
REVIEWS

The Deep End of the Sky, by Chad Lee Robinson (Arlington, Va.: Turtle Light Press, 2015). 37 pages; 5¼"x8". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-0-974814-75-9. Price: \$12.50 from www.turtlelightpress.com

Listening to the Sky, by Marilyn Appl Walker (Privately printed, 2015). 52 pages; 5½"x7". Black with gold embossing; hardcover. ISBN 978-0-692329-33-7. Price: \$20.00 from the author at 1060 East Avenue, Madison, GA 30650.

Reviewed by Randy Brooks

In my third chapbook of haiku, *Barbwire Holds Its Ground*, published in 1981, I wrote haiku exploring the inner and outer landscape of western Kansas, where my ancestors were homesteaders, ranchers, and farmers. In that collection I attempted to embrace the legendary past of stories I had heard about their struggles and celebrations as well as to express my own experiences as a child growing up among the buffalo grass pastures and terraced wheat fields. So it is with great joy that I find myself reading and reviewing two new collections of haiku from the high plains.

Chad Lee Robinson's *The Deep End of the Sky* and Marilyn Appl Walker's *Listening to the Sky* were both published in 2015. Robinson was born in 1980 in Pierre, South Dakota, and grew up along the banks of the Missouri River. He continues to live there with his wife, Kimberly, and son Nathan, and works as the manager of his father's grocery store. *The Deep End of the Sky* is his third collection of haiku. Marilyn Appl Walker was born in Garden City, Kansas in 1940 and grew up on her family's farm in Wichita County, Kansas during the 1940s and 1950s. She and her husband, Marshall, now make their home in Madison, Georgia.

Listening to the Sky is her first collection. I will review both books as both a native—one who knows what it means to live on the high plains—and as a haiku reader who values all good haiku as literary acts of imagination.

I am glad to report that Chad Lee Robinson and Marilyn Appl Walker have both succeeded at expressing the unique nature of living on the high plains and done so with carefully crafted American haiku that will be enjoyed by natives as well as those who imaginatively travel to the prairie as readers.

THE OPEN SKY

It does not surprise me that both of these chapbooks reference the sky in their titles and express the unity of sky and prairie throughout their haiku collections. The title poem of Chad Lee Robinson's collection is a long vertical haiku:

at
the
deep
end
of
the
sky
prairie

which effectively conveys the big, open space of the sky dominating over the wide expanse of prairie. His haiku invokes a sense of an ocean of sky ... so much depth beyond what we can see and reminds me that once the plains were literally under an ocean. There is so much more than can be taken in at once, depths to explore, the “deep end” at the bottom of this huge sky. Chad's haiku invokes the mysterious beyond where the sky darkens into the prairie.

For the title poem of her book, Marilyn Appl Walker writes a long horizontal haiku, focused on listening to a conversation between the sky and earth:

listening to the sky...
the wheat rustling

Aligned across the page with a row of ellipsis and slight line break, the wind is heard just over the wheat. It is the wheat rustling that gives voice to the sky. This is wheat near harvest time, fully headed out with the prairie wind moving through the field in quick waves. A wheat farmer checks the wheat often before harvest, watching for the last hint of green to pass on, watching for signs of any ominous thunderstorms, or worse, hail storms, that might damage the crop. The farmer is in tune with the sky, listening to it, and in this case enjoying what it is saying to the wheat. The wheat holds on to the earth and yet nimbly responds to the wind—it is in full harmony with the sky. Marilyn places us between heaven and earth in this haiku and invites us to listen as well.

In a haiku that resonates with my childhood, Marilyn writes about a boy who finds the sky to be a good hiding place:

fast moving clouds

little brother hiding at the top
of the windmill

Of course the top of the windmill is a dangerous place for children, but also a wonderful place to hide out when grown-ups are looking for help with the chores. In Marilyn's haiku, I see the boy enjoying his climb to forbidden heights, drawn closer to the fast moving clouds. Perhaps he is curious about approaching storm clouds, the smell of cool air rushing by, and doesn't understand the possible dangers of lightning. He may be in trouble if he is found up there!

