Review of *In the Kingdom of Grass* By Margaret A. MacKichan and Bob Ross

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MacKichan’s eye, sharpened by several extended immersions in Sandhills society, captures perfectly both the working cowboy’s laconic go-to-hell honesty and a mother’s fierce protective pride. And whether a young brother or sister on horseback or a slightly querulous septuagenarian, these are subjects that trust the camera. They are caught not in careful pose but in concentrated endeavor and often appear eager to resume visiting with the person behind the lens, to ask the borderline personal question, to share a cherished nugget of neighborhood lore. Should we momentarily lose our sense of place in the seasonal rhythms of ranch life—the fall drives, winter feedings, spring brandings, summer haying—MacKichan retrieves us with a few stunning shots of the great somnolent horizon of the Sandhills. No perspective on earth could be any more humbling.

Bob Ross does not directly explicate MacKichan’s photographs. Rather he confronts us with his own sense of place, a place nearer the eastern edge of the hills where he grew up. The best sections of these superb essays feature Uncle Ozro—a humorous fellow who nurtured and drove Ross to manhood while harboring a weakness for strong drink and an unrewarding relationship with money—and a long series of hired men who gave employers and their nephews full measure of work and patient tutorial devotion in between weeklong benders in town. Uncles can break down under the constant vagaries of markets and weather, the idiocy of bankers, and the cruelties of disease. But when they pass, landowner uncles at least leave a mark on the land, if only in a neighbor’s giving directions past the “old Smith place.” Hired hands depart trackless, their ephemeral legacy a temporarily repaired fence, fresh leathers in a windmill that will soon wear out, a newly broken horse fated to die or be sold, a branded calf that won’t be on the ranch past November. When Ross describes walking past a favorite former hired hand, now slumped drunk and broken against a filling station wall, without the barest acknowledgement, not even a silent nod, he
writes the poignant epitaph of not only the transient hands that populate ranch country, but of the families that use them up in their constant battle to hang on to land and cattle.

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