

MIDAMERICA XXI

*The Yearbook of the Society
for the Study of Midwestern Literature*

Edited by
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In honor of
Edgar M. Branch
and
John E. Hallwas

PREFACE

With the publication of the present volume, *MidAmerica XXI*, the Yearbook of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature begins its third decade of publication, even as the Society itself begins its second quarter-century. If durability alone were the test of accomplishment at this point, we might well congratulate ourselves, settle back, await the publication of *The Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, and tell ourselves that we have defined the Midwest and its canon as we set out to do a quarter century ago and have nothing more to do.

But neither the region nor its literature nor those who approach both in the spirit of inquiry as well as reverence will permit us to delude ourselves so easily. Two perceptive analytical and retrospective essays on *MidAmerica*, Roger Bresnahan's "*MidAmerica: A Ten-Year Retrospective*" in *MidAmerica X* (1983) and Marcia Noe's "*MidAmerica: the Second Decade*" in the current volume, make clear the fact that although the task of doing what we set out to do is well begun, not only do we have a great deal yet to do, but an ever-growing canon and ever-changing insights and perceptions suggest that we've begun something to which there can be no end, that the work to do will continue to demand of us the will with which to do it well beyond the foreseeable future.

Thus, appropriately, this volume is dedicated to Edgar M. Branch of Miami University and John R. Hallwas of Western Illinois University, two Midwesterners by birth, by choice, and by dedication to the work well-begun. Both recipients of the MidAmerica Award for 1994, they point out in their own work some of the many directions that the work of the members of the Society must take in the future.

September, 1995

DAVID D. ANDERSON

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THE DEAD OF WINTER

EDWARD HAWORTH HOEPPNER

We broke slowly through the snow above the Arrowhead,
six days, northwest, the Boundary Waters solid
beneath us into Canada, the sun hardly rising
past the hemlock and the tamarack, a dull bead,
a white hole in the sky opening to a whiter room.
To hear the wolf before it disappears—our snowshoes'
slide and drag numbering that vapid prayer.

Or see the prints along some ridge, the pack imagined
strung like bees around a clearing elk have stamped
and torn the snow for what there is to eat in any world
like this. All of us dreamed of the wolves,
though we spoke little over coffee, a thin fire,
before we packed off. None of our dreams were true
but one: this was something we would never do again.

Listen. It is a lie there is no misery here,
dying or out of the wind, unless you see this
from a study, looking through a book or glass,
a painting on the wall. To have been cold
long, cold for days, the pain comes toward you
everywhere. From everything. A jay's leg
snapped sharply off, lying in the path,

the bones you count along the deer springing
difficultly through the crust and buried trunks.
And the trees themselves, those silent people moan.
This is why, the Ojibewa say, a demon sweeps
out of the sky, drags the lost man or woman,
feet on fire, screaming to the sun: tracks
on the frozen lakes that simply disappear. Why

they say that there are children laughing
just beyond our hearing them, at night in these
woods. When the fire's gone to orange,
all of us have stopped, cup in hand, a frozen
boot lace, thought we've heard. In the end,
this was all. Some frostbite, fingers gone
sullenly gray, a story in which nothing

came about, twenty years gone by. Tonight,
I've sewn a badge on my son's uniform, a wolf's
head in gold, on a scarlet patch. He's been
walking where the dog has walked, in the prints
she's left, on the blacktop in the drive.
"Look," he's said, turning back, "I'm a wolf.
See the tracks?" Then, reading him to sleep,

the imprint I have made upon on his bed,
getting up, sheets glowing in the dark.
It is all that we saw then: in the drifts
where we had slept, the carefully detailed
hollow that a body makes in snow, shapeless
and then not, or nearly human, hardened into ice
by this weak heat that we give off alive.