STAYING LOW

On the prairie one of the survival instincts is to dig in and stay low. Jack rabbits know this. The sky is sometimes dangerous, with storms, or with predators such as red-tail hawks. Marilyn writes:

a pheasant's low flight
to the fence line
contrail sky

The sky is full of contrails that spread out and map the path of high flying jet airplanes, but the pheasant wants to disappear into the tall grass near the fence. Startled, a pheasant will burst into the air briefly revealing brilliant tail feathers, then it quickly settles into the safety of brush where its closed wings blend in with the earth.

Chad Robinson also writes about things settling into low places:

wind in the tall grass ...
an old blue car
almost in motion

Here the blue car is sinking into the tall grasses, abandoned there for years. The wind moves the tall grasses creating an illusion that the car is going somewhere.

In another haiku, he writes about the deliberate effort to build something solid on the prairie, to dig in and hold on:

resetting the bones
of the fence —
morning glory vines

In this haiku the fence is viewed as a skeleton of bones—the remains of bent tree branches turned into fence posts—that have been dried by the sun and bent by the constant wind. The bones have come loose over time and have to be reset, the barbwire tightened in order to continue to do its job of being a fence. Ironically, the morning glory vines are also holding on, tightening their grip on the fence. In Kansas my grandfather always called morning glories “bindweed” because they would catch and clog the combine at harvest time. In the same way, in Chad’s haiku the vines are both giving the appearance of new life on the old bones of the fence posts and threatening to reset the fence in ways not desirable for keeping cattle in.

GRIP OF THE EARTH

In both collections there is a strong sense of admiration of ancestors who have settled into life on the prairie and learned to thrive in the grip of the earth. Marilyn has a beautiful haiku about her grandfather bringing his culture to the prairie:

a lullaby
in grandpa's first language
apricot blossoms

In this haiku I hear an old lullaby sung lovingly to a grandchild. It is from another place and time, a transplant on the prairie. In the same way, with a lot of careful planting and continuous watering, the apricot tree that was planted years ago is blooming. Neither the grandfather nor the apricot are natives to the great plains, but they are expressing love for future generations in their own ways.

In another haiku, Marilyn writes about a sad means of claiming the land:

buffalo country
he digs through snow
to dig the grave

This is not an easy grave to dig. The ground is frozen under the snow. But it is necessary. The buffalo country has become a hometown, including the cemetery where loved ones are buried. I feel the cold and hardness of the prairie as he digs in. Come spring this will be a place of sunshine and cut flowers left in memory of loved ones.

Chad also writes of ancestors and those who have passed on in his collection:

winter stars ...
the name of my father
of my father's father

In this haiku, I see a young man in the cemetery, looking at the tombstones and up at the winter stars. The night is very clear. There are so many stars. He feels connected to the tradition of names passed on from father to father. He feels connected to the stars that suggest an infinite linking of generations. In another haiku Chad writes more directly about family genealogy:

my grandmother's Bible —
 every bookmark
 an obituary

The family Bible is the official record book of births and deaths. There are so many bookmarks, obituaries of family and friends who have passed on. Holding on to his grandmother's Bible is a way to hold on to that heritage.

CHORES & THE BLESSING OF QUIET HARVESTS

It would be wrong to characterize life on the prairie as struggle and death. Life on the prairie requires endurance, persistence, hard work, and vigilant care, but there are rewards and the blessings of quiet harvests. For example, Marilyn writes:

dog day afternoon
 we take turns moving
 the garden hose

I like how this haiku is about the heat and lack of wind. There's no breeze which is a rare afternoon on the great plains. In this stillness the heat and sunshine are overwhelming, making everyone feel very lazy. I can see this couple or family resting in the shade, perhaps fanning themselves with a paper fan. The garden still needs to be tended, so they take turns—being considerate of each other. Sharing the chore makes it less miserable. Watering the garden is also a positive thing, helping assure that there will be a good harvest when things ripen, as in this haiku by Marilyn:

an old love song
 mother slices
 home grown tomatoes

In this haiku, mother slices the home grown tomatoes. They are big and juicy, and she is enjoying the harvest, singing an old love song. I can see her preparing a big plate of tomatoes for the family to enjoy at supper.

