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Cheyenne Line and Other Poems, and: Lost in Seward County  
(review)

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Dante knows these songs by heart.  
After a long playtime the witchy tunes  
of Willie and Lobo commence their spell  
and I gather up Dante, yawning in my arms.

I know that life is a muddle.  
Hopes and griefs fandango  
their own spells and caught in the chords  
we all step and falter, stumble and step.

But these mornings with Dante, we dance!

. . .

Sleet pecks at the windows.

He hooks his right arm over my shoulder  
and tabs his head into the notch of my neck.  
His little chest presses flat on my chest  
and we dance, fitting  
like jigsaw pieces into each other's day.

This will not be Sarracino's last collection – not with poetry of this caliber, this humanity, and this quiet eloquence. Nor should it be, for there is much to enjoy in his work, much to savor.

J. V. Brummels, **Cheyenne Line and Other Poems**, The Backwaters Press  
Marjorie Saiser, **Lost in Seward County**, The Backwaters Press

*Reviewed by Danielle J. Ibister*

The Backwaters Press contributes two excellent collections to Plains literature by Nebraska poets J. V. Brummels and Marjorie Saiser. Each year, the small Omaha press publishes two or three titles by Heartland writers, bringing the often stunning but sometimes forgotten voices of the Midwest to the literary world. The editor works with a laudable set of advisors: Nebraska writers Jonis Agee, Richard Dooling, Greg Kuzma, and Brent Spencer. In a region where geography often determines destiny, these poets' disparate styles and concerns energize classic Plains themes of place and mortality. Brummels writes from a cowboy's perspective, interested in the creation and demise of people, places, and culture. Saiser, a sensualist, focuses on the physicality of place as well as the immediacy of the body.

Also the author of poetry collection *Sunday's Child* (1994), J. V. Brummels, in *Cheyenne Line and Other Poems*, utilizes unadorned language to capture a rural voice, which represents his rancher's life in Winside, Ne-

braska. Even as the opening poem, "Fine Arts," makes use of anaphora, alliteration, word repetition, onomatopoeia, and simile, the figurative language does not overwhelm the narrative:

I am drinking beer  
 standing in the door of the barn  
 listening to jazz, listening  
 to the colts whinny and snort  
 like a heavenly host.  
 I am looking up at stars  
 bright as new dimes.

Brummels' subtle poetics establishes a bucolic setting and a thoughtful mood. Throughout, Brummels offers a conversational voice and lucid, straightforward diction.

As an instructor of creative writing and English at Wayne State College, Brummels struggles between his incongruent identities of academic and cowboy; his poems favor the latter. In "Dead Man's Hand: A Primer," the speaker conveys impatience with newfangled ideas:

*I can tell by your outfit that you are a cowboy, –  
 while he dealt a hand or two of stud or draw,  
 straight poker with a rogue joker  
 played aces, straights and flushes.*

Tonight it's the same fifty-three card deck,  
 still the same straight poker – no baseball  
 or Dr. Pepper, chase the queen or low-hole,  
 those professors' games, or worse –  
 guts-and-challenge, in-between or high-low, that  
 morass of match-the-pots where a nickel ante  
 can cost a hundred bucks on a solid call  
 if a hand just goes plain wrong.

This poem suggests that cowboys play games the correct way – straight, solid, and conventional – while academics play them the wrong way – allowing the stakes to become too high. Unabashedly masculinist, Brummels' speaker calls poker the "private game of men." His speakers admire the Grand Tetons as breast-images to "a sex-starved French trapper," and position women as Other with lines such as "Confused / by the solo girl so plain among us." At times, Brummels trades on stereotypes, exhibiting a machismo that alienates readers sensitive to sexist language and stereotypes. Indeed, the title poem features WWII soldiers lining up outside a Cheyenne brothel: "Maybe / on that day in that mountain town / where all the army'd seem to come / she was simply pleased to do her part." Such lines condescend to a feminist reader. However, Brummels also deals with weightier issues, including paternity: "to smell smoke and come right up

in bed and down the hall / to find kids and stove fine" ("Presence"). In the end, Brummels' cowboy persona offers a thought-provoking new character to readers of poetry.

Thematically, Brummels' poems intertwine place and mortality, and midwestern weather repeatedly takes on a human quality. In "Dead Man's Hand Revisited," Brummels uses a snowstorm to evoke approaching death:

The maps show storms milling in the Rockies,  
gathered by a crew of winds, those ghost riders  
who'll tomorrow yip up a Plains blizzard.

Dynamic verbs and evocative language give power to the personified storm, yet the speaker eventually triumphs over this representation of mortality:

and sure as the snow'll come  
and the wind'll blow,  
and sure as we're damned  
and fire will eat all our bones,  
either fast or slow,  
there's time enough for one more hand.

Brummels beautifully captures the vitality storms bring to midwesterners, even as they intimate death.

