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The Prairie Schooner Book Prize

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The Prairie Schooner

BOOK PRIZE

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The Prairie Schooner

BOOK PRIZE

TENTH ANNIVERSARY READER

EDITED BY *James Engelhardt* AND *Marianne Kunkel*

FOREWORD BY *Hilda Raz*

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS | LINCOLN AND LONDON

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Contents

Foreword by Hilda Raz vii

2003

Cortney Davis

“Leopold’s Maneuvers” 3

“March 28, 2001 /

March 28, 1945” 5

K. L. Cook

“Last Call” 7

2004

Rynn Williams

“The Sample Makers” 33

“Big Yard” 35

Brock Clarke

“The Fund-Raiser’s

Dance Card” 36

2005

Kathleen Flenniken

“Preservation” 59

“Murder Mystery” 61

John Keeble

“The Cross” 62

2006

Paul Guest

“Elba” 79

“These Arms of Mine” 80

Jesse Lee Kercheval

“Beasts” 82

2007*Mari L'Esperance*

"Pantoum of the Blind
Cambodian Women" 107

"Finding My Mother" 108

Katherine Vaz

"Lisbon Story" 110

2008*Kara Candito*

"Self-Portrait with an
Ice Pick" 147

"Carnivale, 1934" 149

Anne Finger

"Vincent" 150

2009*Shane Book*

"Dust" 171

Ted Gilley

"Physical Wisdom" 176

2010*James Crews*

"Paradoxical
Undressing" 195

"Metacognition" 197

"The Bees Have Not
Yet Left Us" 199

Greg Hrbek

"Sagittarius" 200

2011*Susan Blackwell Ramsey*

"Boliche" 217

"Knitting Lace" 219

Karen Brown

"Little Sinners" 221

2012*Orlando Ricardo Menes*

"Elegy for Great-Uncle
Julio, Cane Cutter" 237

"Television, a Patient
Teacher" 239

Xbenet Aliu

"Flipping Property" 240

Source

Acknowledgments 255

Contributors 257

Foreword

The anthology you're reading now is filled with stories and poems from the first decade of the Prairie Schooner Book Prizes, two manuscripts published annually by the University of Nebraska Press, selected by the editor of *Prairie Schooner* in an open competition. We've chosen one manuscript of poetry and one manuscript of short fiction each year since 2003, with a prize of \$3,000 and a standard publication contract from the press for each writer. This introduction is a brief history of the series. In many cases, I remember the exact moments of first reading these selections and they continue to give me pleasure. And I remember the story of starting the Book Prize series.

I've long thought that one purpose of art is to extend human experience; so it has been for me. Over ten years we've chosen stories and poems about family, parents, and children as well as lovers of all genders and preferences; accounts of civil and civic catastrophe; diverse voices praising and lamenting urban life; revisionist texts and tales; documents of the disappeared; ecofiction; and lyrics and narratives about human genius, disability, poverty, and some actions that try to save the world.

These prize-winning selections reflect and respond to our times. Writers of debut books as well as more experienced writers were chosen anonymously each year. We've seen superb manuscripts withdrawn by agents to be published by commercial presses and reputations made and increased by winning a Prairie Schooner Book Prize. And we've seen the contest continue for ten years and longer with the promise that it will go on. Not many magazines endure for nearly ninety years of continuous publication as *Prairie Schooner* has. We aspire to the same for the Prairie Schooner Book Prizes.

Prairie Schooner's History

Don't we all like to read, listen to, and tell stories? "The universe is made of stories, not atoms," wrote poet Muriel Rukeyser. Stories make order of the apparent chaos of our lives. These days, poets and writers and their audiences depend on an array of conduits to reach one another. *Prairie Schooner*, begun in 1927, is one of these conduits. This story about another kind of conduit, the *Prairie Schooner Book Prizes*, grew from the success of the journal.

Most writers want to publish. Why? Here's an old joke. A writer dies and goes to heaven. She's been good, won the major prizes, so St. Peter gives her the choice between heaven or hell. They go on the tour. In heaven the writer sees people chained to trees with their fingers moving fast over laptops. St. Peter snaps his fingers, and they're in hell. The writer sees people chained to trees with their fingers moving fast over laptops. "Oh," says the writer, who is wringing her hands. "What's the difference between heaven and hell?" "Well," says St. Peter with an angelic smile, "in heaven, you get published."

Journals publish. They serve writers and readers. Journal editors graft their visions, ambitions, opportunities, and passions onto the successes of their predecessors. When I became the fifth editor of *Prairie Schooner* in 1970, I knew my debt to founding editor Lowry Wimberly; second editor, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Karl Shapiro; third editor, John Keats and Willa Cather Scholar Bernice Slote; and the fourth editor, the William Blake and A. R. Ammons Scholar Hugh Luke.

