

# High Desert Journal

WITNESS TO THE WEST



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Issue 15



# High Desert Journal

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Issue 15, Spring 2012

## POETRY

- 2 Christopher Cokinos. *Probability Clouds*
- 8 Terry Tempest Williams. *When Women Were Birds*
- 11 Linda Husa. *Am I a Cowboy Poet?*
- 18 Laura Winter. *Edge of Verge*
- 23 Scot Siegel. *Los Alamos, Weather Report – September 11, 1938*
- 24 H. L. Hix. *Sand Against Loneliness*
- 46 Jane Carpenter. *Desert Fishes*

## ART & PHOTOGRAPHY

- 25 Jim Leisy. *Recycling. The Great Basin*
- 32 Quintan Ana Wikwso. *Wupatki: Houses of the Enemies*
- 39 Karen Shimoda McAlister. *Letters*

## FICTION & NONFICTION

- 9 Linda Husa. *National Cowboy Poetry Gathering*
- 16 HDJ Interview. *Martha Scanlan*
- 19 Russell Rowland. *Conversation Piece*
- 28 Jack E. Lorts. *Occupy Fossil*
- 29 Mary Jane Nealon. *Amenable*
- 36 Josh Beddingfield. *Unsettlement*
- 42 Erica Olsen. *Everywhen*
- 43 Bobby Abrahamson & Lisa Wells. *Fields, Oregon*
- 47 Jamie Houghthon. Book review
- 47 Kim Stafford. Book review

## COVER

Patricia Freeman-Martin  
*Falling for Joe*  
Mixed media.  
30 x 22 inches. 2012

FACING PAGE: Webster's, discovered in a pile of trash near a wind turbine farm on us 395 in California. From *Recycling. The Great Basin*, photo essay by Jim Leisy. Page 25.



# NATIONAL COWBOY POETRY GATHERING

BY LINDA HUSSA

**THE POETRY OF COWBOYS AND** cowboy life is archived in the memories of those who wear the scars of the experience – the toe of their boot slipped into a stirrup on a knot-headed bronc, or their rope coming tight on a hell-bitch cow brute with a mind set on tearing a hole in their horses’ gut. Who else could know the cold fear and the relief if not the cowboy who weathered the battle? Who else could understand? Only his compadres.

“Cowboy” was a name that sprung up from the big Texas cow country after the Civil War and tagged to every farm boy, jobless immigrant, saddle-bum or old man, black, brown or the paler tones of Ireland and Scotland. If they were going to survive, the horse was the only tool and the cow was the only way. Prodding cattle north to Montana and Wyoming’s grass country was on-the-job-training of the roughest kind. A cowboy’s equipment might consist of any old saddle and a length of plow rein, but he got a plate of food before he fell asleep at night.

*Buckaroos*, the cowboy’s western counterpart, spread the gear,

and traditions of California’s Spanish Vaqueros east across Nevada and north into Oregon and Idaho. Along the way, the word vaquero was convoluted into buckaroo. They worked at the pleasure of wealthy patrons who afforded them the style and richness of silver bits, spurs and conchos adorning their horses, themselves and finely tooled leather saddles, and braided rawhide riatas in golden coils that set them apart from the indios, for these men were their patrons’ representatives, their first impression.

Three vaqueros who worked for Pete French in the Steens Mountain country in extreme southeastern Oregon are remembered in a picture that hangs in the Frenchglen Hotel. Tebo, Chino and Chico lived in the memory of Jimmy Washoe, he of Paiute-Chinese descent, cook’s helper at the MC and then wrangle boy. Jimmy spoke of their friendship and tutelage when he stayed with them to tend the MC horses and cattle at the P Ranch one winter. They gave him their knowledge of horses and cattle. They schooled him in classical horsemanship as they had been taught. They spoke to him of pride

PHOTO: Cowboy poets in the green room before a performance at the National Cowboy Poetry Gathering in Elko, Nevada. From left, poets Paul Zarzyski, Joel Nelson, Baxter Black and Wallace McRae. Photo by Jessica Brandi Lifland.



