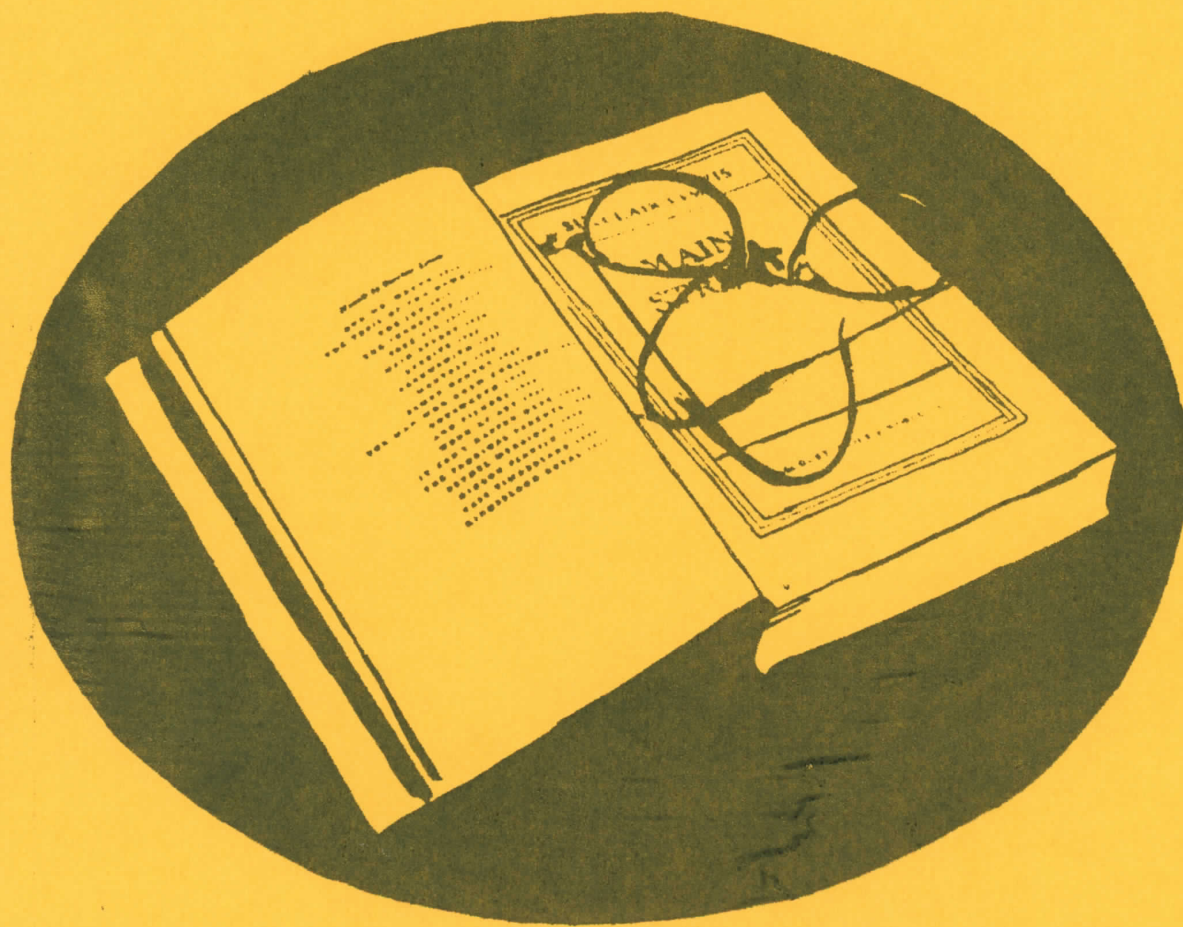


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A Portrait of Jim Tully: An Ohio Hobo in Hollywood

Daivd D. Anderson

The early nineteenth century American dream had its origins in Thomas Jefferson's eighteenth century vision of an open society in which one's talents, ambition, and enterprise were the only limitations on the place one might achieve, and by the end of the nineteenth century, through the fusion and infusion of reality--the lives of Jackson, Lincoln, Garfield, and others--and fantasy--especially the hundred or more repetitious works of Horatio Alger, Jr.--the dream had become myth; perhaps, even yet, the most durable American myth. A poor boy--or, in the late 20th century, poor girl--can rise, through the proper combination of talent, work, and luck (often translated into sharp dealing) to a position of wealth, power, and prestige in American society, perhaps even to the Presidency.

