

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.