Oakland University

FIVE PORTRAITS

CHRISTOPHER STIEBER

Roxanne

With the money she earned babysitting me, Roxanne bought my first pair of blue jeans. She played records by the Monkees and the Beatles and I learned all the bandmembers names and songs. My parents took a corner of our basement and had it tiled and panelled and put a bed and a desk in there. This is where I would listen to Roxanne's records and this is maybe where Roxanne would stay if she stayed overnight.

In the closet of this basement room hung my father's hunting vest and jacket. Camouflage. On the outside of the vest, near the pockets, were rows of ringed cloth. Inside the rings were twelve-gauge shotgun shells. I played Roxanne's records while holding one of these shells in my hand. The shell was as big as my hand. As big as a microphone in the hand of a singer.

In Roxanne's bedroom, in the house she lived in, there was a big picture, "a poster," of Bobby Kennedy. His hair was all over and he was in the sun. He looked like Roxanne's boyfriend, Rick. And I wanted to look like both of them.

Rick worked in a Standard gas station and wore blue jeans and drove an old gray car big enough to play or fall asleep in. I would sit on our kitchen counter and bang my heels against the pots and pans cabinet door while Roxanne talked to Rick on the phone. Roxanne would hand the phone to me and I would say, "Hello?" and Rick would say, "What are you laughing at you little sonuvabitch," and I would laugh harder, and Rick would say, "you better let me talk with Roxanne again you little shit turd bastard," and I would howl and hear laughter coming out of the phone and as I kicked the cabinet door harder Roxanne would take the phone out of my hands and laugh into it, "I think you'd better cut it out, Rick."

Roxanne would fix lunch. Tomato soup, peanut butter and jelly, crackers with frosting that would have to set in the refrigerator a while before we could eat them. After lunch we would lie on the couch together and watch daytime TV. Soap operas, *Dark Shadows*, *The Dating Game*. The game show host was as old as her Dad, Roxanne said, but was trying to act younger. He dyed his hair. He was a fraud. And I thought of a frog, slimy, wet and green. Roxanne was angry but laughing at the same time. I was confused so I said her name again and again.

My mother rocked me through my nightmares but I wanted Roxanne. When the morning finally came the TV came on and my mother talked to the screen, "Oh for God's sake won't you let the man die in peace!" But then she covered her mouth and began to cry. She sort of ran into the bedroom to wake my father.

There were a lot of bumping arms and backs on the black and white TV and the picture jiggled around. Then a voice yelled louder than the other yelling voices. "Give him air!" The backs and arms cleared and Bobby Kennedy was lying on a cold dark floor. His eyes were wide open and his head was in a puddle of oil. A boy knelt near him, holding his hand. Bobby Kennedy looked like a boy, too.

One day I had a new babysitter because Rick was going to Vietnam. She was huge, three of me across, and she had a moustache. She made me a peanut butter sandwich, no jelly. I took it down into the basement because I couldn't look at her and eat. The room smelled different, chemical, frightening. I could taste the new babysitter's smell in the peanut butter, bitter, almost evil. I spit out the bite, put on a record, and grabbed a shotgun shell. I jumped up and down on the bed, singing into the ammunition. The new babysitter walked into the room and I dropped to my knees, embarrassed. I looked up and screamed for her to leave me alone. She left the room and cried.

Jesse Owens

One afternoon in 1968 my father met Jesse Owens' plane at the airport in Dubuque, Iowa and drove him to Loras College where he was scheduled to speak. On the way to the campus my father looked at his watch and said to Jesse Owens that they were quite a bit early and that, if he liked, they could stop

off somewhere ahead of time. Jesse Owens thought a moment, looked down at his own watch, and said then that that might be all right.

Carl Herberger owned the Copper Kettle. When my father began introducing Jesse Owens to him, Carl Herberger waved his hand and told him he didn't have to tell him who Jesse Owens was and asked them what they wanted to drink. My father said that he wasn't sure, how about a manhattan, and asked Jesse Owens if he'd like a manhattan. Jesse Owens said he'd never had a manhattan but that he'd try one and that's what everyone had.