Jim Tully, the subject of this portrait, never to my knowledge aspired to the Presidency nor to any other political office--in fact, he disliked even talking about politics--, but his achievement of the reality beyond the American myth is based upon impeccable credentials: he was born in a log cabin near the town of St. Mary's, in Auglaize County, Ohio, on June 3, 1888; the son of a drunken Irish ditch digger; his only formal education was between the ages of six and eleven in an orphanasylum in Cincinnati. Between twelve and twenty-one he was a hobo, crossing the country at least three times by freight train, as well as an itinerant laborer, a professional fighter, a link heater in a chain factory, and a circus roustabout. Yet, in 1922, he published a well-received autobiographical novel--so innocent was he of authorial

niceties that its first draft was a single paragraph 100,000 words long-- followed by 29 volumes of fiction, autobiography, biography, and sketches, as well as plays, and, as nearly as can be determined, some nine hundred stories, essays, articles, and sketches. His works were best-sellers in the Soviet Union during the 1920s and 1930s, and of him H.L. Mencken wrote in 1928 that

If Tully were a Russian, read in translation, all the Professors would be hymning him. He has all of Gorky's capacity for making vivid the miseries of poor and helpless men, and in addition he has a humor that no Russian could conceivably have....

Tully's financial success was as great as Mencken's continued high regard for his work. In Emmett Lawler (1922), his first novel, his alter ego remarks, not entirely facetiously, that "some day I'll think and make a million, and wear a dress suit and look like a head waiter", and Tully and his alter ego spent many hours in public libraries across the country, reading, occasionally, stealing a book or two, and thinking. By 1940, after more than a decade in Hollywood as press agent, dialogue writer, and magazine journalist--in one typical year in the 1930s he appeared in Vanity Fair, Scribner's, True Confessions, Saturday Evening Post, American Mercury, and Photoplay--Tully delighted in pointing out that he lived in a \$100,000 house in the Hollywood Hills overlooking Toluca Lake, that he owned an 89 acre ranch in the Valley, and, most importantly, that he owned the finest library in Hollywood. After a series of heart attacks during the mid-1940s, Tully died on June 22, 1947, and he is buried in Forest Lawn Cemetery among stars and tycoons.

By 1940, too, Tully had become a Hollywood legend even as he seemed to have dropped through one of the many holes in American literary history: once Charlie Chaplin's press agent and ghost writer, he refused to give Chaplin censorship rights over a sketch, and not only was he fired but Chaplin attempted

to get an injunction to prevent its publication. Failing, Chaplin commented maliciously that "What Tully's forbears did with a shovel, Jim has tried to do with a pen." On another occasion, after a fist fight with John Gilbert, Tully said, "I didn't hit him. He was swinging away at me, and it looked to me as if he'd fan himself to death. So I just put him to sleep for his own protection."

Tully had come to Hollywood by accident - in his last professional fight, in Los Angeles, he had been knocked unconscious for twenty-four hours and when he woke up, he stayed where he was. But enemies in Hollywood insisted that his works were truly fiction, that he had never been a hobo, a brawler, or a roust-about, but instead, a seminarian with an imagination. But Frank Scully described him as "the enfant terrible of Hollywood" as well as "a mighty oak of American letters," and in 1932 George Jean Nathan rated him with O'Neill, Dreiser, and Lewis as a significant and representative if naive writer of the time. Yet, Nathan continued, "he...cannot refrain from making himself out a much lower hound than he is...a man born in a pigsty and one who has never since taken a bath,...a ruthless and dismaying cynic,...a ribald mocker of all sentiment, and--in his own argot--as a tough mug generally."