I also understood that the magazine owed a debt to the University of Nebraska, no metaphor. The budget was all red ink. The English Department harbored an inventory of magazines in a basement room, and our national distributor had discarded *Prairie Schooner* because we couldn't get to press on time. My first ambition was to retire the debt. I also meant to establish a publishing schedule, increase our circulation, and reinvigorate the journal's tradition of excellence.

Our assets were these: we'd published without interruption since 1927; we had a long list of successful contributors and the active support of the University of Nebraska, where we were part of the Department of English; and the University of Nebraska Press, one of the best presses in the country, was our publisher.

In 1927 *Prairie Schooner* was a regional magazine. Our local writers traveled east and west, north and south, with copies of the magazine in their pockets. Soon the journal and its writers were winning national prizes and our demographics changed. We grew beyond our territory.

When I was a new—and young—editor in the 1970s, the colleagueship of editors of major magazines, especially George Core at *Sewanee Review* and Stanley Lindberg at *Georgia Review*, helped us. I don't know why they took the time to answer their telephones to tell me how to make a magazine work, but they did. Before long, with their advice, *Prairie Schooner* managed and then retired the debt, hired a new printer, and found a new distributor. The University of Nebraska Press loaned us the services of a professional copyeditor and a copyright manager. We began to publish portfolios of international writing in translation, and these portfolios helped to expand our mission in a time of growing internationalism. Individual issues sold instead of going to basement storage. Special issues were reprinted as books and they did well. The magazine's size grew as our income did, from eighty pages to two hundred pages and more. We hired Dika Eckersley as our designer; we began to print four-color covers with bar codes. We joined the Association for Writers and Writing Programs, the disciplinary organization for writers who teach in the academy. Our various managing editors took the magazine to book fairs. And, as the editor, I became a participant in conferences, at annual meetings, and on panels, giving papers and eventually serving on the board of directors and then as president of AWP.

Prairie Schooner's opportunities grew fast. Our writers won prizes and published good books with commercial and university presses.

We were on lists and in illustrations: as the foundational roots of the tree of literary culture in *Esquire* magazine, for example, and in all of the prize anthologies. *Prairie Schooner*, always known for its support of beginning poets and writers, was called prophetic—we seemed to attract the best and the brightest writers at the start of their careers: Cyrus Colter, Marilyn Nelson, and Alberto Rios as well as Willa Cather and Eudora Welty. In 2001 *Prairie Schooner* celebrated seventy-five years of continuous publication with a conference at the University of Nebraska; Joyce Carol Oates was keynote speaker. One of her first stories and later ones were published in *Prairie Schooner*. Over one thousand people registered for that conference, planned for mid-September 2001. Then, with the rest of the country, we watched the World Trade Center towers come down. In shock after 9/11, we wondered who would come to our conference? Who would enter air space by choice? We knew: nobody. We were mistaken. Oates arrived along with every reader and every panelist on the schedule, and so did international scholars who came to discuss Oates's writing; other *Prairie Schooner* writers came to read and discuss their work and the state of the world. At the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Conference, panels of poets, creative nonfiction and fiction writers, scholars and critics, and large and vocal audiences refused to leave rooms scheduled for other panels. They joined together. Few people left the building; instead they stayed to read and talk about writing and to discuss the place of the arts in an uncertain future. Then we had a party.

In the hubbub, California poet, publisher, and philanthropist Glenna Luschei climbed on a chair, raised her arms for quiet, and told us that she had endowed *Prairie Schooner* and its editorship, in perpetuity, through the University of Nebraska Foundation. From the highest levels of the administration and the foundation, which had supported and attended the conference, to the writers who had come far in interesting times and local supporters and readers and friends, we were surprised. Linda Pratt (the chair of the English Department) and I met in an alcove to dance our pleasure in a time

of grief. The next week, a senior member of the administration asked what might the magazine do next?

We knew: poetry and short stories are difficult to publish. We wanted a book prize series. The University of Nebraska Press asked for a proposal. Reviewers were enthusiastic. They recommended the Prairie Schooner Book Prizes for annual publication in two volumes, one of poetry and one of short stories. We would have a national literary board to offer the editor advice about the finalist manuscripts, and the editor would choose both winners. The seed money for the prize was deposited in our accounts. And so we began.