Carl Herberger was a big football fan and he asked Jesse Owens if he knew Jim Brown. Jesse Owens said no he didn't know Jim Brown but they'd met once. Carl Herberger asked Jesse Owens if he ever thought about playing football and Jesse Owens said no he hadn't, he was too small. Not receiver or safety asked Carl Herberger and Jesse Owens said no, not really, and said then that the manhattans were pretty good.

Carl Herberger poured another round and asked more questions. Jesse Owens told them what it was like growing up in Decatur, Alabama, about how his mother cut out this abscess on his calf in the kitchen of their home and how this saved his career. Carl Herberger kept asking him about all the records he broke at Ohio State.

And then Carl Herberger brought up Munich. Jesse Owens really thought Hitler was going to have him killed, especially after the three gold medals. 1936 said Carl Herberger and Jesse Owens nodded his head and then Carl Herberger asked him to please remind him which events he'd won and Jesse Owens told him. The hundred, the two hundred and the broad jump. Carl Herberger reminded Jesse Owens that he'd broken the record in each event and Jesse Owens said no, he'd only tied the record in the hundred. He talked about his rival, the German, Luz Long, and about how Long shook his hand and what a brave thing this was for Long to do. Everyone knew Hitler wasn't going to shake Jesse Owens' hand. He really did think he might be killed.

My father asked Jesse Owens if he'd ever been to Hamburg because that's where my father had been stationed in the army and Jesse Owens said no, just Munich, and that's when my

mother walked in. She began yelling at my father about how the college had been ringing the phone off the hook and how could he end up here today of all days and began yelling at Carl Herberger who did he think he was when Jesse Owens was supposed to be giving a speech at that very moment. Jesse Owens looked down at his watch and said, "Oh cripes."

By the time my father and mother and Jesse Owens reached the auditorium people were already filing out. My father told my mother and Jesse Owens to stay in the car while he went inside and looked around. Alone in the car, Jesse Owens apologized to my mother who sat staring out the windshield. She said that it probably wasn't Jesse Owens' fault she was going to wind up a laughingstock it was her horsesass husband. He ought to have his head cut in.

When my father got back to the car he told Jesse Owens that it was useless to go in. The place had been packed and it was less than half full now. They were going to have to hide him or something. Jesse Owens ran a hand over his mouth and said that the only money he made was off of speeches like this and that he'd already paid his airline ticket on his own. My mother shook her head and turned around and asked Jesse Owens if he'd even had the good sense to eat that day. My father told Jesse Owens not to worry about the money and began driving across campus to Father Lange's. Father Lange was my father's old philosophy professor. They were drinking buddies and they drank with the college bursar, Father Whalen.

My father dragged my mother and Jesse Owens up three flights of steps to Father Lange's room. He pulled Jesse Owens in from the hall and introduced him to Father Lange. Father Lange didn't have the slightest notion who Jesse Owens was. My father brought up the Olympics, brought up Hitler and then, remembering his old classes, brought up Nietzsche's superman. Father Lange held up a finger then told my mother to go down the hall and wake up that sonofabitch Father Whalen. He went off into the kitchen to mix drinks.

Father Whalen knew who Jesse Owens was. He walked into Father Lange's with his buddy, the art instructor, Father Sullivan. They each already had a drink in their hand. My father took Father Whalen aside and they whispered together for a while, looking over at Jesse Owens every now and then. Father Lange

handed Jesse Owens a drink. Father Sullivan asked Jesse Owens if he could paint his portrait sometime. Jesse Owens said he didn't know but he didn't think so. Father Lange began explaining Nietzsche's superman theory to Jesse Owens. Jesse Owens said that he's heard of it. Father Sullivan explained to Father Lange that Jesse Owens had pretty much destroyed that theory. Father Lange nodded his head and told Jesse Owens that he himself was a Kantian. He asked Jesse Owens if he'd ever been to Konigsberg. Jesse Owens said no, just Munich. Father Sullivan asked Jesse Owens if he could paint his portrait sometime. Father Whalen walked over to Jesse Owens and handed him a check. My mother told everyone now to just let Jesse Owens be. She took him into the kitchen to make him something to eat.