Musician Shane Queener and poet Rodney Nelson share a laugh with audience members at a performance in Elko. Photo by Jessica Brandi Lifland.

and conduct. The horse lifted Jimmy, as it did them, out of the dirt of poverty and shame.

Despite the differences in style, cowboys and buckaroos were two sides of a coin. No matter their heritage, they both knew more about a cow than she knew about herself. Above all, they learned to be master horsemen and they would take no job if it couldn't be done a'horseback. Let's be clear, they were not ranch-hands; they did not fix fence or do chores. Their work centered on the one square foot of leather that was their saddle seat. That pride and reverence for dangerous work on the wide and open land is what you hear in their poetry.

When the job was done, they returned to the life of a nomad, setting out for new country on a whim. Nobody owned them. Nobody tied them down. Didn't like the cook, they rolled their beds; boss wouldn't keep his word, they rolled their beds; if there was a town close by or no town close by, they rolled their beds. One cowboy drove a potato chip truck when he didn't have day-work, anything to feed the habit of freedom.

When they gathered up again, some would fall to telling hilarious stories of their work or of horse wrecks or put a ditty into rhyme to entertain each other. They would recite poems remembered from the past or made up new verses to old songs. That's the way it was until the Cowboy Poetry Gathering happened in Elko, Nevada.

In 1979, a group of folklorists gathered in Washington D.C. to

discuss field issues. Jim Griffith said, "You know, there are still some old-timers around that recite cowboy poetry. Someone should do something with them."

Folklorist Hal Cannon took Jim's suggestion to heart. He realized that an art form unique to the American West was dangerously close to being lost. As the prime mover and "founder," Cannon applied for a National Endowment of the Arts grant, and with the help of Jim, Carol Edison, Blanton Owen and Mike Korn drove the dirt roads, beating the (sage) brush. They found and recorded cowboys with a reputation for reciting the classic poetry of poets S. Omar Barker, Badger Clark, Gail Gardner, Bruce Kiskaddon and Henry Herbert Knibbs but also Robert Frost, Wallace Stevens, Carl Sandburg and Robert Service. The traditions they lived gained immortality through poetry; their brotherhood flowed from the poet's pen.

Some of the men they tracked down were writing their own poetry during bunkhouse evenings or as they followed the wagon. There were plenty of horsebackers who didn't give a hoot about poetry; but there were some whose lives served two passions – literature and the cowboy life. Those were the ones he went looking for.

In 1985, with pride and a degree of nervousness, the first class of the Cowboy Poetry Gathering arrived in Elko. Those 38 men and two women sent a shock-wave through the multi-culture consciousness of the West.

The next year, the Western Folklife Center, the administrative

## NATIONAL COWBOY POETRY GATHERING

# AM I A COWBOY POET?

BY LINDA HUSSA

Spurs on my boots,  
I ride the outside circle,  
and rope a calf with a hoolihan throw.  
Am I a cowboy poet?

I welded up a gate and when the wind blows,  
it sings like a flute.  
Am I a **welder poet** or a **woodwind poet**?

I waitressed in a Mexican bar and restaurant  
and I could write some stories that would curl your hair.  
Does that make me a **beautician poet**?

With a wheelbarrow and shovel  
I unloaded a boxcar of coal for fifty dollars.  
I was darned sure a **hungry poet**.

I raised seven honkers from down to feather,  
taught them to swim in the pond,  
shouted and jumped around the first time they flew,  
called them out of the sky to land at my feet,  
and cried  
when they joined a flight of wild geese going away,  
but I'm not an **ornithologist, lifeguard,**  
**cheerleader, Mother Goose poet.**

Haying time, I service the swather,  
rivet new sections on the cycle bar,  
and knock down about a million acres of meadow.  
Am I a **hay contractor poet**?

Pulled my cow dog's tooth,  
– not a **dental poet**.  
Splinted a ewe's broken leg with a boot;  
– not an **orthopedic poet**.  
Keep our money straight  
– not an **economist poet**.

Cowboys have amused me, danced me, wowed me.  
A cowboy showed me his desert.  
I've ridden beside him for forty years.  
He taught me to be still and listen,

pushed me to bravery  
that might never have been mine,  
gave me a daughter.