Our First Crisis and Heroes: Forming the Prize

The book prize proposal to the University of Nebraska Press projected five hundred manuscript submissions after the first two years. The first year, twelve hundred paper manuscripts overflowed the departmental mailroom, stymied the staff, and shut down the front office. Who could open the envelopes in a timely manner? Who would administer the contest and oversee the ethical separation of screeners from judges from manuscripts? Who was going to remove author names from the books and assign numbers? Which computer could we use to create a spreadsheet? We'd believed that we could handle the mail. The journal received over five hundred manuscript submissions each month. We'd managed. But the piles of manuscript entries stood well over eight feet tall. We couldn't manage.

Many stories have heroes. Peggy Shumaker, a poet and contributor, had become a friend and colleague on the AWP board. And she, with others, knew how to get things done.

Peggy and her husband, businessman Joe Usibelli, had met with us at AWP meetings to talk about literary publishing. With Joe's keen questions and Peggy's suggestions we first began to imagine the Prairie Schooner Book Prize. If we had the experience, we also had the most important component for this new series: a collaborative team with university support. The outstanding PhD program

in creative writing in the English Department at the University of Nebraska could provide screeners, readers, and staff for the project. The University of Nebraska Press, one of the best in the country, might support it. But we didn't have the start-up money to pay for what Peggy and Joe thought necessary: two large prizes. We decided that we'd have to wait. But as friends, we stayed in touch.

Now we had the money, the approved proposal, and the pure hubris. We went ahead with our plans. We also had eight-foot stacks of manuscript submissions we hadn't planned for. Are you surprised to read that I picked up the telephone? Peggy and Joe answered their phone. They gave advice: hire a book prize coordinator; find a separate office and a new computer. Then they sent a check to implement their suggestions and later promised an annual donation to keep the series alive.

After a rocky start that included the urgent need to draft an ethics statement for the series, we continued with our plans. All manuscripts were sent to an office removed from the journal offices by a floor. A responsible coordinator was hired. Our ethics statement served as a model for other contests (see the journal website: *Prairie Schooner* now uses CLMP's statement, which originally was based on the journal's), and we worked and we worked and we worked. I remember June and July of 2003 as weeks on a couch, an Oblamov in the Middle West where I lay covered by paper. Then as now we had no idea whose work we were reading. At the end of July, the first winners were announced: Cortney Davis, a poet and nurse practitioner, was selected for *Leopold's Maneuvers*, a book whose poems refuse to "brush off horror like salt" as they provide witness to birth and crisis, and K. L. Cook for *Last Call*, a book of short fiction. Cook's next book, *The Girl from Chamelle*, was published by Harper Collins. Each of the winners received a prize check along with a publishing. UNP took over all publishing, publicity, and distribution of the prize books.

By 2004 at *Prairie Schooner* we had all systems running. The winners were Rynn Williams for her astonishing and shocking *Adonis*

Garage and Brock Clarke for *Carrying the Torch* (he'd won a Mary McCarthy Prize already). His next book was *An Arsonist's Guide to Writers' Homes in New England*, one of the most widely reviewed books of 2007. Williams was moving from her upper West side NYC apartment with her children when I called to tell her about her prize. She sat on a packing box to talk. Her premature death five years later brought silence to that loud and compelling voice but her book continues to be read and taught. The next year, 2005, winner Kathleen Flenniken's poetry book, *Famous*, now in its third printing, was chosen by the American Library Association as one of ten Notable Books of the year, in all genres.

The fiction winner for 2005 was John Keeble, a novelist, nonfiction writer and farmer, and subsequent winner of a Guggenheim Fellowship. He described the landscape of his title story, "Nocturnal America," and the predations of human behavior on the land: "As we drove we gazed at the forestland, which in the watersheds grew so deep as to blot out the sun. In other places the clear-cuts opened gloomy vistas of stumpage and barrens backed by beetle kills." We know nothing good can happen here; this prose description isn't metaphor. Humans prey on the land. But human action also can "make an adjustment to the landscape": a huge iron cross, emblem of fascist fundamentalism, set up mysteriously on the steep sides of the "K_____ Dam, a tributary of the great Columbia River" is brought down by the action of two men in "The Cross," reprinted here. Language restores meaning as action will. We'd chosen a book of ecofiction.

The next year brought Paul Guest's *Notes for My Body Double* to us. His poems speak of body and mind fused in remarkable ways. Whether the poet spoke as a persona or whether he was a quadriplegic we couldn't know. The poems were radiant and still are. Guest's prizes since include the Whiting Writers' Award, a Guggenheim Fellowship in poetry, and many more. His memoir and subsequent books of poetry have made a stir with readers and reviewers.

