

FIVE POEMS BY ROBERT COWSER

HEREDITY

In our older son's witty remarks
his mother hears her brother's voice,
the barbs in relentless sequence
like the tips on a strand of prairie fence.

In our son's motions--tilting his head
forward to hear a comment, or
thrusting his chin forward as he watches
the pro games on Sundays--I see
my brother's profile, and lapsing,
I call my son by another's name.

CLOSE QUARTERS

The Eastern bluebird likes close quarters,
a pamphleteer reminds us. A keen observer,
the writer states a fact I learned when a boy
walking a dusty road to get the mail.
As the cirrus clouds thinned in summer's sky,
I heard the soft flutter of wings--
a startled bluebird, her breast the color
of the rusted pipe she flew from.
Looking into the pipe that leaned
against a greying post, I saw the pale blue eggs
nestled in straw. When the bird returned,
she must have felt secure, like Uncle Wiggly
in the hollow stump serving tea
to the tortoise in a yellow vest.

A PRAIRIE LIGHTHOUSE

At dusk and later during the summers
of our childhood we played like seals
born the spring before, our rocks the knolls
behind our row of houses. The wheat field
became an ocean made brighter by a beacon
from the landing strip north of town.

From the prairie lighthouse, the roving
beam found us flattened beside the wistaria
or hunkering behind the wellhouse.
And we chortled, not sensing, as the beam
flashed westward, how it measured our youth.

TREES OF OUR OWN

As a boy, Frank Dobie listened to the mesquite and the live oak and the stunted evergreens on his father's ranch. Just as he, they spoke Chicano and English as well as a tongue peculiar to the landscape of low brush and arroyos. Years later at Oxford, sitting on the banks of the Cherwell, Dobie remembered the tales chanted by the chapparal.

As a boy, on summer evenings I heard through the panels of screen around a part of the porch the murmur of the leaves of the two sassafras trees in the backyard. The tales they told linger in my mind. Today I feel the protruding scales on the bark of the smaller tree and I touch the gash my younger brother cut in its trunk with the hatchet from the shed.

FORTY-TWO AND OTHER GAMES

On winter evenings when I was a child, the Baileys often came to our house to play forty-two with my parents. My mother and Lillian Bailey always played as partners, opposing my father and Frank Bailey. At my father's elbow I would watch as Frank held back the five-blank when his wife led fives. My father, an accessory to the deception, grinned his guilt away as he shuffled the dominoes over the hard surface.

Lillian would hurl the word renege across the corner of the table toward Frank Bailey. She was Hera, furious with her cagey Zeus. With a sheepish smile, Frank would produce the domino, as the red-handed robber returns the loot to the policeman.

By the light of a kerosene lamp precarious on the table, I learned about the games we play.