Whether because Tully's Hollywood legend supplanted that of Tully the hobo kid turned writer and then vanished as Hollywood legends have a habit of doing, whether his subject matter, so successful in the twenties, was, like Bromfield's and Cabell's, unacceptable to critics and intellectuals in the thirties and forties, whether his one story--like Sherwood Anderson, he was fascinated with the facts of his own life--became too repetitious, although again, like Anderson, he told that story well if in fewer ways, whether his success and the price that he paid for it by writing too prolifically and indiscriminately made him too low-brow for intellectuals and academics, whether he wrote too rapidly to be good,

whether his aggressive determination to defend friends and their reputations, as he did that of the late Paul Bern, seemed to be in bad taste to the taste-makers, whether his works were considered simply no longer relevant in a socially conscious age that sought to suffocate hobo kids in various deals, societies, and frontiers, Jim Tully, once an authentic American character, is unknown today, and his works, once so highly regarded by his contemporaries, are forgotten.

Yet, Tully's success in rising so far above his origins was never at the price of betraying, denying, or falsifying those origins, in spite of his long Hollywood residence. If, as Nathan suggests, he may have celebrated those origins too loudly and attempted to mythologize them by over-dramatizing himself to his friends, nevertheless he continued to define them in his works and perhaps to celebrate them in his life because they were real; to Tully, the eight years of his wandering were not only the path away from poverty in the Rabbit-Patch area of St. Mary's, Ohio, to adult success, but they were the means by which he contributed to the substance of the American dream. To Tully those years were revelatory of a significant dimension of American life that we overlook or ignore because it denies what we prefer to believe about our country, our values, ourselves.

The reality that he defines is not that of the American dream nor of its naive acceptance. His reality is what he calls the American "underworld," not a place or an ideal but a group of people who reject the American mainstream and its values even as they are rejected by it. In the preface to Blood on the Moon (1931), he wrote, in terms that apply to all of his novels, that

...the incidents in the book have all been lived. Life, and its pitiful objects, interest me more than literature. Every human is a continued story--whether his existence be narrow as a prison cell, or broad as Balzac's.

To those critics, however kind, who contended that I am a novelist trying to find myself, I will here answer for the first and only time: If I have not been able to invent a new medium in my picaresque books, I have at least been strong enough not to conform to one that is outworn.

I did not study the people in these books as an entomologist does a bug on a pin. I was one of them. I am still of them. I can taste the bitterness of their lives in the bread I eat today....

Tully's published canon of thirty volumes is perhaps as uneven as any in American history, yet from it may be extracted a solid core of six novels that deserve recognition, reading, and comment: Emmet Lawler (1922), Beggars of Life (1924), Circus Parade (1927), Shanty Irish (1928), Shadows of Men (1930), and Blood on the Moon (1931). To these, Tully might add (although I prefer not to) Ladies in the Parlor (1935), reportedly his favorite and the work that introduced me to Tully a number of years ago when I found it in a second-hand bookshop.

All of the six are rooted in Tully's experiences in the years between his twelfth and his twenty-first birthdays. Five of the six--all but Emmett Lawler--are written in the first person, and each is organized episodically and chronologically--picaresquely, I suppose. In the last five--which Tully later liked to group together as "the Underworld Edition"--each work focuses on a particular facet of Tully's formative years--Beggars of Life on life in St. Mary's Ohio, on the road, and as a fighter, much of which repeats Emmett Lawler; Circus Parade on life as a roustabout; Shanty Irish on life in St. Mary's, focusing on Tully's grandfather, Old Hughie, Shadows of Men on the life of vagrants imprisoned by an indignant society; and Blood on the Moon on life on the road from St. Mary's to San Francisco, from an orphanage to the prize ring and ultimately to the determination to write.

So autobiographical are the works that many of the same characters recur in most of them. In each the central character-narrator is an increasingly road-wise kid who was driven to the road as the most attractive

of unattractive alternatives, among them farm labor, town labor, institutionalization. But the kid not only learns to survive on the underside of life but he acquires a peculiar lust for what is nearly total, if ignoble, freedom in a mass society that marks every man who prefers life on the road--or on the river or in the territories--to what passes for civilized society in our time. Like his fellow vagrants, Tully's "Cincy Kid" will work, but he prefers not to, even when the cost of freedom is cold, hunger, fear, or imprisonment. The "Cincy Kid" is a direct descendent of Daniel Boone, Jim Bridger, Bartleby the Scrivener, and Huckleberry Finn rather than of Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Carnegie, or the heroes of Horatio Alger's single-minded productivity.