Jesse Lee Kercheval's ten linked Alice stories illustrate the formal

connection between short fiction and the novel. Its narrative surprises are vivid, as seemingly impossible as life. *The Alice Stories* stayed with us, a family's stand against death. Kercheval's publishing credits in all genres were extensive and her reputation established when this book was selected. We couldn't know. We didn't care. The book was superb, surprising, original, and everyone who read it in manuscript recommended it for the prize. In "Beast," reprinted here, Alice is a model for her photographer husband: ". . . when my mouth was a weary smear, my eyes were narrowed, my neck bent with fatigue into a slightly odd and painful angle, then voila! there was tension and a hint of a story that would forever remain tantalizing and unknowable. There was art."

In 2007 we gave recognition and publication to reenactments of war, displacement, and redemption: Mari L'Esperance's prize-winning poems invoke silence at the heart of a daughter's longing for her disappeared mother. And Katherine Vaz's AIDS-affected story "Lisbon" here represents her collection of Portuguese American stories where grief and death may not prevail over a dying father's memory of the stems of unsold flowers stuffed into guns, a gesture of defiance during the 1974 Carnation War.

In 2008 Kara Candito was a PhD student in poetry and literary theory and Anne Finger was a well-known writer and disability studies scholar when each won the Book Prize, the former with her vivid debut collection set in the world of travel, filled with violence, sex, and cultural dysphoria, the latter for her brilliant revisions of familiar texts. Here, Finger retells the story of artist Vincent Van Gogh, this time in contemporary New York without his brother's support to buy paints, dying of poverty with scores of other homeless people, waiting for social security to provide enough money for food, never mind art supplies: no masterpieces for us to buy, cherish, display, or reproduce.

The 2009 prizes went to two debut collections, Shane Book's in poetry, *Ceiling of Sticks*, and Ted Gilley's short fiction, *Bliss*. Boundaries seem to dissolve in these books, between events, people, and even

earth and sky as the landscape shifts under pressure; a boy grows up, a Cambodian lover meets an American ex-husband, memories of bathing merge woman and grandfather into one experience of loss. The effects of global politics press on individual lives. Filled with experiences of Africa and Latin America, California and the Caribbean, family and lost love, these separate books show the talent of their authors. Book was a Cave Canem scholar and a *New York Times* fellow; Gilley won the 2008 Alehouse Press National Poetry Competition.

The 2010 prizes are *The Book of What Stays*, James Crews's poetry which demonstrates how to live to write love poems, and Greg Hrbek's *Destroy All Monsters*, from which the amazing "Sagittarius," a myth about difference, admonishes us to cherish monsters; they are us.

In 2011, poet, teacher, and bookseller Susan Blackwell Ramsey's *A Mind Like This* reminds us that difference lives in language—Spanish "was a different building, not just repainted English" in a high school class where learning was "a first attempt to fit our thinking / in another's, like empathy." Karen Brown, a winner of the Grace Paley Prize for her first collection of short stories, won the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in short fiction for her next collection, *Leaf House*, represented here by "Little Sinners." Let Brown's words sound: "we are all alone with the stories we have never told." Secrets, told, become art.

The 2012 prize in poetry went to well-published writer Orlando Ricardo Menes for his collection, *Fetish*. Born in Lima, Peru, to Cuban parents, he has lived most of his life in the United States where he directs the creative writing program at the University of Notre Dame and is the author of *Furia* and *Rumba atop the Stones* and editor of *Renaming Ecstasy: Latino Writings on the Sacred and The Open Light: Poets from Notre Dame, 1991–2008*. He also has published translations of Spanish poetry, including *My Heart Flooded with Water: Selected Poems by Alfonsina Storni*, and he is the recipient of a NEA Fellowship. The poems in *Fetish* are set in Cuba, Miami,

Panama, Peru, Bolivia, and elsewhere. They are political and satiric, funny, smart, and represented here by “Elegy for Great-Uncle Julio, Cane Cutter” and “Television, a Patient Teacher.”

Xhenet Aliu is the fiction winner for her debut collection, *Domesticated Wild Things*. “There is a sophisticated brand of humor in Aliu’s fiction—her stories will make you laugh out loud,” says current *Prairie Schooner* editor in chief, Kwame Dawes. “These are entertaining and insightful stories full of surprises and revelations.” A former secretary, waitress, entertainment journalist, and private investigator, Aliu lives in Athens, Georgia, after recent stints in Brooklyn, Montana, and Utah.

In 2010 I proffered my resignation and began to leave the *Prairie Schooner* offices to imagine a new life. We moved to New Mexico in 2011, where I became the director of the Mary Burritt Christiansen Poetry Series for the University of New Mexico Press and the poetry editor for a small magazine, *Bosque*. *Prairie Schooner* and her Book Prizes continue under the visionary direction of poet and writer Kwame Dawes, who has invited me to become part of the journal’s National Literary Board.

Why did we want to start a book prize in the first place? Readers, look here to find out.

Hilda Raz

Placitas, New Mexico