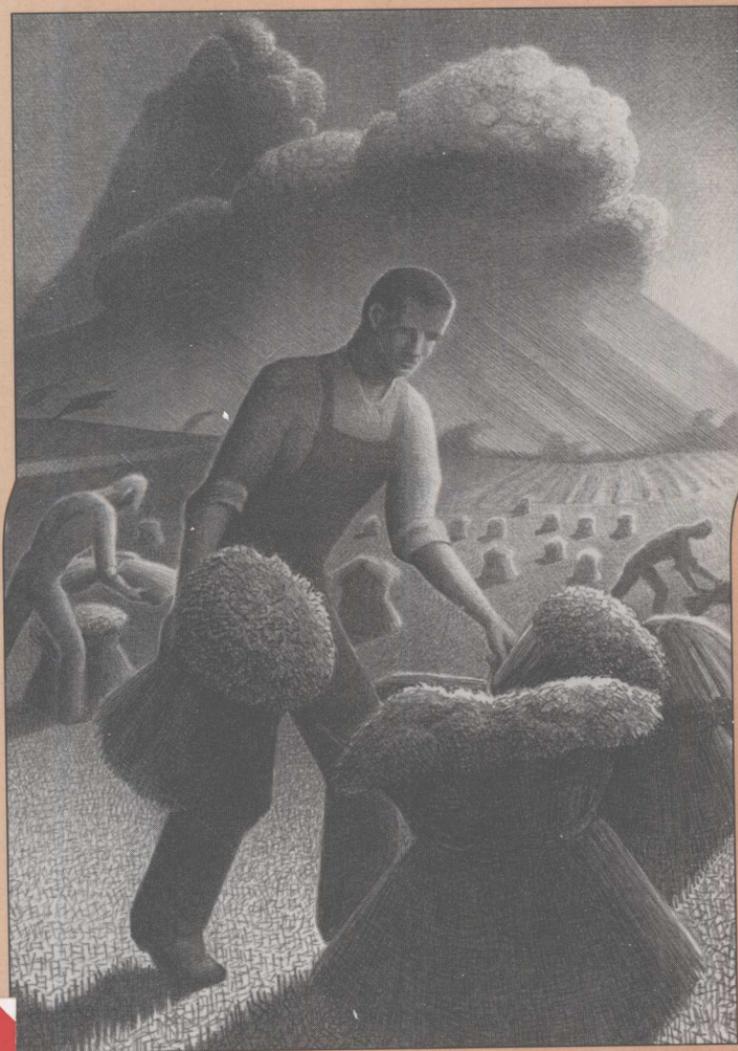


"... a rich and sensitive record of American farm life in our century."

Pattiann Rogers

An Anthology of American Farm Poems

# Handspan



**of**  
**Red Earth**

E D I T E D B Y

**Catherine Lewallen Marconi**

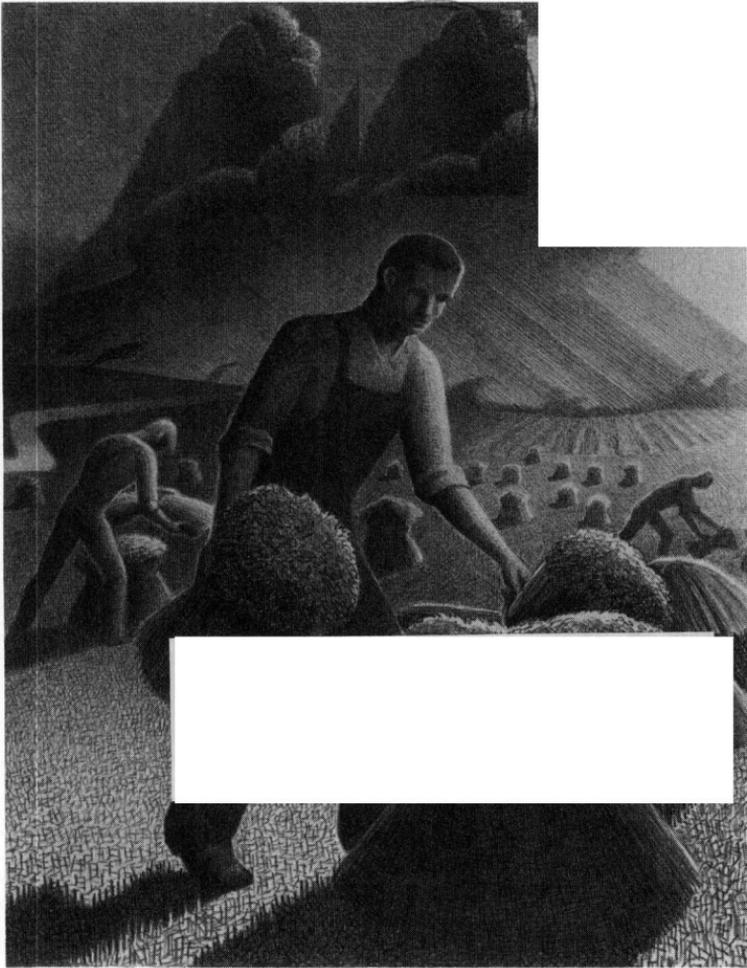
# Handspan of Red Earth

An Anthology of American Farm Poems

Edited by Catherine Lewallen Marconi

---

University of Iowa Press  Iowa City



University of Iowa Press,  
Iowa City 52242  
Copyright © 1991 by  
the University of Iowa  
All rights reserved  
Printed in the United  
States of America  
Second printing, 1991

