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Review of *Great Lonely Places of the Texas Plains* Poems by Walt McDonald

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Great Lonely Places of the Texas Plains. Poems by Walt McDonald, photographs by Wyman Meinzer. Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2003. xiii + 165 pp. Photographs. \$34.95.

Both of them winners of major awards, poet Walt McDonald and photographer Wyman Meinzer link their work in a volume that can be read profitably three ways: studying the brilliantly lighted color photographs; reading the moving, story-directed poems; or experiencing the ways both sets of works engage each other. The book's production is beautiful, and the consistent high quality of poems and photographs makes one revisit their memorably precise images and phrases. In places the land of the Plains is seen as sparsely fertile, even parched, and its people, we see, have lived close to grief; but what emerges in both poetic and visual presentations is a powerful beauty.

Time and again Meinzer and McDonald suggest ways that climate and land modify people; they also emphasize the resilience of inhabitants developing their lives in rural settings. Still, throughout the work—whether one is reading the color photographs or viewing the people depicted in the poems—there’s harmony in the juxtaposition of the two artistic forms.

In a representative poem titled “Luck of the Draw,” McDonald conjures fresh metaphors when he compares water-witching to prophecy and drilling water wells to creation. Instead of sentimentalizing the capacity for endurance of a couple living out their lives on a farm, McDonald calls home “a casino / of chance and choice, / four arms that hold each other.” Time and again love rises to attention. Appropriately facing this particular poem, Meinzer’s photograph shows storm clouds outlined radiantly by a hidden sun. Here and throughout the volume, we see parallels between people and nature articulated vividly but obliquely.

Something similar occurs in “Calling First Stars By Name” and its accompanying image, a single buffalo grazing in high foliage, a fog-blurred mountain in the background. The couple in the poem evoke two points of time: the days and nights of pioneers living in dug-outs and contemporary people who have lived beyond those times to embrace grandchildren. There is no word about buffaloes in the poem; the image of one in the photograph, however, suggests the sweeping power of tradition. Here and throughout the volume a fine and rightly complex tension enlivens the relationship between poem and photograph. Not only is this a book that compels revisits, but its price is welcomingly modest for the volume’s consistent richness.

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