As my mother opened the refrigerator door a bizarre blue light poured out over her and Jesse Owens. They both backed up a step and, as the refrigerator door swung wide, the bluelight arced throughout the kitchen. Inside, it looked like a sculpture. Like a honeycomb made out of bright blue ice. Five inch octagons stacked side by side, row upon row, filling up the entire appliance. Jesse Owens put his hands on his knees and bent over and stared into the refrigerator. "Judas Maude," he said.

My mother yelled out into the living room what in God's name was this in this refrigerator. Father Sullivan walked into the kitchen, stood and weaved in place a moment and said, oh that. He reached into the refrigerator between my mother and Jesse Owens and pulled out a bottle of Teacher's Scotch. He said that they were Father Lange's empties. He said that Father Lange didn't want the maid to know he drank. My mother began yelling out into the living room well for Christ's sake this is crazy someone come get Jesse Owens out of this godawful light. My father walked into the kitchen to try and calm my mother down. Take it easy, he told her, he'd get rid of the bottles. Father Lange heard this and followed him out into the kitchen. He told my father that if he was going to get rid of the bottles in the refrigerator he might as well take the ones in the closet and under the bed too.

They boxed up over a hundred bottles. It took my father and Jesse Owens two trips apiece to load them into the Oldsmobile. When they were done my father talked everyone into one last drink. Father Whalen fell asleep. Father Sullivan began

gripping about the transcendental aesthetic, calling it a lot of horseshit to annoy Father Lange. Father Lange asked Jesse Owens if he'd ever been to Konigsberg. Jesse Owens asked Father Lange if that Teacher's was pretty good scotch.

The next morning Jesse Owens sat with his elbow on our kitchen table and his forehead resting in his hand. My mother cooked breakfast as my father woke us all up and called us into the kitchen to meet Jesse Owens. We each shook his hand as my father told us how Jesse Owens had defeated Hitler. Hitler, I said to myself. Hitler was the reason my Uncle Joe had a wooden leg. "You sure have a lot of children," said Jesse Owens as my brother crawled up onto his lap. Our mother told us to just leave Jesse Owens be.

Jesse Owens left everything on his plate but half a piece of toast. From our front window I watched him and my father talk by the car out in the driveway. We lived at the top of a hill in our neighborhood. Over the night it had rained and the boxes full of scotch bottles, stacked out on the curb, had collapsed and avalanched down the street. A few even rolled down as they spoke. I could see my father pointing them out to Jesse Owens as if to say see here how these bottles have spilled down the hill. It would be better for us I think if we were to instead drive up the hill and so avoid them. I watched Jesse Owens nod his head as they got into the car and did exactly that.

Geo

Everyone knows Geo. Everyone knows Geo came back from LA a success. He'd made enough money to buy his parents a home. He'd played guitar with Steely Dan, had dinner with Keith Richards. That's his name on the back of the Barbra Streisand album.

The Barbra Streisand sessions made Geo's father proud. Ninety-two, Carl. He'd repaired violins for something like fifty years. New York virtuosos sent him their Stradivariuses. He'd made enough money and established enough connections to land Geo an apprenticeship with Andre Segovia. Barbra Streisand was all right. Rock and roll Carl couldn't see for dirt.

Geo holds court at the bar. Local musicians tug at his elbow, shake his hand, give him their demo tapes to listen to. Musi-

cians, lawyers, reporters, professors—he never buys a drink. Geo talks physics, digital interphase, floor tile, Rubens, sour mash, playing in San Clemente for Nixon, the origins of lipstick, Bach, the futures market, his idea for the third-world utilization of discarded American tires. I serve him his vodka and tonics across the bar. He winks, grabs my shoulder, and smiles. “What are you doing here?” he says. “Go home. Write your novel. You’re a god.”

