

The following article, based on the lecture Larry Watson 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.

Silence as a Language of the Land by Larry Watson

To research the topic of the language of land, I strapped on my skis and took off down a trail near my house in Wisconsin. I went into the woods as far as I could go, so far I had to break the trail myself. I wanted to get away from the city so that I wouldn't be distracted by any of those city sounds, to be sure that I heard the language of the land clearly. I stood out there a while and a light snow was falling, but I edited that out without any trouble. I didn't have to stand there very long. Soon I could tell what the language of the land was, and I don't think it's very different here—it is silence, absolute silence. If you don't believe me, you can drive out to the prairie and listen, and I'm sure you'd hear the same language.

In fact, I think we probably have more than our fair share of silence in this region. Maybe it could be designated the official language—I think most of the residents understand it. Kathleen Norris, in *Dakota: A Spiritual Geography*, has written about standing on the prairie outside of Williston and believing that where she stood was the quietest place on the face of the earth. Of course, the silence might have something to do with weather, with all this land, all this sky, with the wind that you shout to make yourself heard over. Yesterday, when we were flying in [to Bismarck], I looked out the plane window and saw the unbroken cloud cover, just a mass of white. Then I realized those were not clouds I was looking at, that was the prairie. Then, every once in a while, I noticed a dark dot here and there—a tree that someone had planted just to break up the monotony. In Marianne Moore's poem, "Silence," she writes, "the deepest feeling shows itself in silence." This gives me an opportunity to tell my favorite Norwegian joke. I don't approve of ethnic jokes, so I'm not telling this for laughter, but for illustration: Did you hear the one about the Norwegian who loved his wife so much he almost told her?

Maybe our land caught the silence from the people, from our restraint, our skepticism, our pragmatism. In Jane Tompkins' book, *West of Everything*, she writes about the westerners' distrust of language. If the demographic projections prove out, silence really will be the language of the land as North Dakota's population keeps declining. Soon seldom will be heard not only a discouraging word, but any word at all.

I read one of my poems earlier today. It doesn't really fit, but I can't read this in Wisconsin, because they just don't get it.

The Population of North Dakota

In fact, North Dakota's population numbers in the millions yet every census counts it not much more than six hundred thousand. How can this discrepancy be explained?

Perhaps the census taker couldn't see the Indian population—that the Sioux, Mandan, and Chippewa are still invisible, as they were when whites first came and took what they saw no one else claiming. It may be that because North Dakotans are hard-working when the census taker came they were on the job, and when he visited the fields to see if they were there the dust from four years of drought obscured both tractors and the men and women riding them. Or the census taker might have stood outside Fargo, looked north, looked south, and assumed that should anyone be living within sixty miles he'd be able to see them (since nothing blocked his view), and seeing nothing, marked down zero, neglecting to look inside those seven groves of trees.

Maybe he took one look at the Badlands, became badly frightened and simply turned back, leaving uncounted all those millions living up and down the banks of the Little Missouri. He might have seen the endless miles of sagebrush south of Dickinson, assumed he was in South Dakota and quit for the day. Maybe he took the lazy way out, climbed to the top floor of the capitol and from there simply counted houses, forgetting that North Dakotans will sometimes take brothers, cousins, aunts, or uncles into their homes until they can get back on their feet.

Perhaps he came during a tornado warning when most people were in the southwest corners of their basements and did not hear the bell. Or finding someone home he may have met with denial—
“Oh no, we're just visiting, here from Minnesota.”

Or perhaps he came in winter.¹

Of course, it may be that only North Dakotans have the sophistication to really appreciate the silence of the land around here. And maybe it's just what people got used to in all their silence.

I am going to read a short section of *Montana 1948*. I hope it illustrates the pleasure of silence, even in human company:

My happiest memory of Marie, the one that gradually separates itself from the general tangle of pleasant, warm moments, was from the autumn before she died.

Unhappy with my general lack of success at team sports, I decided I would do something about it. By sheer disciplined practice, through diligence, I would overcome my lack of natural ability and become good at something. Football was the sport I chose, and I further narrowed my choice of skills by concentrating on just one aspect of football. I would become an expert dropkicker. Drop-kicking, of course, has long since ceased to be a part of football, but in 1947 players dropkicked field goals; they dropped the ball, let it hit the ground for the briefest instant, then tried to boot it through the goal posts. That fall I spent hours in the back yard, trying to dropkick a football over a branch of our oak, then shagging the ball and kicking it back the other way, back and forth, back and forth. . . .

One afternoon when I was practicing after school, Ronnie Tall Bear burst out the back door of our house, Marie close behind him. Although Marie was obviously chasing him, they were both laughing.

Ronnie ran across our yard. When he came to my football, he fell on it, rolled with it through the leaves, and came up running, exactly as he no doubt had done with recovered fumbles countless times in football practices or in actual games.

