

The following article, based on the lecture David Solheim delivered at the North Dakota Heritage Center in February 1994, was originally published in *North Dakota History: Journal of the Northern Plains* (62.3, Summer 1995) and is reprinted here with the permission of the State Historical Society of North Dakota. His appearance was part of a program co-sponsored by the North Dakota Center for the Book and the State Historical Society of North Dakota in conjunction with a traveling exhibit on loan from the Library of Congress. The exhibit, "Language of the Land: Journeys into Literary America," identified American authors and explored how their writing became an interpretation of their regional landscapes.

## **Language of the Land: Poetry and Commentary** by David R. Solheim

Strictly speaking, land doesn't have a language of its own. It is the interaction of land and light, sky and wind; of land and water, rainfall and river that creates the unarticulated language of painting and music—the sound, color, and shape that human beings may experience directly from the land. In response to that experience, some of us attempt to articulate the human translation which becomes language that speaks *of* land and sometimes *for* land, but always through human intercession, the human interpretation of the primal language. . . .

[Far from North Dakota], as a graduate student in California, I began to have a sense of living in exile, away from a landscape, folkways, and manners of living that were important to me. It wasn't until I had lived away from the plains and rural life for sometime that I began to value that experience and feel and write about it in a serious, appreciative manner. [This] poem is composed recollections of my first clear memories of preschool childhood in North Dakota. It is written in five short parts, and two voices weave through poem: the memory of the child and the commentary of an adult upon those memories. Although I am sure there are several locations that could be the setting for the poem, my first memories were formed in Washburn.

*Editor's Note: The first stanza is printed here.*

Rivertown, Dakota

Above the arcing Missouri River  
Near Like-a-Fishhook Village and  
Fort Mandan is the first town I remember  
Spread across the sloping ridges between  
The coulees breaking from the plains to bottoms.  
The courthouse and high school with darkened halls,  
Oiled wood floors, and humid boiler rooms  
Look down their avenues over the town.  
Green across Main Street and the railroad tracks  
Broken by steeples and a grain elevator.  
Green down to the river, the ferry landing.  
Its two-car load could cross the river to  
The trail on the other bank. Parallel  
Ruts twisted through bottoms to a hidden town.  
I never saw a car return from where

The road turned west on the distant bank.  
I rode that ferry once, its deck two feet  
Above the water. The stern wheel pulled the river  
Up behind and let it drip back down.  
They dropped the plank on the other side,  
But I stayed on board and rode it back home.  
I knew the river always waited for me.  
I saw its sucking whirlpools, the tricky  
Dance of driftwood, how sandbars slid away  
At night, where foam ate crashing cutbanks.

In 1989, after about twenty years of . . . writing poetry, I was selected the North Dakota Centennial Poet. That was and still is my highest claim to fame as a writer, and I consider it an honor to be chosen to represent my home state in this manner. Of course, in addition to receiving the honor, I was expected to write. For each of five official centennial events, I was commissioned to compose poems to be part of the celebrations.

The first event observed was Native American Day held in Grand Forks in conjunction with the University of North Dakota Writers' Conference. To prepare for this event, I went to the far northwestern corner of the state to Writing Rock which has the oldest signs of human habitation in North Dakota. The ancient carvings on these stones no longer have a definable content, but . . . in "Two Views of Writing Rock," I attempt the language of stone.

#### Northern Anasazi

He sought his vision where the night hawk nested.  
The spirit bird's hoarse cry filled his ears.  
And the whistling wings wove a circle round him.  
The animals given him came to the circle.

The vision so strong, he lined in stone  
The track of each visitant: bear paw and cougar.  
The scratchings of turkey and grouse;  
But shining in the center of the stone  
The chevroned bird himself, soaring over all it gave.

He brought his sons to the nesting place.  
Told his vision and showed his totem marked in stone.  
They brought their sons, and they brought theirs.  
Each heard and dreamed and lived his life.

The story went from "father's vision," to "grandfather's dream,"  
To "an old man said," and the dream disappeared.  
Only the rock remained. The bird is still so beautiful.  
It weaves the circle of this story.

## White

With spring snow. I came to Writing Rock.  
The winter world speckled with horned larks  
Seeking strength from the promise of sunshine.  
Each field stone seemed topped by a bird  
Startled into life at my approach.

The hill seemed no higher than its neighbors.  
But its vision was the curve of earth.  
I saw a bird preserved on stone.  
The stone sheltered by rock pillars.  
A re-bar cage and wooden roof.  
A living bird fluttered from the rock's ridge;  
The stone bird soared though bound to earth.

