

Visible and Invisible Battles at the Border

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After three years of being poetry editor for *Contemporary Rural Social Work*, I have found that each poetry section organically develops into a unique witness of the rural experience. One theme that has emerged through this collection of poems is that of crossing borders—borders of land, town, or even countries. Unlike the borders of urban or suburban communities which often blend without distinction into each other, those of rural towns are clearly defined. You leave the last gas station at the edge of town, pull onto a freeway flanked by open land or rows of trees, and it may be hours before you see the next exit. The borders create a sense of identity for a town—there may be the desire to cross them for the hope of something better or to return to that which is familiar. A rural community can be defined by the heritage of those who founded it, who brought hopes and dreams through their original settlement. Yet in contemporary times, those same communities face economic challenges that make it difficult for later generations to stay. Thus, there is a tension in that relationship to place between wanting to escape it yet at the same time wanting to return home.

When one does return home as a professional adult, one's childhood identity is what others still see. The poem "Professional Detachment" by Curtis L. Todd explores this concept so effectively. This poem wonderfully demonstrates a common challenge of rural social work—how to approach dual relationships in a rural community. On the other hand, how does one deal with the anger and frustration that results from limited social services because of economic or environmental hardship? With a kind of bitter resolve, as is indicated in the poem "How to Build a Ghost Town" by Ross Howerton. The first step toward change is to recognize the problem—thus Howerton's poem bears witness of one town's struggles.

Some of these poems may seem pastoral—their sense of rural identity is conveyed through the setting such as in "Graduation Day" or "Lyric Tradition." But beneath the pastoral there is a tension. In the poem "Rough River" Loren Sundlee describes skating as an act of negotiation over "pocks and ripples,/corrugations like country roads/that jarred/our teeth and ankles." And yet there is a resiliency at the end of the poem for not having fallen through the ice. Another resiliency exists in the poem "Visiting the Site Fifty Years after the Fire" by Maureen Tolman Flannery where artifacts that still exist provide a link to a past heritage, even if the structure is no longer there.

Last July, the annual Rural Social Work Caucus held its conference at the University of Texas, El Paso. The border towns of El Paso/Ciudad Juarez have a rich history of a shared cultural identity; yet the border is a reminder of the disparate economic opportunities that exist between the cities. This tension has created challenges for Human Services. The poem "Family in Arms" provides one perspective—that of a young daughter-in-law who crosses the border illegally, is deported, and then finally returned to her family through marriage (though not without a cost). Two poets whose work explores in depth the borderland of El Paso /Juarez are Benjamin Alire Saenz and Ray Gonzales. Their compassionate work acknowledges the "invisible war" that exists between the two towns and the toll it takes on those caught within it while expressing that both

sides are accountable for that war. In Saenz's poem "The Ninth Dream: War (the City in Which I live) he describes the risk for those who attempt to cross the border:

....Nothing
 In the desert has ever had anything resembling mercy
 On Mexicans attempting to leave their land, to become
 Something they weren't meant to be.
 People are still crossing. People are still dying. Some have
 Died suffocating in boxcars. Some have drowned. Some
 Have been killed by vigilantes who protect us in the name
 of all that is white. Some have died in a desert
 Larger than their dreams.

<http://www.narrativemagazine.com/>

In his poem "One El Paso/Two El Paso, Ray Gonzales repeats the word "awake" like a chant in order to make himself see the war of Juarez within El Paso: "Awake to follow immigration shadows vanishing inside/American walls, river drownings counted as they cross/Maria Salinas' body dragged out" With the concluding lines of the poem, Gonzales turns an important verb into a noun as he sees how the border will always connect the fates of the two places:

Wake up, I thought, look south to the last cathedral
 in Juarez before its exploding bricks hurtle this way.

Make the sign of the cross, open your eyes to one town,
 two cities, five centuries of praying in the beautiful dust.

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/>

In the summer of 2017, the conference will take place at the University of Memphis' Lambuth Campus in Jackson, Tennessee. In doing a bit of research on poets from that region, I have found two whose work pertains to aspects of human services. TJ Jarrett is the author of two books, *Ain't No Grave* and *Zion*. Her poems bring the history of slavery and oppression into contemporary times through dreams, metaphors, and surreal images. In her poem "The Children" she describes a dream of seeing children emerge from a slave boat until one escapes by becoming an angel from wings that sprout where she touches him on his shoulder. Again, her poetry bears witness. A poet who resides specifically in Jackson is James E. Cherry. His poem "Suspect" describes the humiliation of racial profiling during a TSA check. Both poems can be read in their entirety at the following websites: <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/children> and <http://chapter16.org/suspect/>

It is now more important than ever that writers who are connected in some way to the field of human services, especially in rural areas, give voice to that experience. To quote Ben Saenz from "Ninth Dream," "We have been fighting a war on this border/For hundreds of years. We have been fighting the war so long/That the war has become as invisible as the desert sands/we trample on." Every rural community is challenged by battles that will remain unseen unless someone bears

witness of them. And it is usually the practitioners in the field of human services who at the forefront of these battles.

