive off for two weeks at Bread Loaf, a few days at Port Townsend.

It was in one of these jealous moods that I decided to spend a weekend this August at the

Sandhills Writers Conference, a yearly event organized by Nebraska poet Ted Kooser. I'd never been to the sandhills (my image of them derived from memories of dunes along the Oregon coast), but Ted's a friend, and I figured anything he cooked up had to be okay. Besides, the flyer he sent mentioned a big Saturday night feed put on by Al Davis, owner of the ranch we'd be camping on. It mentioned a swimming pool. It mentioned readings around a bonfire, including “lies and laughter.” Writers need lies and laughter, I figured. And the price was right: \$15, BYOF&B. So I took a Friday off work, borrowed a friend's tent, loaded an ice-packed cooler with cans of Stroh's and those single folks packages of bologna and sliced cheese, gassed up the Datsun, and steered onto the interstate toward Sterling, Sidney, Alliance and points east.

There is nothing I have to do. The morning goes while I sit in a lawn chair, in the shadow of my tent, reading a novel by Yehuda Amichai called *Not of This Time, Not of This Place*. Now and then I take out my notebook, jot a line, toy with a flashy metaphor, a dramatic enjambment . . . but the undershape's not there.

There is nothing I have to do, and my mind wanders.

Most of the other conferees have wandered off into the hills. The sandhills, it turns out, *are* dunelike. But they're covered with tough prairie grass, thistles, sage, and dark green spills of pine. The pines look unnaturally well placed, and I seem to remember reading somewhere that one of the Roosevelts (Teddy, no doubt) had paid people here to plant shelterbelts as a way to retard erosion. At any rate, the effect from a distance — as one surveys the region from the highway, let's say — is of a Japanese garden assembled by someone with a dry wit.

By ten o'clock the heat is heavy; the wind eddies, surging rather than gusting. My tentshadow shrinks until I can feel the scalp reddening around the roots of my hair.

Finally I lay aside my credentials for being here (book and notebook and pen), sling my Minolta round my neck like a bona fide tourist, and head down the dirt road that runs alongside our pasture, linking the Davis ranch to the highway. Every step sends insects hopping or buzzing away: they pop up like spits of grease in a hot pan. A quarter mile off, a wild-looking horse watches me approach from a cloud of thornbushes on the top of a hill. He watches until I'm a hundred yards away, watches while I unsheathe my camera . . . then suddenly gallops off when I uncap the lens. I snap a picture looking back across the pond instead, framing the two ranch houses and various outbuildings, all built of brick and painted white. The bricks, I remember Al Davis saying, were handmade right on the ranch from sun-dried mud dredged out of the marshy field in front of me. In fact, there had been no pond here until the ground was dug to make those buildings.

That's the way poems should be made, I think. And the thought surprises me. I've never found analogs for the process of writing in the outside world, the way Wordsworth found them in nature or Williams in machinery or Bly in the brain's physiology. But this view of the Davis ranch I find convincing.

I take another shot of it. In the foreground, the sunlight is sparking off the windshaken water.

I remember him being full of that anxious job that seizes writers when they're working on a new project.

Mid-morning that Friday I stopped for breakfast in Sidney, Nebraska. It's a lovely little nest of a town with wide, quiet streets and a park full of shadows. I had come there once to speak at a writer's conference with my friend Mike McNamara, a novelist. We'd driven up from Denver the evening before, lying and laughing, and spent a good portion of the night in the motel bar. I remember him being full of that anxious joy that seizes writers when they're working on a new project. A few years later Mike was killed in a car wreck, and though he'd finished the new book, publishers aren't interested in works by little-known dead authors. As far as I know, it's still in manuscript. Anyway, that's why I stopped in Sidney. I ate breakfast in the same café where Mike and I ate, and I thought hard about all the things in our lives that will never be touched by anyone.

The afternoon heat is on, and the lawn around the pool is being crushed by browning bodies. A few of the conferees are drifting in turquoise water, hanging off the side with their elbows, trading gossip. One group in the shadow of the big house is noisily involved in a round of Trivial Pursuit. The congregation I've wandered into consists of already beer-soaked raconteurs, most notably Al Davis and his half-brother Angus, poet Art Homer (his real name), and Kooser himself, just back from visiting with a field of dinosaur bones north of Alliance. The stories we tell are unprintable, of course. Most begin with the ritual phrase, “This guy goes into a bar,” and quickly decline to a suitably low level.

By three o'clock the jokes have run thin and our group dissolves. Ted and I wander back to the tents, draining our beers, drunk in the hot sun.

“How were the dinosaurs?” I ask him.

“Well, he says, grinning in his laconic, farmerish way, “eighty-million-year-old bones kinda put things into perspective.”

Ted is now the head of the marketing department for the insurance company he’s worked at for years. He’s finding it tough, what with new responsibilities for agents in the field. But he’s getting the real work out as surely as Stevens did from *his* company’s office. There’s a new Kooser volume coming from University of Pittsburgh Press called *Figures in a Landscape*, and he’s giving further shape to the western novel he’s been tinkering with for years. Still, he’s a quiet man when it comes to his writing; he’s even forgotten to bring some of the new work with him to read around the bonfire tonight. On the other hand, he mentions with a certain relish that the drama critic for a Lincoln newspaper, reviewing his play *Blizzard Voices*, had referred to him condescendingly as “a local writer.”

“Well,” Ted says, “I wrote a letter explaining to this guy just how local I thought I was.” A straight smile rounds out his bearded cheeks and his eyes glitter, the brim of his straw hat rising with his eyebrows.

