

The following article, based on the lecture Larry Woiwode 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: Voices from the North by Larry Woiwode

When I woke, the dam had burst,
Water was flooding the fields
Where grain rose in green spikes
And raying beards that swayed
Forward with the current's strength,
And I was pulled from the pit and wrote:
How long has it been since I've spoken?
I want to say that our hill is overlaid with snow,
That its trees are, that spring is close, and that
*Love awoke in me and Love awoke.*¹

"When I Woke, the Dam Had Burst" is from *Eventide*, the only collection of poems I have published. It suggests the lay of the land that helped form my language. But an even weightier influence were the people of Dakota. I'm going to speak of them in my reading. Certain writers influenced me at crucial points also, but the single most telling influence on me, and it's one I seldom mention except in private, and often at night, was Bob Dylan. . . . I heard his first album in 1963 when I was still at the University of Illinois, and I was drawn so far in I never quite found my way out. Because he was writing not only about social and political issues, he was charting with each new album, it seemed to me, a spiritual odyssey. And from the first, I seem to have seen that, or anyway, that's easy to say in retrospect. I never idolized him as a great poet, as academics on different occasions have, but as a troubadour; that's how I saw him. A newsbringer. One in touch with his spiritual makeup and the world outside that wanted to destroy it and always able to be honest about that.

The language of North Dakota doesn't necessarily rise only from this state, although a local community can indeed color that language and shape or modify it. But it is also in the words and the voice of Bob Dylan, the singer of good news from Hibbing, Minnesota, near the Mesabi Iron Range, the young man who began issuing albums when he was twenty and has produced at least one new album every year since. In him, I recognized an authentic voice from the North. I like to think at times we were traveling the same highway. It was a road for both of us that shattered and split, then led to faith in Christ, then led back home, and I was so much older then. I'm younger than that now.

I wasn't as aware, at first, as I should have been of the effect of the state of North Dakota itself on my language. I got the best glimpse of that a long time later when I was living with my wife and oldest daughter in Chicago. An older man moved into the upper apartment of the house we were renting. I noticed he drove a new Cadillac but was seldom at home, although some nights he sat in a lawn chair out in the back yard. I learned that he was from Michigan; he lived there with his wife, he

told me, but spent two days a week in Chicago because he was setting up a branch plant of his new business. He was in glass-forming. One night when he was home, I climbed the stairs to his apartment, and I handed him my recent novel, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*. It seemed weeks later, I was going out to our car when he said from his lawn chair—it was night again as usual, “My wife likes your book.”

“Oh,” I said, wondering, I suppose, what he thought.

“I don’t have time to read novels,” he said.

And, at the age I was then, I had to restrain myself from saying, “Who does?”

“I looked at the beginning,” he told me. “Actually, my wife is enthralled with it. She’s from Canada,” whatever that meant. But when he asked me if I really was from North Dakota, and I said yes, he nodded and said, “Ah, that explains it. Your precision of language,” he said. And then I understood. The pure plain speech that I had heard in North Dakota and had tried to cull up as I worked on that book was a heritage of the literary culture, honed for centuries in France and in England, located only a hundred miles from the village where I grew up, that is, in Canada.

But there’s more than that influence on the way we speak here. Our language has been refined further by the mechanical precision of Germanic diction, darkened by the black despair of Scandinavian locutions and rhythms, by the frosty poetry of the Icelanders, and the love of the earth and country as mother which Russian best conveys. But the importance Dakotans ascribe to landscape and the land has a source that few have examined: the Native American sense of holiness. That reverence affected, I believe, immigrant settlers in a way we can only recognize now generations later, in the way Transcendentalists felt that effect in the East a century before. This sense of reverence seems to me at the center of the language of the land of the Dakotas and finds full expression in those who believe that a landscape is a particular creation of God. Because above and below words is the impact of the place itself, blue above green, now white, the stormy wind fulfilling His word.

The spare and pure poetry of our language, however, will be lost without literate generations to pick up the path already laid down. Because North Dakota has a literary tradition, too, largely initiated by Thomas McGrath who, for instance, helped me to see the land as no one else did. “North Dakota is everywhere,” he wrote. Dear man. . . .

“I’m just a girl of the plains, I guess,” Alpha Jones Neumiller says in her diary, “and I’m riding the Soo Line.”² When I began to search for my language as a writer, I turned to Alpha, girl of the north country. Why a woman? Why? A crisis in my writing arrived when I realized the greatest influence on my life, more important than any writer I’d read or instructor I’d had, was my mother, then her mother. And I knew if I couldn’t admit that, I’d be a liar.