That cowboy calls me out from cooking supper  
to see the moon rise,  
and when I dance in the rain, he says,  
"Come inside and let it all hit the ground."

He brings pussy willows in March,  
buttercups in May,  
wild plums in August.

When we can't get the calf out alive,  
both our hearts break.  
Win or lose, we stand together.

Ride like a cowboy, rope like a cowboy,  
but there's only one cowboy in our family  
and I'm not him  
which suits me fine,  
'cause it gives me time  
to be all of those poets.

## HDJ EXTRA

Hear a recording of Linda Hussa reading her poem  
"Homesteaders, Poor and Dry" and an interview she gave  
to Lisa M. Hamilton from Real Rural, posted on our website:  
[www.highdesertjournal.com](http://www.highdesertjournal.com)



Fields, Oregon: The Ensley family.

# FIELDS

## OREGON

BY LISA WELLS

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BOBBY ABRAHAMSON

**THE ROAD SOUTH, FROM BURNS TO FIELDS,** is more or less 111 miles of straight ahead through open range. Occasionally, a table of rock appears on the horizon, glowing in the sloped sun like a deity. I turn on the radio hoping to catch a scrap of news about the storm I'm driving into. It's mostly crackle, but sometimes a phrase worms through the static, creating a strange sort of poetry; *19 dead in Arkansas ... one more body recovered ... escaping water in darkness.* I learn that a tornado tore through the state of Missouri, 140 are dead.

Night is coming on. I can see it blooming on the far mountains like a bruise. Otherwise, the world is miles of cracked dirt and scrub sage, the desert floor gone so long without moisture that when rain finally comes, it stalls on the parched earth in sparkling beads. Storms of one kind or another dominate the season. Rain comes to Harney County like no one remembers seeing before. It's the same all across the country. Record rains and snowmelt bloating every river and tributary from Oregon to Vermont. Here, in Harney, the roads turn first to mud, then flood, and the city of Burns declares a state of emergency.

I'm detoured past pasture lands that have become lakes because they've closed the main highway and bored a hole underneath it to direct the flood waters out of town. In one of these pastures there is a small island filled with cows and their calves. They are huddled together in the rain, their big eyes blinking, waiting out the storm. The rain turns to hail. It

HDJ EXTRA

To read a backstory about Lisa Wells' essay go to: [www.highdesertjournal.com](http://www.highdesertjournal.com)



bounces on the blacktop and drives hard against my windshield glass as I speed past the cows and over the creeks that rage to the lips of their little bridges. Eventually, the glassy lakes subsume the earth entirely, on both sides of the highway, stretching all the way to the horizon. The road draws a black line through the void. The white sky fuses seamlessly with the water. White noise in mind. Static on the radio.

## ON SEEING OUT

**THERE'S NO MAIN STREET IN FIELDS**, but there is a gravel shoulder. It serves as a parking lot for the town's few buildings: one squat motel, one general store attached to a small diner with a gas pump and a rv park tucked back in the weeds. Across the highway a single-room schoolhouse sits empty, a swing-set rusts on an awkward patch of dying grass, the odd square of cropped lawn as impressive as a door-mat on the floor of the awesome basin.

I stand outside the Fields Station store with its owner, Carol, our arms folded over our chests, watching the light die on the expanse. Carol's daughter moved off to Redmond, a city of about 20,000 in the high desert east of the Cascades, 250 miles northwest of Fields. "She doesn't like it," says Carol, "how you can't see out."

My room here is a dark cavern of faux wood paneling, the walls adorned with hazy photos of wildflowers and summer fields in dark wooden frames. I open my cheap bottle of wine and swallow and look out, prying apart two slats of the canvas blind. What does it mean to see out? Beyond the blind, there's the concrete walk with its hem of long tulips, their bulbous heads bent toward earth and the comfort of my station wagon parked in the mud, its friendly round headlights like the kind German eyes of a busty barmädchen. I bring the bottle to my lips, tip it back and swallow. Beyond the wagon, the mountains of black muscular stone are freezing.