Each of the five, and to a lesser extent, Emmett Lawler, share another characteristic. Each book is, in a manner reminiscent of Winesburg, Ohio, a series of character-based sketches linked by the relationship of each character to the young narrator in the latter five and to the protagonist in the first. The road kid in each learns from many of them, but what he learns is not the ability to seek out the momentary glimpses into human souls that taught George Willard compassion in Winesburg, Ohio, but the tricks and techniques of survival in the American underworld. Tully's young hobo doesn't need to learn to understand his people and to view them with compassion; his reports, clear, factual, and detailed, are permeated with a precocious understanding and compassion that is perhaps more intuitive than learned. It is evident in each of the novels that, as Tully said in the preface to Blood on the Moon, he was one of the people of the underworld, that he could taste the bitterness of their lives as he wrote.

In each of the six the protagonist-narrator is in another sense closely related to George Willard of Winesburg, Ohio and the protagonists of such great stories as "I Want to Know Why" and "I'm a Fool". In each portrayal, Tully

emphasizes his characters' conviction that appearance, whether of people or institutions, is misleading when it is not deliberately dishonest, that consequently, maturity is based not on chronological age or acceptance or conformity, but on the ability to identify true human worth in spite of contrary assertions by society. But whereas Sherwood Anderson's adolescent males, as they reach out for maturity from their small-town middle class origins, are neither cynical nor sceptical, Tully's are both: before any of them reaches puberty, he has not only put bluing in the holy water at the orphanage, but his rosary, won for various religious reasons in several of the books, is stolen from him by what he insists is a more pious child; he has seen his mother die and his father drunk; he has been informally adopted by a farmer unwilling to hire and pay for adult labor. The environment that shapes George Willard and Anderson's other young men is idyllic in comparison, and Tully's St. Mary's, Ohio, separated from Anderson's Clyde by seventy miles and ten years, is not a background upon which Tully's young man can paint the dreams of his manhood but a place that will deny his identity and destroy his manhood unless he can escape it by the only means available.

Thus, when George, comfortable in a passenger coach, leaves Winesburg to make his dreams real in Chicago, he is going toward something, and he is taking much of the town and its people with him. But Tully's young men are not going to something; they are fleeing from something, and the places to which they journey are destinations only because they are someplace else. But every place is the same. Tully's youngsters know intuitively that neither answers nor fulfillment exist, that escape is impermanent, that life is painful and that institutions and those that serve them are untrustworthy at best. Conversely, they know that those who reject both institutions and their servants, those whose lives are

lived in the shadow of life, are, if not intrinsically good, at least beyond betrayal, and that whether yegg, hobo, tramp, or simple road kid, they are possessed of an essential innocence impossible for those who live by the impersonal rules of society.

Only one of society's institutions was, to Tully's young protagonists, worthy of recognition, respect, and use, the institution that made something possible at the end of the road for him and for some of the others, the institution that taught him to think. "There is more real democracy in an American Public Library than in any other institution in the land," he wrote in Emmett Lawler; "Emmett owes them a debt that black words on white paper will never repay."

In an interview in 1928, Tully recounted the fates of some of the people of his underworld:

...Columbus Jack...bumped into the one woman, went clean dippy about her and died. Red Cawley is in a goddam insane asylum somewhere....Bill, in 'Beggars of Life', is the manager of a taxi company. And Gabe Sullivan--the lad who was doing life in Columbus for murdering a scab--Gabe is swinging a paint brush, now, as useful as a citizen can be in Cincinnati....I expect Johnny Backus--the Flying Tramp--out of San Quentin this month....Johnny Sinclair--I fought him twice....came to a lecture I gave....I didn't know him, he had been pounded so much....

Perhaps it was as fitting as it was paradoxical that Tully's transition from rags to riches, from the violence of county jails to fist fights with celebrities, not only took place in Hollywood but was made possible by Hollywood's major industry. While he wrote his autobiographical novels, he became, at the same time, not a movie specialist but a Hollywood specialist, focusing, in hundreds of magazine articles, on the people of Hollywood, which he called "the gaudiest carnival in America." He saw its people as either genuine, like the freaks, the tramps, the roustabouts of his past, and his Hollywood friends, Clark Gable and Paul Bern, tragically a suicide after his marriage to Jean Harlow,

or as phonies, like Chaplin, too often believers in their own projected images, and childish, imperious, and scornful as a result.