Earlier, when I was leaving for New York, my father handed me a book and said, “Maybe you can use this.” It was a diary my mother had kept when she was unmarried, a schoolteacher in the country. Her entries were skeletal, brief, often about only the weather. And as I read through them in New York, I began to type out the ones that struck me, on note cards. I still have some of those cards, twenty some years old, here with me. I’ll read an example: “November 16, 1936. A very, very tired and nappy evening. Must go to bed as it is after ten, and I promised.” On this card, I’ve circled “as it is” and “nappy,” which speaks for itself. “As it is”—that strange odd phrasing for a young woman. And, another, “November 24, 1936. Another of those most beautiful windstorms. Got a ride to and from school for which I was very thankful.” Circled are “those most beautiful” and “for which.” It was a mystery. My mother was hiding somewhere in these words, none of which sounded

like her. But if I couldn't recall or capture her voice I knew I'd never find mine. I knew I had to know my song before I started singing. I had to hear her before I could be born as a writer. And the labor to create Alpha from those fragile diary phrases of my mother extended over ten years. Then one day her voice appeared after all that work and for weeks it echoed in my mind. How did she sound?

FEB 23 It's blizzarding as badly as it's blizzarded all year. We couldn't see the barns until 2:00, when it let up a little, and then I walked to school facing it. It wasn't cold but the wind was so strong the walk wore me out and my forehead froze and slowed my mind. Greeted in the schoolhouse by a snowdrift up around the potbellied stove. No pupils. Shoveled snow for forty minutes and am still creaky from it. No letter from Martin again. I'm in a shining desert, but ice-cold.

MAR 1 Handsome Axel Anderson just a ways down the road got his handsome Pontiac out of hibernation for the spring and took me for a ride this afternoon and, Oh, what a ride! We knocked down a fence post! He wanted to paw and paw, is all, Ma, and then invited me to a dance. I declined, kind sir.

JAN 29 The fifth month of school done. Time passes, after all, even if it doesn't for me. As I stepped out the schoolhouse door, I saw a stray, wolfish dog sniffing around the swings for a place to pee, and yelled, "Get out of here, you pest!" just as the Lutheran preacher, Rev. Grigson, came walking past. My cold breath on the air was like a blowtorch!³

The local language of our land often has music beneath it or music running through its phrases. That music isn't always polka music, although polka music is there, too, here in North Dakota. At various points in my books, I've tried in different ways to suggest the strains of that Dakota music, as in the opening of "New Year" from *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*. This, the mock somber tone of waking dreams:

He dreamed he'd been sleeping in the catacombs, those cold and nitrous tombs he'd heard of only out of history books and from nuns' lips. The shuffling of a pair of slippers traced a tangle of paths and passageways through his sleep, the sound of an object being dropped struck deep into a dream and turned up as a spatula, and somebody in the kitchen (who?), whispering to Dinah in a banjo tune, mingled with the hiss of a kettle making steam, had washed out a great cave, the echoing hollow where he now lay. There was a cold crown around his ears and forehead and a frosty network stiffening his nostrils, and he felt, at the outline of himself, a heavy and constricting, wrinkled skin. And then he remembered that he hadn't undressed.⁴

In the opening to another chapter, "About Father Krull," in *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, I tried to indicate percussive pizacatto—that percussiveness is present in the everyday language many residents here speak:

Alpha's mother, Electa Jones ("No wonder we've got such weird names," Elling once said to Alpha), was vocal and aphoristic about her likes and aversions, a compendium of arcane beliefs and outright prejudices. "Men with dark hair have minds dark as water," she said, and Alpha's father's hair, except for the silver on the sides, was nearly black; Martin's hair was

as black as a Sioux's. "Grown men who chew on a chaw of chewing gum deserve no respect; it looks like their mouths haven't grown up yet and makes you wonder if their minds, which are mighty close, have either." And, "If you don't eat in little bites, if you bolt your food or chomp it with your mouth open wide, or slurp soup like that, people will think we feed you from a trough." The use of tobacco, of cigars and cigarettes, especially, was one of the filthiest acts permitted to take place in public, to her mind, and she often said, "People who put their cigarettes out on plates should have to eat their meals out of ashtrays."⁵

Who needs a Jewish mother when you got a Scandinavian one? Or a German one who knows best the best things for you? This sort of angle of wrangling and disputing in Dakota between families, between nationalities, and religions, was partly the material of *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*. There is other material there, too. And in the book as in Dakota, business always gets done. . . .