As Brummels explores mortality, he returns repeatedly to its counterpoint: conception. For Brummels, the biological processes of birth, youth, aging, and death explain our cultures, places, and emotions. His title poem, "Cheyenne Line," concerns the creation of boundaries, geographical and cultural: "They talked of forming a county / to line one nothing from the next." Similarly, "The Beginnings of an Outfit" explores a railroad town settled twenty years ago, which exists today as a ghost town. Both cerebral and poignant, Brummels' exploration of how we "grow places" suggests an abiding curiosity about the relationship between creation, growth, and demise.

Also a Nebraska native, Marjorie Saiser uses a lyrical style to express her affirmative voice. Her first book, *Bones of a Very Fine Hand* (1999), won the Nebraska Book Award for Poetry; in *Lost in Seward County*, Saiser contributes to Plains literature a voice skilled in the language of celebration – of place, of home, of family. In "Looking for Ted," Saiser, like Brummels, places the reader in a pastoral setting, using prepositional phrases to emphasize location: "I am lost in Seward County, looking for Ted, / for his house, his front door near a prairie, near a barn." Also concerned with literary identity, Saiser devotes many poems to the subject of writing, including "Dear Writing," "The Muse is a Little Girl," and "Thinking of Emily Dickinson." These and other poems explore sisterhood and sensuality, which inform Saiser's feminist perspective.

Saiser's poems deserve to be read aloud, so the reader can appreciate her attention to alliteration and assonance, enhancing the theme of each poem. In "Taking the Baby to the Prairie," Saiser connects the human body with the landscape by showing an infant "baptized" with place. Here, the repetition of prepositional phrases situates the child powerfully in the natural world:

Stems of switchgrass make a low sound  
in the wind: Welcome home.

I lift this child to grassland,  
to kingbird,  
to cedar and sumac,  
to long roots hidden like a deer in the draw.

Under the shells of these dry grasses  
a green strength comes.

The first stanza includes lulling, multi-syllabic words and 's' and 'w' alliteration to mimic the wind's whistles and gentle moans. The second stanza transitions to shorter, sharper one-syllable words; even the two compound words – "grassland" and "kingbird" – deliver acute sounds. By the final stanza, Saiser's adept craft in punctuating sound supplies, in the three strongly-stressed words, the very power for which her poem's literal meaning strives.

Like Brummels, Saiser links place and mortality. Saiser's closing poem, "My Old Aunts Play Canasta in a Snowstorm," eerily echoes the snowstorm and card game in Brummels' "Dead Man's Hand Revisited." While the storm rages, the characters defy death's insistence:

We are getting up there in the years; we'll  
have to quit sometime. But today, today,  
deal, sister, deal.

Saiser's fantasies about mortality take several forms, including the violent image of her plane crashing into the Pacific, and the wishful image of Saiser resurrecting a young father. Characters with terminal illnesses and cancer, along with images of a beheaded St. Cecilia, remind us of ever-present death.

Saiser also explores mortality through bodily images. In "The Living, the Warm," the speaker refuses to touch her dead father, preferring the living body of her mother:

but I didn't. My mother laid her hand on his;  
my hand was on her back, the ridges of her spine,  
the curve of her shoulders, the living, the warm.

By naming and repeating body parts – hands, back, spine, shoulder – the speaker suggests that all family members, dead and alive, are part of one body. Yet in her developing vision, she learns to make the more direct connection, as in a later poem, “Father”:

I would like to touch again  
 the rounding of his arm  
 put my fingers into the L of his elbow  
 cover his hand  
 as he showed me in Kramer’s mortuary  
 that grandmother did not mind being touched  
 and that those dead, and living, are not untouchable  
 if you are not afraid.

So sensory and specific that the reader nearly caresses the body parts herself, this insistent naming – arm, fingers, elbow, hand – brings together three generations. In this way, Saiser’s book forms a wonderful arc, with the speaker moving from discomfort with death to acceptance by the book’s end. This convincing development provides readers with more than just a musical collection of poems; readers experience the power of hope and change.

By turns critical, joyful, sorrowful, and playful, these collections from The Backwaters Press offer two different visions of the Midwest. One delights in the cowboy perspective, at times masculinist and frustrating, at times innovative and rewarding. The other focuses intimately on a woman’s return to her small hometown – a choice that leads her to thwart, repeatedly, despair and loss for celebration and triumph. In a literary culture where critics may dismiss midwestern texts as “regional,” these poets remind us that rich experience and wonderful literature emerge from everywhere – here, the ranches and small towns of Nebraska.

Scott Cairns, **Philokalia: New and Selected Poems**, Zoo Press

*Reviewed by Kevin Cantwell*

Scott Cairns’s new and selected gives us roughly twenty years of poetry by perhaps the most important and promising religious poet of his generation. The title word *philokalia* means “love of the good/the beautiful,” with the sense that both roots are inseparable. The early poems of the Cairns oeuvre are smallish, but masterful in establishing a tone of voice; the later poems are more overtly grand in theme, more formal, and enlarge to a voice that is fully realized and thus believable. Emphasizing in Cairns the moral choice that makes human experience meaningful, the poet and critic Jonathan Holden has written in *The Fate of American Poetry* (1991) that Cairns “owes a great deal to the Christian existentialist writing of Kierke-