In his last years before his health began to deteriorate, Tully turned again to his past, but not that of the road. Instead he turned again to St. Mary's Ohio, and the people he remembered best. In Esquire he published "Portrait of my Father;" in Reader's Digest, "Gypsy Sister." In each, in moving sentiment, he recounts the barshness, the privations of the last years of the nineteenth century in small-town Ohio after the sudden shock of his mother's death. But out of that chaos the image of his father stands clear and strong; that of his sister, warm and caring, the former casting "a magnificent and muddy shadow" from Ohio across countless hobo jungles to Hollywood; the latter, "a little girl who watched others go on journeys she could not take herself." In both essays Tully not only turns back in time to extract a measure of meaning from a memory beyond reality, but he reveals what might have been had not that reality intervened. In them, it is clear, Tully's dream is not that defined by materialistic America, in spite of his long residence in Hollywood; it is that of a time and place beyond or perhaps before material reality, a time before we lost our innocence on the road to someplace, a time in which he recalls, "a mid-summer twilight in Ohio is the very essence of wonder."

Michigan State University

Clarence A. Andrews (ed.), Growing Up in the Midwest.
Iowa State University Press, 216 pp. \$12.95.

The accomplishment of this book is its virtual guarantee of bringing to every Midwestern reader the pleasure of self-recognition: "Yes--that's it! That's what it was like for me, too." In one way or another, its writers are talking about all of us as we, too, grew up in the Midwest.

Clarence A. Andrews is a former professor of humanities at Michigan Technological University, now semi-retired in Iowa City, in his home state. He has collected selections from a wide spectrum of twenty-two writers--men and women, poets, novelists, and essayists, both well-known and emerging, from before the turn of the century to today. Photographs accompany them.

Deliberately, he avoided the objective, scientific approach to characterizing the "Midwestern experience"--either of the earth or the social-scientists. Instead, he limited himself to selections that express "the truth of the human heart," choosing the inner reports of individuals who tell us what they thought about and how they felt as they were coming of age.

No special central theme emerges, unless it is that "growing up" was essentially a joyous experience. Langston Hughes's "One Christmas Eve" is the exception--a black child's traumatic encounter with Santa Claus in the lobby of a picture show. But even the ugly little boy in Gwendolyn Brooks's poem, "The Life of Lincoln West," discovers his horror to be, paradoxically, a source of joyful comfort.

Andrews's approach--stressing the personal moment--may result in a little too much impressionism. While it is probably impossible, as he notes, to represent

every Middle Western region, yet one questions the necessity of choosing Iowans for forty percent of his people, and thus omitting for us in Michigan two or three more of our own, who might mean more to us.

Still, that may be only a minor cavil, after all, if the landscape of the heart really doesn't have state boundaries. Mid-western color does run through the book; e.g., the small towns, hard work, farms, poor-rich awareness. But the reader is struck less by such things than by each person's own moment of inner illumination. Thus, since no thesis is forced, readers will come away pleased, with separate, very differing impressions.

My own favorite selection is "Drowning, 1944," by Garrison Keillor, M.C. of the popular public radio program, "The Prairie Home Companion." After being intimidated by a tyrannical YMCA swimming instructor, the boy quickly learned how to swim on his own; now, as a father, he feels fully the fear that his own little son undergoes, in his first encounters with water. It's a strong, touching piece.

The collection provides occasional incidental information: Patricia Hampel tells how a pail of water came to be bricked into the cathedral in St. Paul, and Ellen Williamson explains the origin of the name, Quaker Oats. But most of the experiences, like Keillor's, say much more. Edna Ferber, for instance, takes us into a young Jewish girl's experience on the Day of Atonement, which she begins with a selfish notion about fasting, but makes a mature discovery about the meaning of real faith at its end.

Besides the six writers I have mentioned, vital experiences in the lives of sixteen others are also offered. Reading about these individual moments of vision stimulate us to recognize some of our own. We all have them. And there is value in matching our sharply-illuminated recollections with theirs: we

understand ourselves a little better, as a result.