Back at his truck we listen to a taped radio show of ‘30s bluegrass tunes and trade stories about other writers, nursing our last two beers until they’re too warm to drink. It’s five o’clock, and we’re sober again. I suggest a quick liquor run to Hyannis, 14 miles south. A little something to go with the lasagna dinner Al and his friends from the local theatre group are whipping up in the kitchen of the main house.

We pile into the Datsun and roar off.

I like the way the road rumbles under us, the way fences ten feet from the shoulder lope past. The late light pours clarity over the rounded hills and haystacks and the plush stands of pine. Words, unmoored from a poem I can't quite place, drift by: “You feel like stopping the car and dancing around on the road.” I don't stop, though. I let the hot air dance alone on the road and watch while it turns to bright water in my rearview mirror.

A few inches from my eyes, the shadow of a solitary cricket shows through; with a shock I notice it has only one hind leg.

I never saw land as level as Nebraska was halfway from Sidney to Bridgeport. The white cliffs of Scott's Bluff in the westward distance lapsed like a dreamily breaking wave, and suddenly there was nothing but eerie, cloudshadowed flatness. The clouds themselves were slow-motion bursts of whiteness bruised underneath by their own immensity. My hands fell asleep from gripping the wheel to keep wind from shoving me into some ditch, and then the deeper boredom set in. Even Bridgeport and the North Platte — a pretty river, though sandy and sedate — slipped by without bringing a bit of relief.

I began to wonder if this conference would be worth the trip. What if the sandhills were as naked and empty as this part of Nebraska? What if these Nebraska poets, most of whom I didn't know, were as boring as the landscape?

By the time I got to Alliance, the country had greened up, turned rolling. The air seemed fresher. I steered through the Alliance McDonald's and devoured a burger and fries out of my lap as I drove. Soon the sandhills started up on all sides, folded me in somehow. Lakes

glinted here and there, and the windows of ranchhouses squinting through shelterbelts, and the tines of harvesters parked beside huge brown loaves of hay.

I thought of Ted’s poems, and the poems of Shirley Buettner, who would also be at the conference. I thought of Art Homer, whose work I’d seen around and admired. For the first time I found myself really looking forward to the gathering — not as an escape, not as a poor man’s answer to Port Townsend, but as a meeting of fellow artists, And I started to wonder how my own work would measure up.

It’s almost ten o’clock. I’m stuffed with lasagna and beer and the incredible ghostliness of watching Gershwin play Gershwin on Al Davis’s player piano.

The bonfire reading is in progress, and it’s quietly spectacular: words and approving noises from the audience and sparks from the logs all swirling up toward stars so large and bright they feel almost in reach. Even the weaker poems seem to be borne upward by the flames.

A few beers later Al sets off fireworks: glittery showers crackle down and draw childlike oohs and ahhs from everyone. Then Art Homer uncases his guitar and the night winds down with folksongs and the blues.

Toward 2a.m. I crawl back into my tent, undress and zip myself into my sleeping bag. The moon is up, and it drenches the canvas wall sloping over me. A few inches from my eyes, the shadow of a solitary cricket shows through, black and clear; with a shock, I notice it has only one hind leg . . . and suddenly feel the hungry silence arching over me, over all our tents and all our words.

It was nearly 3 p.m. when I got to Hyannis, a sunny roadside town with a hilltop high school, white frame houses, a liquor store in the back of a western wear shop, and streets even wider than Sidney's. I missed my turnoff while eyeing the community theatre our conference's proceeds would go to support, then took the opportunity to stop for fresh ice.

I don't understand the feeling of ease I had in Hyannis that Friday. Small towns usually bring out my big city foreignness. Maybe the physical openness of the place influenced me. Or maybe it was the woman at the grocery store checkout counter, who confirmed the road I should take to the Davis ranch.

“Are you a writer?” she said.

She said “writer” the way she might have said “rancher” or “truck driver” or “phone installer,” which pleased me.

“Yeah,” I told her. “I write poetry.”

“That's good,” she said.

And I believed her.

After a few more minutes of lingering and small talk, I drive up onto the road and head back for the highway . . .

It's Sunday morning. The tent's packed back in the Datsun, along with my nylon suitcase and cooler and lawn chair. I trudge across the shaggy pasture to Bob and Shirley Buettner's tent for good byes and a quick photograph or two. We promise we'll try to make it back next year, because yes it was a great time and everyone's so scattered out west.

Ted drives up in his truck, hops out and gives me a hug. Next year, we tell each other.
And don't forget to write.

After a few more minutes of lingering and small talk, I drive up onto the road and head back for the highway, which proves wide open all the way to Hyannis. Fresh air thunders through my open windows with a galloping under-rhythm, a steadying onwardness. I stick my left hand out into it, and suddenly the poem I couldn't remember yesterday leaps to mind entire.

“So This Is Nebraska.” From Ted's *Sure Signs* collection:

The gravel road rides with a slow gallop
over the fields, the telephone lines
streaming behind, its billow of dust
full of the sparks of redwing blackbirds.

On either side, those dear old ladies,
the loosening barns, their little windows
dulled by cataracts of hay and cobwebs,
hide broken tractors under their skirts.

So this is Nebraska. A Sunday
afternoon; July. Driving along
with your hand out squeezing the air,
a meadowlark waiting on every post.

Behind a shelterbelt of cedars,
top-deep in hollyhocks, pollen and bees,
a pickup kicks its fenders off
and settles back to read the clouds.

You feel like that; you feel like letting
your tires go flat, like letting the mice
build a nest in your muffler, like being
no more than a truck in the weeds,

clucking with chickens or sticky with honey
or holding a skinny old man in your lap

while he watches the road, waiting
for someone to wave to. You feel like

waving. You feel like stopping the car
and dancing around on the road. You wave
instead and leave your hand out gliding
larklike over the wheat, over the houses.