Likewise, Chad celebrates a quiet harvest:

home early —
 alone in the silence
 eating a bruised pear

This haiku is written as a moment of quiet solitude—the perspective is that of someone home before everyone else. It is perhaps more self-indulgent, with the actor of the haiku eating a bruised pear. I imagine that this pear eater is also a bit bruised, feeling down a bit, not wanting to be social at this moment. The pear is juicy and tastes great, even though it is over-ripe and bruised. The eater rationalizes that it won't last long anyway, and it is comforting to eat it in silence.

ACCEPTING DISTANCE & LETTING GO

Several of Chad Lee Robinson's haiku excel at expressing a sense of solitude and acceptance of things beyond the self. In these haiku he captures that sense of wonder—that deep end of the sky:

stars at dusk:
 the tractor's radio
 crackles

The stars are starting to emerge with the darkness, and a distant tractor radio seems to be losing its signal. It crackles and breaks up. It doesn't make sense, but can be heard ... an attempt to keep something of civilization and man with us in the open sky. The stars aren't fully out and

the night sky is not clear yet, and in the same way the radio is distorted. Somehow the crackles of the radio and the not-quite present stars match perfectly in this moment.

In a similar haiku about distance, Marilyn writes:

distant grain elevators
 in mirage
 the silent shimmerings

This haiku is in the heat of the day, but the rising heat waves are distorting our vision. We can see the horizon, but not clearly. We can still make out the distant grain elevators from neighboring towns, but they seem to blur into the sky. Again, silence is associated with not seeing. Absence. We know it is a mirage, but in our imaginations the distant grain elevators can become anything—skyscrapers, the tall masts of ships, towering trees, or just silent shimmerings. In this haiku Marilyn acknowledges that nothing seems real—everything is illusions.

I would like to conclude with two haiku by Chad in which he talks about the connection of earth and sky and how people on the prairie live focused on that borderline:

the Big Dipper —
 rows of corn connect
 farm to farm

Chad looks to the heavens, the Big Dipper. Identifying the constellations out of so many stars, and knowing how to find the North Star off the big dipper, makes everything seem to be in its place. There is an order to the universe. In the same way, when he looks down at the rows and rows of corn (irrigated of course), he sees that all of the farms are connected both by land and by history. The stars are all part of a greater heaven and the rows of corn are all part of a continuous farm. We can recognize distinct stars and name certain clusters just as the farms and ranches each have gates and names. However, when you let go of the names they are all part of one continuous greater whole.

In a final haiku by Robinson:

a farmer sets
the curve of his cap
prairie skyline

we see the farmer adjusting his view to match the curve of the horizon. He is looking out into the distance of the prairie, aware of its grand reach. He sees the skyline, its darkness, its promise, its history, and he is ready to be part of it. He is in tune with the heavens and earth of the great plains.

Don't just drive through the great plains of Kansas and South Dakota, get your copy of these two excellent collections to enter into the inner landscape of life on the prairie.

The Bone Carver, by Ron C. Moss (United Kingdom: Snapshot Press, 2014). 112 pages; 5"×7¾". Glossy four-color card covers; perfectbound. ISBN 978-1-903543-32-0. Price: \$23.00 from www.snapshotpress.co.uk

Reviewed by Dan Schwerin

The first line of the first poem is 'meditation' which is the frame for all that follows. About that *The Bone Carver* is intentional. This first collection by Ron Moss is for the reader who wants more. The black currawongs and banjo frogs of Tasmania sing a clear sense of place—and more. In short, the 'more' is the here worthy of meditation. These poems render an immediacy that arrives brick by brick:

meditation ...
deep in a white forest
the sound of frost