(The writers included are the following: Meridel Le Seur, Edna Ferber, James Stevens, James Norman Hall, MacKinlay Kantor, Ellen Williamson, Langston Hughes, Michael Borich, Hadley Read, Robert Traver, Patricia Hampl, Harry Mark Petrakis, R.V. Cassil, Ruth Suckow, Hugh Sidey, Joseph Langland, Dorlores A. Quinn, Garrison Keillor, John R. Powers, Gwendolyn Brooks, Jille Paylin, and James Hearst.)

Lawrence R. Dawson
Central Michigan University

F. Richard Thomas (ed.), The Land Locked Heart (Bloomington: Indiana Writes, 1980). A joint issue of Centering and Indiana Writes. 80 pp. \$5.00.

The character of an anthology of verse by living writers depends on the taste of the editors and on the work of the contributors--scarcely an original observation, but one that needs repeating if one is to avoid temptation to assume that a culture's verse "is" what the book presents.

The collection of from one to three poems by each of 49 writers represents Indiana as an enclave of the plain style, a holdout, one would gather, against the neo-surreal that in the past 20 years has been typical not only of the fashionable (though mislabelled) San Francisco versifiers and "New York poets" but also of many Midwesterners (Robert Bly, Diane Wakoski, James Wright, among others). Richard Thomas's Introduction suggests an even more conservative tendency--"a large number" of submissions, he says, were in rhymed couplets or quatrains. The one example of this sort that Thomas and the assistant editor, Michael Wilkerson, chose to print, Helene Taggart's "Diminuendo," is a conventional suggestion that nature heals, marred by its fourth line's vague "the wide serene."

Thomas also reports surprise at receiving only a small number of urban poems. Perhaps the writers are showing an Indiana that is still real for most of its residents, even those who themselves dwell under the smokes of Gary-Hammond or in the sprawl of Indianapolis. Going from the Michigan State or Michigan campus to Purdue, one who chooses to skip the Interstates and drive south on Routes 131 and 421 will note that each town in Michigan seems to be built around a factory, but that immediately upon crossing the state line into Indiana the

economic bellwether is the farm implement dealer, who is often allowed by an indulgent city council to take up much of Main Street with toothed, metallicly gesturing shapes that defy the city boy's effort to guess out their function.

The implements' appearance is surreal, but their action is homely. The poems in Landlocked Heart are as plain in appearance as they are in presentation. The typical work is the data-filled observation that avoids sociopolitical, moral, or even esthetic significances that cannot be established by the facts themselves. One is to rise to significance only on a stairway of fact, and if the stairway never gets out of the workshop--well, better a well carpentered set of stairs than a catapulting into the old night of an unverified "meaning." Of course no good writer limits a poem to a list of data. But the reader senses again and again the reluctance to venture beyond what the eye can attest to.

The mentor for such work is the verse of William Carlos Williams, especially his "The Red Wheelbarrow." But even for Williams a few such sparse verses were more than enough. One of his typical patterns is the set of alternating stanzas of presentation and comment. This is the model for Phyllis Janowitz's "Nora," a poem about a young woman who comes to stand for all of Indiana, a "biscuit face" that upon closer perception becomes beautiful.

The most vivid piece in this vein is Susan Scott Thompson's "Paring Down." The speaker gives one truth, the horrifying appearance of a skinned rabbit, juxtaposes another, the reassuring appearance of her own "various viscera," and does not overtly push an interpretation. Thompson succeeds because her facts are emotive as well as descriptive. Another success, Thomas's "Myself, My Home, the Moon" is, to my taste, the best poem in the book--a ruefully humorous presentation of the "schizophrenic" effect on the speaker of the moonlight that pales an evening scene.

A number of the best poems speculate on flight from Indiana or give ironic acceptance of what are seen as its limitations--themes that suggest a greater measure of sophistication in the state's writers than the booster recognizes. The theme of escape, of rejection of Indiana's claim on the spirit, is perhaps a survivor from nineteenth century doubt that the Midwesterner has as yet tamed and shaped his environment. The editors highlight this note by beginning the collection with the anonymous "Graffito" asking "why is Indiana?" and with Wilkerson's "Exit South," a perhaps wishful comment that gas thieves may use their siphonings to leave the state.