When Ronnie picked up my football, Marie was able to gain some ground, but now he began to run like the football star he once was, tucking the ball under one arm, faking, spinning, stopping, starting, shifting direction. Ronnie turned when he came to the railroad tracks and doubled back toward me. Once he got close enough, he lateraled the ball to me. Now Marie, tiring and slowing but still pursuing, was after *me*.

For the next half hour we chased up and down the yard, throwing the football back and forth, running after each other. It was a game, yet it had no object and no borders of space or time or regulation. It was totally free-form, but we still tried to use our skills--throwing accurate spirals, leaping to make catches, running as fast as we could in pursuit or escape. I felt that what we played, more accurately how we played, had its origin in Ronnie and Marie's Indian heritage, but I had no way of knowing that with any certainty. All I could be sure of was that I never had more fun playing ball, any kind of ball, in my life.

When we were too tired to play any longer, we went back to the house by way of the garage. There my mother kept a gallon of apple cider. Was it Marie's idea to uncap it? No matter. We passed the cider around, each of us drinking from the heavy jug, the cool, sweet cider the perfect answer to the question, how do you follow an afternoon of running around in the warm autumn sun?

I believe I remembered that incident so fondly not only because I was with Marie and Ronnie, both of whom I loved in my way, but also because I felt, for that brief span, as though I was part of a family, a family that accepted me for myself and not my blood or birthright.²

Of course there is another kind of silence that is also present around here. It's almost a cliché in the Midwest. That's the silence of repression, of ignorance, of keeping quiet so we don't disturb things the way things are, and of course the truth is often disquieting. Kathleen Norris has written about the poor reception the authors this series is honoring—the reception Lois Phillips Hudson and Louise Erdrich and Larry Woiwode and Richard Critchfield have sometimes received in this very

region that they write about. She writes that they have been read warily, if at all, and that their work has sometimes been thrown down into silence, because they write about matters we would just as soon not think about.

Avoidance of truth isn't the only reason for keeping silent. There are other pressures—the fear of being embarrassed, of challenging authority, of not being believed. I tried to write something about this silence of repression in *Montana 1948*. If silence has its way, if certain matters don't get talked about, if they don't come out into the open, that will mean a triumph of evil. From part one of *Montana 1948*:

From the summer of my twelfth year I carry a series of images more vivid and lasting than any others of my boyhood and indelible beyond all attempts the years make to erase or fade them. . . .

A young Sioux woman lies on a bed in our house. She is feverish, delirious, and coughing so hard I am afraid she will die.

My father kneels on the kitchen floor, begging my mother to help him. It's a summer night and the room is brightly lit. Insects cluster around the light fixtures, and the pleading quality in my father's voice reminds me of those insects--high-pitched, insistent, frantic. It is a sound I have never heard coming from him.

My mother stands in our kitchen on a hot, windy day. The windows are open, and Mother's lace curtains blow into the room. Mother holds my father's Ithaca twelve-gauge shotgun, and since she is a small, slender woman, she has trouble finding the balance point of its heavy length. Nevertheless, she has watched my father and other men often enough to know where the shells go, and she loads them until the gun will hold no more. Loading the gun is the difficult part. Once the shells are in, any fool can figure out how to fire it. Which she intends to do.

There are others—the sound of breaking glass, the odor of rotting vegetables. . . . I offer these images in the order in which they occurred, yet the events that produced these sights and sounds are so rapid and tumbled together that any chronological sequence seems wrong. Imagine instead a movie screen divided into boxes and panels, each with its own scene, so that one moment can't occur simultaneously with another, so no action has to fly off in time, so nothing happens before or after, only during. That's the way these images coexist in my memory, like the Sioux picture calendars in which the whole year's events are painted on the same buffalo hide, or like a tapestry with every scene woven into the same cloth, every moment on the same flat plane, the summer of 1948. . . .

Forty years ago. Two months ago my mother died. She made, as the expression goes, a good death. She came inside the house from working in her garden, and a heart attack, as sudden as a sneeze, felled her in the kitchen. My father's death, ten years earlier, was less merciful. Cancer hollowed him out over the years until he could not stand up to a stiff wind. And Marie Little Soldier? Her fate contains too much of the story for me to give away.

A story that is now only mine to tell. I may not be the only witness left--there might still be someone in that small Montana town who remembers those events as well as I, but no one knew all three of these people better.

And no one loved them more.³

Endnotes

1. Larry Watson, "The Population of North Dakota," 28.2 (Summer, 1990), *South Dakota Review*, pp. 133-134. Poem is reprinted with permission.
2. Larry Watson, *Montana 1948* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1993), pp. 172-173. Excerpts reprinted with permission.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-12.