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1992

## Review of Dreams in Dry Places

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Gibbs, Dale L., "Review of Dreams in Dry Places" (1992). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 686.

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The next day my dad took me along and we drove to Clearwater to see the Russells, who had become his only family when he was orphaned at age fourteen. That afternoon, Frank Russell took us in a pick-up (I got to ride in the back with a dog) to show my dad the farm and we stopped later at a new place Frank had bought south of Clearwater. I remember standing in the farm yard, the men digging their boots into the hot sand, the dog aimlessly chasing big grasshoppers, and a few head of thin cattle clustered around the big galvanized water tank. There were plenty of abandoned farms for sale and Frank had bought this one and thought my dad might come back to operate it for him. As bad as the Depression was, my father knew that my mother would never trade Lincoln for this, so we drove back to the home place.

I stayed over the weekend at the Russell place, enjoying the cooler evenings and riding on the cow ponies, the hands holding me in front of them on the western saddles. On Sunday Mrs. Russell took me along to church in Clearwater. I recall now how she appeared on the back porch, the day already becoming hot, in a voile dress, straw hat, white mesh gloves, Enna Jettick shoes, and with an aroma of lavender. Frank drove us into town in the Ford sedan and let us off in front of the white frame Methodist church. He went across the street to the cafe to talk cattle prices and politics while the young minister talked of perseverance, courage, and the Lord's way.

I had not thought much about that time until I began to look carefully at the photographs in Roger Bruhn's *Dreams in Dry Places*, and suddenly all the memories of that time, the mixture of hope, idealism, and practicality came back into focus. This, says Bruhn, in his preface, is what this book is about—through images to touch our memories, “to make you feel something about striving, about aspirations—about dreams.”

“*Dreams in Dry Places*” was originally the title of a touring exhibition of Nebraska architecture, in photographs and text, sponsored by the Nebraska Committee for the Humanities. In this book, there is no text, there are, in fact,

*Dreams in Dry Places.* By Roger Bruhn. Foreword by Ted Kooser. Notes by Edward R. Zimmer. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990. Foreword, photographs, notes, geographical index. xix + 146 pp. \$40.00.

In the summer of 1936 after weeks of scorching heat, my parents decided to visit my grandparents in Neligh and Clearwater, Nebraska. We got into the 1932 Terraplane which my dad had bought with his veteran's bonus from World War I and headed out through Seward, Columbus, Norfolk, Oakdale, to Neligh. My grandmother's big Victorian house was on North Main Street at the foot of Standpipe Hill and its big yard and porches did, in fact, seem cooler after the 100 degree heat in Lincoln.

no people, no cars, no toys or swings, to remind us of the actors on this stage. Ted Kooser makes a point of this absence in his richly poetic introduction, which is in interesting contrast to the sparseness of Bruhn's photographs. Like an abstract painting, these images proceed not from analysis but from emanation. As Kooser says, the people are waiting in the wings, but there is invisible evidence of their presence in every photograph.

With hundreds of photography books appearing each year, we might ask the purpose and distinction of this one. Bruhn follows a distinguished tradition in this genre. One thinks first of Wright Morris, a fellow Nebraskan, and *The Home Place* where the mixture of archtypal images, the parlor with the potbellied stove, the railway station, the abandoned house, are accentuated and expanded by the narrative. There are the unforgettable images of Walker Evans in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* with the story of the Southern tenant families told by James Agee. More familiar, perhaps, are the photographs, taken during the Depression by Dorothea Lange for the Farm Security Administration, whose compelling starkness and piercing truth needed no explanation. The difference here is that the Agee-Walker book and the Lange photographs are documentary photos with strong political and social messages. The purpose of Bruhn's book, as he says, is not to teach but to present the material world with the observer supplying the memories and dreams. In my case he succeeded for when I saw those small town stores, isolated churches and farm houses, they brought back nourishing memories of Clearwater, the Russells, and the hot, dry summer of 1936.

Roger Bruhn is an experienced "photographer of architecture." He has avoided some of the dramatic "Churrigueresque" effects of Ansel Adams school and the effulgence of Eliot Porter and instead treats his subjects with an almost clinical astringency and directness. *Dreams in Dry Places* is not one breathtaking photograph after another, but a series of carefully selected images of architecture and landscape arranged in a calculated sequence of point and counter-

point that is the only editorial statement. In the place of drama, these photographs invite the viewer into the disciplined but evocative world of the photographer's inner vision and in the final analysis into ourselves.

Dorothea Lange kept the following sign over her darkroom from 1923 to her death in 1965:

The Contemplation of things as they are  
without error or confusion  
without substitution or imposture  
Is in itself a nobler thing  
than a whole harvest of invention.  
Francis Bacon

Roger Bruhn's work is in this tradition.

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