Admitting flaws or shortcomings does not mean condemnation, of course. In Roger Pfingston's "From the Heartland," the soaring of four hawks is recognized to be "not exactly / right whales / breaching / in the Bay of Valdez," but nevertheless is seen as adequate for "a June morning, / a thousand miles deep / from the nearest coast." The sights of Indiana may not have grandeur, but they are not therefore without interest.

Perhaps the most typical reflection on the situation of one bound by circumstance is Phyllis Moore's "This Ain't Oregon, Honey." The speaker can think of moving west to live in a cabin, or to "paraphrase novels" at a university. But she is "caught in this March, / In this cold and colorless day." If this collection is representative, Indianans see their state as wintry. Over and over, the poems speak of snow, flatness, bleakness. No doubt a certain pride in sticking it out underlies these notations; but they show again that the Indianan is not the captive of James Whitcomb Riley's jingling optimism.

The theme of escape is amusing, and vivid, in Eugene Stelzig's "The Wheatland Diner," wherein the lunch eater finds himself "whooshing" to California aboard the suddenly airborne diner and wonders "how in hell am I going to explain / all

this to the wife and the boss?" In William Stafford's "North of the Ohio," escape is transmuted into tornadoed movement toward unidentifiable, presumably metaphysical destiny. The whole community, labelled with domestic possessiveness "our town," becomes perhaps an Argo, a conveyance to who knows where, "a chip on a river / our pilots do not know."

Not all dreams are of departure. That Indiana is a home for a people rooted in familial and cultural continuity is a theme in, among others, Jared Carter's "Watching by the Stream" and "bridge Over Yellow Cat," Jim McDonald's "Walam Olum," and Bert Stern's "Homestead." In Ron Wray's "Terre Haute," the speaker first supposes that the town, no doubt standing for the whole state, is "not a place." But he finds eventually that Terre Haute harbors the "burning of the heart" that makes it indeed a "place," a named local habitation where "living" occurs "together with or in spite of / environment."

The people, when not generalized as "we" or "they," often are seen as individualized in traits yet shaped by their region's wryly sober sculpting. The "wall-eyed" oldsters of Carter's "Watching by the Stream" hold in memory the rich social fabric of their town; other towns, too, the reader supposes, may mold such men, but Indiana communities do as much shaping as any. The children of Brian O'Neill's "From My Window at 10:00" are equally universal, equally creatures of their neighborhood. O'Neill's "Mrs. Vicary" limits itself to observation of the woman and of others' responses to her, but selects detail showing that these relationships are caring ones, examples of the loving concern that the reader of our day disbelieves when this quality is merely asserted.

One note of the fashionable is the several prose poems. As a reader disinclined to accept this form--most such efforts appear to me to be verbal balloons, rubbery inflations that pop when pricked by the attentive eye--I would hold that

Michael Martone's "WOWO" is typical of the genre, and Tam Lin Neville's "Go Tell Aunt Rhody" is good prose that does not need comparison with poetry. An excerpt from Fredric Brewer's "Hexahedron" comes closest to the ideal, prose that rises carefully without resorting to huff-and-puff.

Most selections are short lyrics. Somewhat longer pieces give opportunity to show that one may explore Indiana experience without becoming narrowed to the merely provincial. Among good longer pieces are Michael Allen's "Tomatoes," a well realized appreciation of familial and personal associations with the fruit; James Hazard's "From Our Tub, to My Wife," a love poem that finds the speaker's wife to match the appeal of an actress of his adolescent dreams; and Albert Drake's "Where Is Gary?," perhaps the most urban of the poems in its recognition that the Gary of movie-fed childhood supposition does not exist, that the actual Gary is a place one fears being lost in, a representative, and victim, of fervid industrial expansion.

In almost all these poems the unspoken message, the backbone for presentation and meditation, is affection, a guarded respect and love for Indiana that accepts deficiencies with the salt irony that knows perfection is nowhere to be found. It is from this adult belief in Indiana's present and its possibilities, rather than from conformity to fashion, that these poems take their strength as good regional writing. The poems by Thomas, Thompson, Stelzig, Stafford, and some others would add to anyone's anthology of national literature.

Bernard F. Engel
Michigan State University

Steven Hind, familiar ground. Lawrence, Kansas
Cottonwood Review Press, 1960.