There are times when we've all felt we've had one too many mornings. I wanted someone in that state to wake to the landscape of North Dakota, a native, and see it new, and since it was the opening, the first chapter of the novel, I wanted a central character's awakening to introduce the awakening I hoped the reader would have. We learn to find our way through the territory of a novel by resting within a character who becomes a reliable guide. C. J. C. Neumiller was such a guide, I felt, and I wanted him and thus the reader, to enter the world of my new novel and thus North Dakota in this way:

He was awakened from sleep by his head slamming against glass. The train was going into a shuddering turn and his shoulder was crushed against steel. He pushed himself up in the seat, glimpsing his diminishing reflection in the dim glass, and the act of sitting and the sight of himself, gray and unrelated to who he thought he was, drained away his blood and struck him blind for a breath, and he had a hallucination of milkweed parachutes floating from a broken pod. Alcohol. The pain above his right eye was like a needle imbedded there and pressing upward. What was the form that had been so overarching, so vaulted and protective in his dream, as though he'd been sleeping in a cathedral? He pulled a pocket watch from his overalls; he couldn't have slept more than fifteen minutes. Where was the sun? He looked out the sooty window and watched the sun, which was still hidden from him, form a hazy plain as if from the earth, from the plain itself, warming his face, and fall colors became visible everywhere over the flat land.⁶

Editor's note: Woiwode moved ahead in his narrative to explain C. J. C. Neumiller's feelings upon the burial of his father. Otto Neumiller had once been a respected man in his community, but was no longer looked upon so highly after losing everything during the Great Depression. Charles decides to build his father's coffin himself and bury him at home:

Charles stared at the coffin lid, at the crucifix, the oval with his father's name countersunk into it, at the nails along the lid, each with its black shadow, at the hammer beside the lid, and felt such an uncharacteristic and malevolent bitterness that he had to lock his knees to feel his legs beneath him. He wanted to see lightning across the entire sky, a violent storm, falling snow, or a dove burst from his father's breast and fly off from the coffin—some sign that his father's life and good deeds had not gone unnoticed on earth, not for his father's sake

or his own sake, but so his sons and daughters would always feel he believed in a just and reasonable God. He replaced his cap, got the lid and laid it over the coffin, picked the hammer up, and went down on one knee and drove the first nail home with a single blow. Augustina touched his shoulder, and Clarence said, "Wait." Charles looked up, and then to where Clarence and Augustina were looking, and saw, in the direction of the farms to the north and the east, and in a ragged procession along the road from town, dark shapes, mourners in black clothes, grownups and children moving over the plain, coming to pay their last respects to his father.⁷

Editor's note: Woiwode concluded with an excerpt from "Confessionals," a short story found in his collection, Silent Passengers:

As I hammer home a nail or wire up an electrical box, I'm aware that each act closes another link in the network that keeps closing the distance between us. I'm on the other side of the screen now, and no matter who you are, you're being drawn into intimacy with me; though by "you" I mean *you* in particular, the one for whom my smallest variation in inflection expresses a nuance of meaning unstated but understood. So populated places (only a million inhabitants in one huge state! six hundred thousand in another!), I sometimes feel your presence so tangibly I raise my eye from a detail—the tuft of grass with a pebble beside it as glassily pale as amber among the spores of sawdust—I raise my eyes not to the sky but to a meditative middle distance, and stand thinking these matters through once more, expecting your hand to come down on my shoulder.

You were the one I intended to tell this to as though it were the story of my fall from the Catholic church, and you are the one who would see that it couldn't be so simple and that the mixtures within the simplest motive provide the clues we need to identify another's character—that personal trajectory we each take through time. That trajectory at moments might seem to be turning in a contrary direction, but it keeps to its course over a path as predictable as a parabola. You understand this, and you are the one who would have known, when I stated near the end of this, "I felt I'd prayed among so many statues, I couldn't pray anymore among people," that the statement had risen from the defensiveness of youth, and that whatever meaning it might have had then, other than youth's tendency to deal in the generality of "people" rather than individuals, it was now colored with a self-deprecating patina of twenty years.

And you do know all of this, and more, too, before I can acknowledge that you do; and although I suspect sometimes that it won't be long before I see you, I'm sure that when your hand at last comes down on me, I'll probably swing around, startled, as if the sky in its overarching span had united in a flash my past and present, and I'll try to cough out these last words: "I've been waiting a long time, but I never expected you to get here so quickly."⁸

Endnotes

1. Larry Woiwode, *Eventide* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1977), p. 63.
2. Woiwode, *Beyond the Bedroom Wall* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1975), p. 127.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.
8. Woiwode, "Confessionals," from *Silent Passengers* (New York: Macmillan, 1993).