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A Recent Gift of Immense Value

Sitting in the waiting room of my physical therapist a week ago I noticed a book lying on a shelf on the other side of the room. Curious, I picked it up and discovered a book of poems by a new, to me, poet. The book is “Very Far North,” and the poet is Timothy Murphy, who I found makes brilliant insights into North Dakota life..

I’m simply going to name the subject and then quote a few of Murphy’s tight little, cryptic utterances many Dakotans can relate to.

Here is Murphy on early farming in western North Dakota: “The Last Sod busters:” “Rain follows the plow”/ The pamphleteers proclaim.// Does grass follow the cow/ Or wind the weather vane?” “Care furrows the brow/ and bows the straightest frame/ Thistles follow the plow/ And hail threshes the grain.”

Farmers pioneering in the dryer western counties had it pretty tough. Here’s “Dollar Corn” Partner, I asked,/ How have we sinned?/ Greed in some former life?/ Kelly pondered and then he grinned,/ I’d have to ask the wife.” Sound familiar?

Murphy, like many Dakota farm kids, was a hunter: “A Gun Dog
Named Maud Gonne:” “She no longer hears/ whistle or wings,/ The drums
in her ears/ were delicate tings.// There will be water/ to gun when she goes;/
autumns of slaughter/ winters to doze/But never a partner/ with so sweet a
nose.”// I saw a couple of my dogs end their hunting days in groans and
dozes. Maud Gonne was the Irish poet, W.B. Yeats’ girl friend.

Most of us have seen Veteran’s Day services. Here’s “The Recruit:
“An honor guard of battle-scarred old men/ Discharge their antique carbines
to the sky/ as though the ghosts of war were winging by/ like pintails flushing
from an ice rimmed fen,/ How many of these troops will hunt next fall?/
Fewer and fewer totter out to shoot/ They hardly hear the mallard’s bugle
call/ which lures me to the sloughs with my recruit--/a boy shouldering arms
where reeds grow tall/ and mankind’s present enmities are moot.” Few old
hunters will miss what Murphy’s saying here.

Murphy like many of us, hated what we did to the Indians. He, like me,
cherished Black Elk’s legacy: “Pa Sapa” “Lost in a badlands draw/ I saw the
last white buffalo/ and leapt up with a startled caw/ transfigured to a crow./
As I flew below Bear Butte/ lightning struck and oak/ and split the trunk to

the root/ A man stepped from tie smoke/ Black Elk spoke/ “These lands your tribe shall keep/ so long as the grasses grow/ and rivers flow.”/ Your promises were cheap/ a hundred years ago. Restore Pa Sapa to/ the disenthled Sioux, and let me sleep.”

The poem I read upon opening Murphy’s book hooked me, by citing two of my favorite poets, Frost and Hardy, and introduces A. D. Hope: “The Cortège:” “Last night I dreamed that A. D. Hope was dead./ Thomas Hardy was riding in the hearse/ as Frost strolled slowly by the horses head/ “His judgments were as measured as his verse,”/ The elder of the two “proud songsters” said.// The horse had no idea who he was towing/ No mourners lined the silent streets they crossed./ His *Western Elegies* rival *The Going*, And though I grant it grudgingly, said Frost,/ His *Hay Fever* is better than my, *Mowing*.

I Googled up Hope’s *Hay Fever*, and wow; it may indeed be better than *Mowing*, Frost’s poem about cutting grain with a scythe. What all these poets have in common is that they are formalists. Avoiding free verse, they stick to the traditional measured and rhyming styles of the old masters. My next goal is to get A. D. Hope’s book of poetry. I don’t believe my discovery of these

fine “songsters” was an accident. God delights in dropping timely gifts in the paths of his children. Murphy’s *Very Far North* was ”designedly” dropped.

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