

**GERRY SPENCE**

---

**The Wyoming I Knew**

The Wyoming I knew  
In the long silent snow  
And the short singing spring  
Is of forgotten places  
With deep traces of sorrow,  
The sweat having soaked  
Up the angry ground,  
This fretful land of brave men  
Who, as if mad,  
Tore up the soil  
And then, as if satisfied,  
Lay down and died.  
The children—I saw them happy,  
Laughing  
Through bitter sage  
Chasing short-tailed birds  
And prairie dogs,  
The children gone,  
A few grown old,  
The rest resting in graves  
With various excuses.

I think of the children  
And the nursing mothers,  
Their breasts full, their hands  
Rough as old boards.  
The children died of high fevers,  
The mothers, the fathers, their eyes  
Weary and panicked,  
Helpless like small animals  
In the snapping traps.  
And the children died  
Like flies in the fall,  
The fathers too weary to weep  
The mothers too weary to cry.

Then they buried the children,  
The children, one after the other,  
Donna Mae, Carl Dee, and Peggy,  
Eva Darleen and Aloma Ann,  
And they thanked dear God  
For taking them home.

The Wyoming I knew  
Was of men with bulging dreams,  
And sunken bellies,  
The women the same,  
Dreaming from beneath sod roofs,  
Their feet on dirt floors,  
Dreaming without proof  
That dreams could be touched  
With blistered fingers,  
Or grasped with bleeding hands  
In such a wild and naked land.

The Wyoming I knew was a place  
Where men were free to die  
And free to live in trying,  
Free to live against storm  
Against the slow torture of drought  
Against the rage of wind,  
Snarling at the intrusion  
Of such strangers to the equation.

The wind was their enemy,  
The eternal ice of winter,  
The relentless, piling snows  
Were their enemy.  
The beating sun, laughing  
And melting them in their own sweat  
Was their enemy.

They had a couple of horses, of course,  
One old wagon, and one rusted plow  
And a mortgage at the bank.  
The bankers waited like hungry crows  
To foreclose,  
Eager were the bankers.  
These sod-busters go broke

As fast as they come dancing  
Onto the land.  
Then with broken hands they claim  
They should be given another chance,

Another season.  
The grasshoppers came.  
They say that was the reason  
The oats were eaten, and the horse  
Too weak, fell in the traces.  
But there were no grasshopper clauses  
In the mortgage.

The bankers threw them out,  
The children,  
The tired mothers  
Who bathed once a week  
In the creek  
And rose from her bed  
In the dark,  
Drove twenty miles to church  
In the morning  
After the chores were done,  
The old cow milked,  
The cream for butter separated,  
The wobbly calf fed  
And the chickens served up yesterday's  
Skim milk, clabbered in the sun.

The bankers threw them out,  
The worthless tin plates,  
The empty kerosene lantern,  
The kitchen table, the broken chairs  
The Bible, the Sear's Roebuck Catalogue,  
The chest of drawers  
With one suit of clothes  
The husband was buried in.

The Wyoming I knew was of hard times  
And good times.  
The people free  
As the long reaching sky.  
Some days the people could see

For eighty miles or more.  
The people could see their own bleak souls.  
The people could see their ragged,  
Running children  
Laughing by the creek,  
The trout happy to oblige  
A boy's dangling worm,  
The squirming devil,  
The boy without shoes,  
Calluses his soles,  
And tender his boyish soul.  
Then he grew like the quaking aspens grew,  
And wept and quaked as the aspens wept,  
Laughed at hurt,  
Laughed at the noisy loneliness,  
And loved in short and breathless times.  
Then in the long days  
And into short nights  
He busted up the sod  
As his father had,  
This was the Wyoming that I knew.

I knew a solemn purity  
Hard-bitten, some said foolish  
Like the white sago lily bursting  
Through its pain.  
There were tender silvery pussy willows  
In the spring  
That bloomed through disappointment,  
The meadow lark  
Shouting its missiles across the sage,  
Fighting its wars with yellow song.  
There were the thunderstorms  
That made us laugh,  
We, safe behind the door.  
There were the winter snows  
That bound us up  
In five layers of winter clothes.

There were the days blue as bottles  
Without a cloud  
The silent desperation,  
The dreary shrouds  
Having fled the golden morning light.

I have seen the distant mountains.  
I have seen the endless prairies  
I have seen my soul go bouncing  
Across the land  
Like the playful jackrabbit  
Without care, without fear  
Of the coyote in its lair,  
Innocent as sweet lilacs  
In the air.

This is the Wyoming that I knew  
Where I grew young  
And as the years passed, younger  
And as the gray invaded, younger still  
Until I have retreated as a child  
Seeking the welcome womb,  
And beyond, the ejaculations  
And elations of fathers  
And fecund mothers of tight breasts  
And limber thighs, and nails yet unbroken  
Against the plow.

This is now the Wyoming that I knew  
A place forgotten by most,  
A blessed gift of bleached sanity  
Abandoning the race  
And embracing  
My humanity.