## LIQUOR, GAS AND MAIL

**THE DINER IS EMPTY SAVE FOR THE PRESERVED HEADS** of animals and a small radio on the counter blasting The Doors. "Hello," I say, but am drowned out by "Riders on the Storm" and Jim Morrison's voice of cold boredom.

"We have pie. Cherry, apple and blueberry. \$2.95 a slice. Yum. Yum," reads a pie-shaped sign while a wooden milkshake says, "We have sold 864 world famous milkshakes since January 1, 2011," and a hamburger proclaims, "We have sold 830 hamburgers since January, 2011." Why the milkshakes are world famous and the burgers non-descript, I'm not sure. Carol appears in the hallway in an apron and rushes to the radio, "I don't even like this station," she says, turning it down, and soon enough Tim McGraw (or similar) is twanging softly through the atmosphere. There is a cup of weak coffee steaming before me. All seems to be right again with the world.

Carol's pump is always full with gas, and her hours are strictly consistent unlike some places in the area (she won't name any names). It's of vital importance this be so, when one only has access to gas every 50 or 70 miles. A person running out of gas in the desert is a bad thing. A person can die that way.

Fields Station receives mail on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, but they have UPS every day, and on those long haunted roads, sometimes for hours all one sees is a brown UPS van in a train of billowing dust, rippling like a heat mirage in the distance. The Fields Station serves as a mail sorter. They used to keep the mail with the bottles of liquor until the Postal Service finally requested they be housed in separate areas. If at some point, they're not allowed to reside on the same premises, the mail will be the first to go.

I ask Carol, "Have you felt the economic decline?"

"I noticed that folks are splitting a burger and fries and getting their own milkshake, when they used to get their own everything," she shrugs, "but that might also be changing attitudes about diet and stuff."

The Fields Station, est. 1881, offers many necessities: animal furs, candy bars, soda, cat food, liquor, meat, sweatshirts, coffee mugs and genuine antler bolstered baskets from rope handled by cowboys and real ranch hands. There's a Big Horn Sheep kill photo spread on one



## CAROL'S PUMP IS ALWAYS FULL WITH GAS, AND HER HOURS

are strictly consistent unlike some places in the area (she won't name any names). It's of vital importance this be so, when one only has access to gas every 50 or 70 miles. A person running out of gas in the desert is a bad thing. A person can die that way.

of the walls, files of smiling faces under camouflage hats, wrestling by the horns the bloodied corpses. Glassy black eyes. Slack tongues lolling from mouths.

A man named Virgil enters the diner and sits at the counter. He wears a fisherman's bucket hat and a robust handle-bar moustache. Carol pours him a cup of coffee and asks if he'd like "some carbs to soak up all those libations" from the night before. His muscles seem contracted, his jaw clenched, as if anticipating a blow. It is a common physical conditioning for men on the range. His mouth twitches as if it could but does not smile. Theirs is a subtler social language. To understand requires careful attention in short supply among city dwellers with their endless distractions and didacticisms. I am among these invaders. The birders and campers and hot-springers pulling in for gas, busting the peace of the place apart. Demanding rv owners slathered in SPF, under neon hats, burdened as mules in fanny packs, backpacks and oversized binoculars. They march into the Fields Station and the air grows anxious. Why is gas so expensive? How many calories in the milkshake? How long have you owned this store? Is it snowing in the pass?

A group of middle-aged liberal types enter the café and assume a booth. They survey their menus and grimace. They complain about gas prices. They complain about the cow skulls and coyote pelts. One whiner in particular, a man in a many-pocketed vest and khaki pants mutters, "A coyote pelt? You should be put in jail." He has a red bandanna tied around his neck, like somebody's dog, and a wide Panama Jack. Lunch conquered, and they're off! To another frontier, to scale the next mountain in their Gore-Tex. To pose and sip Vitaminwater and condescend to earth.

## CHASE

**A LOCAL ENTERS** the diner and sits at the counter. He grunts to Carol and then to me. The man is trailed by a young guy in denim and boots.

"You need some carbs for all those libations?" Carol asks the grunter.

I turn to the kid, "Was there a big party last night? Because it seems like a lot of men are suffering this morning."

"Nah," he smiles, shyly. "I guess you could say it's a party here every night."