Like the ones who marked the rock,  
I mark my symbols on the page  
Wishing to hold what escaped.

For another centennial event, Founders Day, observed in Dickinson on May 14, I focused on not just *the* language of the land, but the many languages and origins of languages that are woven into the speech of Dakotans. The poem for that day includes place names from Native American sources, the influences of Northern European homes and cultures as evidenced by the many “new” places scattered across North Dakota, the names of early land barons, the more recent influences from Asia as evidenced by Chinese students at Dickinson State University where I teach, and my own children adopted from Korea. . . . Here are the languages of the land I heard in building my “Foundation”:

## Foundation

I am driving home at night in the first rainstorm of the season  
With three Chinese women here to study English for a year.  
One has been here four months, one two weeks, and one arrived tonight.  
We converse politely about the weather, the difficulties of travel.  
Juan says to Yin huan. “I will help you tomorrow, as Su-ting helped me when I first came.”  
I understand again why countrymen cluster here, and it  
Reminds me they have never seen a North Dakota thunderstorm  
That they now see things as my grandfather first did.  
I remember, too, the night of bringing my Korean children home.  
My riders shift to Mandarin and its music blurs into a litany of names,  
Tonight's and memory's, telling me how far we've come.

The old country names: New Leipzig. New Hradec, and Langedahl.  
The names of bankers and politicians, the robber barons and their cousins:  
Taylor, Hursdfield, McKenzie, Dickinson, Bowman, Tuttle and Steele.

The biblical Hebron: the timely tick of Elgin: and the witchless New Salem.  
The echoes of displaced Americans: Mandan, Elbow Woods, Young Man's Butte, and Crow Flies High.  
The mixtures of foreign tongues and popular songs: Belfield and Glen Ullin.  
The descriptions of first impressions: Otter Crossing, Pleasant Valley, Custer's Look-out and Grassy Butte.  
The impossible Walhalla: exotic Medora: and far away Cathay.

My passengers and I hum along the interstate,  
Cross the old NP line and highway 10 at Eagles' Nest overpass.  
By lightning we see the land revealed.  
Amidst all these improbabilities of names and origins,  
Of visitors from Asia and Europe traveling this night and road together,  
It is the land sustains us all.  
The rain speaks not Mandarin, Lakota, English nor Norwegian.  
The ink runs off the map as rain down the window and we are cleansed.  
We dream again and with our predecessors believe:  
We can live here and build on this.

The Statehood Centennial Commission claimed an attendance of 75,000 people at the 1989 Fourth of July Celebration in Bismarck, the Party of the Century, but I preferred to compose for the official title for the event, Constitution Day. The notion I had for my writing at that time was the interrelationships of the ideas of "rugged individualism" and "the common good," so the metaphors of the poem centered on the image of weaving:

#### Public Access

Weaving drunkenly between the soldiers of fenceposts  
Paralleled by telephone poles  
And crossed by the skeletal giants of the REA.  
The overgrown section-line trails  
Are the net of democracy laid over the land.

From the web of Jefferson's brain,  
The weaving of veins and nerves.  
The grand idea of "We the People . . ."  
Lives in the public freedom  
Of power to travel and talk  
On the webs that sustain us all.

With the wisdom and skill of Athena,  
Jefferson wove the net he cast over the Old Northwest  
From the Ohio River to the Mississippi  
And sent Lewis and Clark seining the Missouri  
To draw into the net of the Union  
Louisiana and North Dakota.

Now, like arachnids, we each live in webs.

A thread vibrates; someone answers the phone;  
Another eyes filaments spinning across the computer screen;  
A woven wire fence surrounds a missile silo;  
A trainload of black electricity slides east on the rails;  
A farmer hauls wide-eyed cows to a sales ring;  
The writer weaves words like worm tracks in old wood.

The government is not the spider;  
Nor the citizens the flies;  
But as fishermen do, we live on what the net brings in.  
Each of us weaves a thread or knots a loop  
In the lines we imagine we travel.  
We weave a silken harmony  
In the bonds that hold us free.

In the fall of the year as I prepared to write for the October 1 Citizens' Day in Minot, I decided I needed to make a different kind of poem and instead of speaking for people, I would attempt to allow them to speak for themselves. With that in mind, I eavesdropped more and read newspaper interviews more intently. I then tried to reproduce portions of that language of the people of the land in a group of seven short poems each spoken by different characters called "Seven Citizens." *Editor's Note: two stanzas are printed here.*

Farmer

Trees is all the difference  
'Tween the ones just passin' through  
And the one who meant to stay.  
No profit in 'em. Comfort  
For the eye and shelter from  
Storm. Places without trees is  
Where farmers just mine the land.  
Salesman

Have I got something for you.  
This new one will change your life.  
I can get it wholesale. Done.  
Tomorrow morning when I  
Get up, I'll shower and shave.  
Begin the day clean and sharp.  
I like living on the edge.