In Steven Hind's first book of poetry, familiar ground, he portrays the power of the prairie. It shapes his life, his thoughts, and his words.

All my life I have
wanted to be who I am
here, to brace
against the time
and rise on my hours,
to drift above my shadow
over the earth as
substantial as dreams,
the amazing transposition
of the ground I touch
and love: To eat
the oldest facts.

The landscape becomes a living entity. Painted in minute detail, we can listen to life and nature with the poet. We hear the "scratch of a redwing," the water calling out its name, and the muttering of the wind. Through the poet's eyes we see a grasshopper's skull that "hangs by its jaws / in the weeds." And we sense the haunting endless quality of the prairie sky, "as deep as / a long kiss; we can live / between breaths."

In coming to an understanding of this landscape, the poet must also identify with the people, past and present, who have lived here, for they are the core, the center of life in this land. The poet recognizes that the bare, pioneer essentials will still help us to lead our lives: "The straight oak, dry as a sermon, / scored by the ax in knowing hands, / is the place to begin." Much of Hind's knowledge is gained from people like the man at the Western Auto Store in Colby, his granddad, or the character who remarked, "I'm old enough to be my own father." In "Arrowhead Hunting, A Guide" the poet relates some of the

Kansas wisdom he has gained: "love the broken / as well as the whole stones" and "hunt for things that last." We are familiar with many of the common objects and everyday gestures Hind uses to portray these prairie people. He uses midwestern quirks like Cappy Newman's fingering "the chevron on his cap, / drinking cold Orange Crush," the hot shot kid's grabbing "Pall Malls in his t-shirt sleeve," and the old blacksmith's stacking his wornout Penney's workhats into towers on his kitchen table. Certain details of midwestern existence like the Katie spur, Lee overalls, Monkeyward's shoes, and Western Auto Stores add to the reality of the poet's portrait of the inhabitants. Many of the poems are dedicated to someone: for Ella, for Jim, for Granddad, which extends a hometown sense of familiarity, as if the poet is writing about his place for particular people.

From the geography of the land, we discover a pioneer past and from the poet's own memory he relates his own past. In the poem "Requiem for Gene Autry," the poet relates his youthful infatuation with an idealized West and the movie heroes who portrayed that West. This childhood view of the Western experience stands as a contrast to his other poetry. Hind is careful not to idealize his own past. He gives us the humorous picture of a boyhood idol, Hopalong Cassidy, making a whistle stop in Augusta. The actor was so drunk he fell off the train.

Neither is the pioneer past idealized, "Medicine Lodge" depicts the "perfect" buffalo slayers who represent the wastefulness of the natural resources of the prairie. They are cruel, inhumane people who laugh about killing the "Cheyenne cattle." Hind, speaking of the buffalo hunter's journey home, notes: "we make no progress as it seems to me." He refers in this statement, also to modern man. We have not grown past this cruel and

wasteful attitude. There runs through the book a sense of desolation in the present and a longing for a simpler life, such as the pioneers lived, a life nearer to nature" "running out / my hand over the long blue stems, / wanting my new name." The poet yearns to be christened by the prairie, to live closer to her, through her:

The flat land moves us
down to this canyon
full of grass-clear water,
open like a mouth
in the belly of the plain.
A snapper's armor jolts
across the spillway. A carp
stirs the mud, sifting
for food. The sage
and the cottonwoods shiver
and the deer walk thin trails
in the red ground. Quiet lives
lean to the wind, survive

In all, this book reflects the positive influence of place when we live
on familiar ground.

Cynthia Pederson

ANNOUNCEMENTS

The Society needs assistant bibliographers to assist in preparation of the Annual Bibliography of Midwestern Literature, which appears, with acknowledgements, in MidAmerica each year. If interested, please contact either Don Pady, the Library, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011 or Bob Beasecker, the Library, Grand Valley State Colleges, Allendale, Michigan 49401

Abstracts of English Studies is being reviewed and revitalized, and it needs abstracters. If interested, please write William H. Magee, Abstracts of English Studies, English Department, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 14N

As always, the Society needs reviews, notices, bibliographies, essays, and other items for the Newsletter, Midwestern Miscellany, and MidAmerica, and it needs participants in its programs.