"Oh yeah? Do you party a lot?"

It is 1997 and I am working as a nurse in a homeless shelter for men with AIDS in New York City. I think the word should be *houseless* because the men all proceed to make homes out of long narrow cots and bent metal lockers. It is the same as it is in the flophouses; the men find items and tape them to the side of the lockers facing the head of the cot. Their homes are in

# AMENABLE

the air. Their homes are in the picture of Malcolm X taped alongside a concert ticket taped alongside a post card of the Apollo spaceship. One has collected Chiquita banana stickers and arranged them in the shape of a banana. Another man, Jaime, is always sneaking broken vacuum cleaners up the stairs and trying to hide them under his cot. He wears a shiny maroon smoking jacket with a black velvet collar that he found in the garbage on the Upper East Side. He has dreams of owning a vacuum cleaner



business, but we have to keep making him get rid of the vacuums, there is no space in the shelter for collections like his.

There are always a lot of religious icons: Buddha and Our Lady of Guadalupe with her shining backdrop of gold. Some of the men have bibles and at night, after they've eaten, I can hear their arguments about faith, about racism. The talk is cynical, like one would expect to hear in a cops' bar. The accusations around AIDS continue, the white man is trying to wipe out everyone who isn't a right-wing Christian Republican, most especially the gays and the drug addicts and "of course, the black man," one man says. "Amen!" say the others.

**ON ONE NOVEMBER DAY, WHEN** the air is clear and the Twin Towers still dominate the view from my window, the agency's outreach workers find Jimmy and bring him to the shelter to be admitted. Outreach workers are former clients who walk the area downtown around the World Trade Center. They approach men who are pan-handling or sleeping by the PATH train. They ask them questions and then direct them to the shelter system. Sometimes, in the initial interview, someone discloses their HIV status and that's when they call me. Such is the case with Jimmy, who is wandering, in nice clothes with a small duffel bag, and who, at first, seems to have a destination, but the outreach workers realize they are seeing him over and over again. He is circling the walkways between the river walk and the towers. He tells them he is from North Carolina and that he has been driven out of the small town he lives in because his partner died of AIDS. He is sick too, he says. He had enough money to get to New York but isn't quite sure what to do next. He has a few dollars for food, and that's that. The outreach workers call me. I have an empty cot because it is the third of the month and Devon, a guy who spent only two weeks with us, got his social security check on the first and rented a limousine and borrowed Jaime's smoking jacket and invited one of the other residents to come with him and they cruised into the projects along Avenue D in the big car and picked up some crack and cheap champagne and a whore and broke curfew. Devon knew he would be losing his bed in the shelter, but he also knew his exploits would make him a legend for a few days. He waltzed in, took his discharge well, and sauntered out. For at least one night, he was eating McDonald's and there would be no piles of rice and beans on a Styrofoam dish for him.

Jimmy's problem is a lack of documentation proving his HIV status. This is not uncommon, but it requires a leap of faith on my part when I am deciding what to do about a vacancy. Some people will lie about their status; they want a few nights in a shelter but don't want to deal with the Brooklyn Armory or the street. I am always torn because if I give a bed away and then someone with documentation shows up, I may not have a place for them to stay. "I need to talk to Jimmy before I decide," I tell the workers. "If I can't take him, I'll page you, and you can get him to Brooklyn." They understand, they say, this is how it always works.

**SOME PEOPLE YOU REMEMBER ALWAYS.** I never know when I meet someone if this will be one of those times or not. So it is with Jimmy from the minute he walks in. His skin is a deep ink black and shiny from the heat. He is beautiful and neat and carries an organized nylon bag, and in it, a picture of his lover, Paul, a lighter-skinned black man with short braids and pale eyes. Paul looks sick, his legs are folded under him on the grass, and he is looking straight into the camera. Jimmy has a hard time sticking to the questions I am asking, every answer seems to veer off until he is talking about Paul again. Jimmy describes the small town he has come from, and how after Paul died, word got out about the AIDS diagnosis. "I was scared," he says, "and then one day I came home and someone had painted a red cross on the door. I ran like hell, I wish I'd been braver, but I wasn't," and he looks down and I find myself folding, I am persuaded to let him stay. "You can have a bed," I tell him, "but I have to draw another HIV test today, and if it doesn't come back positive, you'll have to go immediately." He agrees, but he doesn't understand why anyone would fake a positive result. I explain to him that for New York City's homeless population, a crime-free night in a space with only 20 beds is a kind of paradise.