The final, official event of the centennial year was "Statehood Day" on November 2. As the day neared, I had a recurring nightmarish dream that I would enter the ceremonies with no poem and timidly ask everyone to come back in two weeks as by then I would have thought of something. Shortly before that dream came true, I happened to spend an afternoon at the Knife River Indian Villages near Stanton and from that visit came the materials for the final centennial poem. The villages are near the confluence of the Knife

and Missouri Rivers, near the wintering grounds for Lewis and Clark, and were the adoptive home of Sakakawea, the Shoshoni guide to the expedition. At that time and earlier, they were the hub of a trading network that extended from the Great Lakes to the Pacific Ocean. That location is also now the center for energy development in the state, and the place where most of the regions in the state rub together. This poem uses the language of land, water, horizon, and sounds under the controlling imagery of a Native American tradition of referring to North America as Turtle Island:

### From the Heart of Turtle Island

Imagine the place where all things come together.  
The pinpoint fulcrum where the carapace of the continent balances.

Imagine the place surrounded by three rivers:  
The Souris, the Red, and the Little Missouri.  
Against all odds, each stubbornly flows North in Dakota.

Imagine the place where all oceans are equally far away.  
Yet buried shells still hold the sound of salty water.

Imagine the place where the same year felt temperatures  
Of sixty below and the high of one hundred and twenty-one degrees.

Imagine the place where the tall grass folds of farmland fields Meet the bunch-grass, broken buttes  
of ranches.

Imagine the place carved by the big muddy Missouri.  
Fed by its arteries of creeks and rivers:  
Painted Woods, Burnt Boat, Apple, and Beaver:  
Cannonball, Heart, and Knife.

Now in the evening of the year and century,  
All things unfold from the ancient river villages  
Where the peaceful gardens grew.

Stand in the circling remnants of the earthen lodges.  
Feet on shards of pottery and  
Splinters of bone gone back to grass.  
There is something in the air.

It is, and it is not.  
The call of geese and migrating cranes.

It is, and it is not.  
The diesel growl of draglines,  
The pulse of oil pumps,  
Or the static crackling of electrical transmissions.

It is, and it is not.  
The startled bark of white tail deer.  
The grating moan of spirits twisted into trees,  
Or thud of bison hooves beyond the ridge.

It is, and it is not.  
The lub-dub of leather drums.  
The circling tread of moccasins.  
The rustle of cottonwood leaves,  
Or the rippling river waters.

It is the heart of the greatest of turtles  
Beating here where the sunlight settles unto earth.  
Where the past and present meet.  
The future is conceived and we  
Imagine its birth and celebrate.

. . . The following is a series of poems built out my early work and family experiences. The first uses the image of a quilt to suggest landscape and family ties:

#### Homecoming

*We were neighbors to your grandpa  
When your mom was a little girl.*

Now I'm "Vic's boy" again.  
The old names die hard  
In this woven country.  
The patchwork of field  
And prairie is  
The knit of lives.

Somehow I am part of this,  
A piece to complete  
The quilt, that warms me  
Through the winter nights  
And lies on me like  
A spider's web, holding me  
In its sticky warp.

. . . In the spring of 1987, after more than ten years of marriage, my wife Joan and I became parents. We completed the adoption of our son and daughter both born in Seoul, Korea. As we approached this momentous day in our lives, it occurred to me that I was born the grandchild of immigrants and was to become the father of immigrants, which naturally led to this poem:

## Immigrants

When the century rolled over,  
My grandfather, nearing manhood,  
Left Norway, the mountain plots  
Too small to feed five brothers.

His mother begged his promise  
“Not to write of grand America  
Or your wonderful success. I  
Will not lose all my children to

Your dreams across the ocean.”  
In Advent we await our own  
Dream children to leave their parents  
Beyond another sea to promise again.

When grandfather visited his  
Ancient home, memory led him to  
The sloping meadows of his childhood  
And the nearly forgotten house

Where his long-dead mother left a final gift:  
A rosemaled trunk dated from her wedding,  
A candleholder, embroidered apron,  
Hardangered bridal sheets and

Her mother’s wish to wrap her  
Absent child’s life within.  
We wait our children’s coming  
To wrap them in the arms of now. . . .