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Book Review: Winning the Dust Bowl by Carter Revard

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Carter Revard says of Winning the Dust Bowl, “I’ve made this a home of new and selected poems, and put a meadow around it of history and autobiography, by looking out from these poems at the people, places and happenings from 1931 to the present.” The vast meadow of memories allows his poems to sing more clearly.

Thirty-eight chapters surround forty-four poems in various forms, from the Old English riddle to free verse. His songs and metaphors range across time and place. Having drunk from the springs of the Greek gods and muses, Revard writes “To the Muse, in Oklahoma,” remembering the springs that flowed into the Buck Creek valley of his childhood where he found his voice.

His life began during the Great Depression on the Osage reservation among people who knew hunger, but who also worked to grow their own food. In chapter 14, “Transubstantiating,” the context for his poem “Communing Before Supermarkets,” Revard explains, in reference to watermelons, that “the best ones grew down in the creekbottoms where families lived way back from the highways and gravel or dirt roads.” In the poem, he recalls thinking as a child “how strange / that dirt does turn into their sweet crisp red flesh / and juice in the mouth, that those long vines / can draw the dark earth up and make it melons, and I said / to myself, how does the seed know to make a watermelon and not an apricot?” As the poem ends, the boy, swimming, who has eaten his fill, is thinking, “now the melon is turning into me, and my sisters and brothers, / my mother and father and uncles and aunts and into the / ants feasting there on the melon rinds, / and into the grass and the trees growing there, and into the dirt—. . . .”

Out of his abundant heart, intelligence, and vision, Revard pays tribute to the many relatives and friends who nurtured him. His book
contains visual and verbal portraits of friends and relatives like his cousin Roy Camp, who taught him to read; his grandpa Aleck Camp, "who held off shame and poverty;" his beloved Aunt Jewell, who affirmed his spiritual sense; and Professor Eikenberry of Tulsa University, who generously nurtured his literary gifts. This book celebrates the complex beauty of relatedness, sharing the gifts of the places and people that helped Revard win.

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