**I LIKE TO BELIEVE I CAN TELL** who the schemers are. I believe I have good instincts, and I trust Jimmy. The shelter can only house 20 men at a time so every new person changes the chemistry of the place, and right away, Jimmy brings good energy to the group. He is easy-going and helpful. He cleans up after himself; he helps one man fill out his food stamp form. In the group sessions, he talks openly about Paul, and about how hard it was to leave the little town where his mother had a front yard with roses. How he doesn't want to bring shame on her. Even when it comes to the tv, a source of argument almost every night, he comes up with a little game to decide who will watch "Star Trek" and who will watch back-to-back episodes of "Martin." I work in this place Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. On Thursdays and Fridays, I am in the flophouses doing dressing changes and visiting the men who have cancer or liver disease. When I leave on Wednesday night, I tell Jimmy to meet me Monday at four p.m. "I'll have your documentation then," I say, "and we can go over housing options and other programs in the city." Good-bye, good-bye, I call out to the men.

**IT IS SUMMER AND SPIKE LEE IS** making a movie about the Son of Sam killings. He has been very generous to the shelter, refurbishing the old Palace Hotel sign, buying shades for our massive windows. The simple act of buying the shades has limited the intense heat that used to flood the shelter. This night, I walk to the corner of Houston and Bowery, and the floodlights from the movie set highlight the graffiti on the First Street wall. There is human shit against the chain link fence on the corner, you can always tell which is human and which is dog by the bulk and the odor. I have parked my car with the man around the corner, he has a tiny lot that holds fewer than 25 cars, and he is good to me, charging me very little money to park every day. He has an old blind dog who sidles up to my leg and in the half trailer where the dog and the man spend their evening, an elaborate replica from the Koran is framed in fake gold. I ask him one day where he is from. "Persia," he says, "do you know where that is?"

"Yes, I do," I say, "it is called Iran now, right?" He seems pleased, and pulls the dog away from me.

"Leave her alone, you old dog," he says.

**THE NEXT MONDAY STARTS OUT BADLY.** My father calls to ask if I have to go to work. "Sure," I tell him, "I'll leave about 11:30." I like these odd hours, missing rush hour, allowing me to drive into the city and to get morning errands done. "Well, there's been a murder on that block," he tells me.

He's heard it on the news. "Maybe they were talking about the Spike Lee movie, Dad."

"No," he tells me he is sure, and he does seem to have all the details: "a guy was using the pay phone on First Street and he was stabbed," he says, "just be careful, Mare."

I drive up Hudson Street, when I get out of the tunnel, I take Sixth to Houston, then turn right and left again on Bowery. I am worrying about my men. This is a phone that many of them use and it is startling to see the crime scene tape on the corner. The tape is red not yellow like on tv. I walk just outside the tape after parking my car. The Iranian man is upset, he heard the fight he tells me, he called 911, he says. The phone has been left dangling and the silver coil is stained with blood. The *mortal coil*, I am thinking, *shuffle off the mortal coil*. The murder has put a temporary crimp in the movie shoot. At the security cage inside my building, Jerome reassures me that all the men have been accounted for. Jerome has just had a baby; he shows me a picture of her in a hot pink jumper. I breathe easy for the first time since my father's call.

**I MAKE MY WAY THROUGH** the paper that has accumulated since I left Wednesday night. There are applications from day programs and disability forms and a letter from a potential landlord asking about character, and then there is a fax from the New York State Department of Health. It is Jimmy's HIV test, and I check it over and over again, comparing the anonymous number with the log of initials and date of birth book. It is definitely his test, and it is negative. Elisa negative. Western Blot negative. I am furious that I have fallen for Jimmy's story. Roger, the case worker assistant and sometime security worker, is sitting at the large table out front checking the kitchen