

Introduction

The poems that follow are isolated voices heard in that blinding snowstorm we know as the passage of time. When the Alberta Clipper, roaring out of the north, rips apart a straw stack, only the frozen center remains, and each of these memories is like that center, stripped of digression, picked clean of equivocation. What is left are the core narratives, spare and cold. Each clings to a concrete and specific detail, for memory works like that. Recall gets snagged on some sharp thing, like a cornshuck on a barbed wire fence. Someone remembers the pets spinning around and around as the barometer dropped. Another remembers the row of sunflower stalks that she and her schoolmates followed to safety.

I snagged these poems from actual reminiscences, recorded in old age, of people who survived the most talked about storm in American history, the Blizzard of 1888, also known as the Schoolchildren's Blizzard because of the many children and their teachers who were trapped in rural schools on the bitterly cold days of January 12 and 13 of that year. In the Nebraska State Capitol, near the ceiling of the Great Hall, is an abstract mosaic, mostly blue and white like a snowstorm, dedicated to one of those teachers, Minnie Mae Freeman, who led her students to safety, trailing hand in hand through the blinding snow. Minnie's voice as I imagined it appears in this book.

My sources are many. When I was a boy there were people in my family, then in their seventies and eighties and nineties, who remembered the Great Blizzard and would from time to time talk about their experiences. I was bound by their spell as only a child can be. All my life I have been talking with people about their experiences of the great storm. Preparing to write these poems, I read town and county histories that mention the blizzard. W. H. O'Gara's book *In All its Fury*, published in 1947 by

Union College Press, is a superb collection of memories of the storm, and I used it extensively as a resource, as have other writers. But these poems are wholly mine, trimmed and shaped and imagined by me. I took the straws snagged on the fence and froze my own stories around them.

This book was performed as a play by the Lincoln, Nebraska, Community Playhouse in the late 1980s, and what struck me most was not the pleasure of seeing my work come to life but what occurred in the theater lobby afterward. Somehow my poems and a handful of talented actors had set memory free, and as I walked through the crowd with my cup of punch I overheard things like, “Well, my grandmother told me . . .” and “Great Uncle Harry once said that . . .” It was one of the most marvelous evenings of my life, for what I’d written was being put to service, and a community was awakening to a history they’d misplaced until those costumed figures in lantern light showed how to find it again. Out came the memories, all whispers and awe, and those recollections blew around in a swirl in that lobby until they once again caught up on the barbs of time. Once again our ancestors groped through the darkness for that row of sunflower stalks that might lead them into the next day and the next. And there we followed. I have rarely been more deeply honored.