Geo closes the bar with me at 4:30 and we walk to his house to eat. He fixes linguini in olive oil with red pepper and garlic. We eat with the dog in the kitchen among the violin necks, yesterday’s breakfast, sheet music, medicine bottles, a fifth of gin. There are pepper flakes in his beard. His clothes are five days old. His Impala is on two wheels in the driveway. His eighty-seven year old mother Dorothy paints water colors in the living room. Carl walks naked into the kitchen. He holds out a roll of paper towels and asks for a knife. He wants to cut the roll in half. They are out of toilet paper.

Geo’s girlfriend is pregnant. “She doesn’t want a child, she wants Eric Clapton,” says Geo and that’s it. Instead he rants about Modern art, incompetent plumbers, the horrible local musicians, the horrible local restaurants, foreign movies, organized sports, the people who come into the bar and act like they’re in foreign movies or organized sports.

The FBI, the IRS, MTV. Women. “How can you trust a creature who bleeds once a month and still lives,” he yells. I watch him grab the edge of the bar, watch him hold his forehead, see him bend over, hear him howl. Actual tears run into his beard. He is Henry VIII eating his own leg. He is Santa Claus coming down his own chimney.

Dorothy catches pneumonia. Carl has a minor stroke. Geo’s girlfriend has a baby girl. She goes back to her job at the radio station. She goes back to her cocaine. Geo takes a job in a country band. He plays and drinks all night. He comes to see me at the bar and drinks some more. The kid is crying all the time. I tell him to turn on a vacuum. Kids like it. It sounds like the womb. The sound of a vacuum. Geo downs his drink, rubs his stomach and says, “That kid should have heard the sound of a vacuum.”

There's this guy who wants to kill me. Unemployed, a drunk, a crackhead. I'm sleeping with his wife. He gets up in his only suit, a brown three-piece, and comes into the bar asking questions about me. Tells everyone he's a detective. He's waiting for me when I get to work. The place is busier than hell. He yells at me for a Bud Lite. When I bring it to him he stands up on the foot rail. He leans over the bar and holds out his hand. "I just want to introduce myself," he says. "I'm Troy Hanson. Karla's husband."

I've never seen this guy in my life. His eyes are jiggling back and forth in his head. He's got these thick glasses, a little ponytail, a shitty beard. His lips are pulled back into his mouth. The jaw muscles underneath his ears are pulsing. I don't know what to do. I think of Geo. "How ya doin'," I say. I grab Troy Hanson's hand and pull him across the bar. "I think your wife is the best thing since sliced bread."

"Are you having an affair with my wife?" says Troy Hanson and I say no way man. "Then tell me what's going on with you two," he says and I tell him to look around at how busy I am. Troy Hanson's eyes start tearing up and he slams his fist down on the bar. "Well when can we talk about it!" he yells. I tell him anytime he wants. "Tomorrow noon, the Gas House," says Troy Hanson and I point a finger at him, pull my triggered thumb and tell him, "High noon."

Geo comes in after his gig and I tell him about the trouble I'm in. "The first thing you do," says Geo, "is show up." I tell Geo I'm planning on it but this guy is nuts. "Forget about it . . .," says Geo, ". . . do you still pray?" I tell Geo yeah I still pray and Geo says, "Good. So before you show up tomorrow you go to church. You go to church and you pray to the baby Jesus to help you lie like a Persian rug. Forget about it. Do you think I'd let anything happen to you?" Geo is heading toward the door and he trips over a bar stool. I ask him if he's going to remember any of this tomorrow. "Listen," says Geo. "Before Carl takes a shit, he has to get out the plunger and plunge the water down because his balls are so heavy they hang into the water. And that's where I come from."

I go to church. I show up at the Gas House at five till noon. At the far end of the bar sits Geo. The sun shines behind his brown curls, his brown beard, the black sunglasses above his