Design by Richard Hendel

No part of this book  
may be reproduced or  
utilized in any form or by  
any means, electronic  
or mechanical, including  
photocopying and  
recording, without  
permission in writing  
from the publisher.

Printed on acid-free paper

The Grant Wood lithographs are  
reproduced courtesy of the University  
of Iowa Museum of Art.

Page iii: *Approaching Storm*, 1940

Page 1: *Sultry Night*, 1939

Page 45: *March*, 1939

Page 85: *February*, 1940

Page 133: *July Fifteenth*, 1938

Library of Congress

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Handspan of red earth: an anthology  
of American farm poems/edited by  
Catherine Lewallen Marconi.—1st ed.  
p. cm.

ISBN 0-87745-325-X (alk. paper),

ISBN 0-87745-326-8 (pbk.: alk. paper)

1. Farm life—Poetry. 2. American  
poetry. I. Marconi, Catherine  
Lewallen, 1944—

PS595.F38H36 1991

90-21163

811'.54080355—dc20

CIP

**Handspan of Red Earth**

10 95

*To the memory of*

*John Lindley Lewallen (1897–1989)*

*and to my mother,*

*Alberta Webster Lewallen*

*I lay close to the dirt and looked through fenestrated*

*wheat.*

*A white star froze the focus of my gaze.*

*Its straight beam called a terror to my heart.*

*The love, it said, the love you have of dirt*

*Rots out pure images and forms all symbolism into a*

*moulded peat.*

*—Alberta Webster, 1939*

## Acknowledgments

---

It has been my pleasure to collect these poems about our contemporary American farms. To the following friends who helped make this book possible: Dennis Schmitz, William Stafford, Roger Weingarten, Catherine French, Gary Short, John Anton Pillar, Denise Lichtig, Dianna Henning, Lisa Shannon, Mary Madsen, and Kim Silveira-Wolterbeek; to the financial supporters who helped pay the permissions fees to reprint the poems: Bank of America, Stockton Savings and Loan, Farmers and Merchants Bank, and Raj Bisla; and to my children, Sarah and Matthew, for their ongoing support—thank you.

## Preface

---

On my morning mail run, that five or so miles from my home on Clements Road to Linden (pop. 2,300+), I drive from these low, rolling Sierra Nevada foothills south to delicate bottomland of wyman silt loam and sandy loam—some of the world's most fertile and productive farmland. Clements Road dead-ends on Comstock Road, and if I were to gear my Jeep down and head right out cross-country, I'd drive through prime farmland, hundred-acre family farms and orchards. I'd drive through one of America's largest walnut orchards. In fact, any road I'd take to Linden would pass kidney bean fields, tomato fields, peach, almond, pear, cherry, and apple orchards—Granny Smith, Golden Delicious, Mutsu, Royal Gala, and Fuji apples.

When I drive west, toward Stockton (pop. 220,000+), along Comstock Road, then turn north onto Duncan, I pass orchards that flow into onion fields, alfalfa fields, 160-acre blocks of field corn, and finally, at the first major intersection, at Eight Mile Road and Highway 99, I slow down, stop. Even wait. A dust cloud boils up from the Caterpillar D-10 hauling an earthmover, from backhoes, truckloads of conduit, and the Cat-yellow road grader whose fifteen-foot steel blade is skimming the red loam. And, of course, out in the field, the ever-present building contractor, hard hat pushed back, is bent over blueprints for another 155-acre subdivision on San Joaquin Valley soil.

This morning, while standing in the check-out line at Bi-Rite (one of Linden's three family-owned and -operated grocery stores), I listened to a familiar conversation. The new truck driver for Pepsi-Cola was scoping the Linden area for a home to buy. As I fixed my gaze on his blue

shirt—its red-white-and blue Pepsi emblem blurring—my mind flashed on Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, written between 1769 and 1782. Just two days ago I'd read letter 2, "On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures, of an American Farmer," in which Crèvecoeur wrote: "The instant I enter on my own land, the bright idea of property, of exclusive right, of independence, exalt my mind. Precious soil, I say to myself, by what singular custom of law is it that thou wast made to constitute the riches of the freeholder? What should we American farmers be without the distinct possession of that soil?"

And, still seeing that blurred Pepsi emblem, I flashed on Thoreau living on Emerson's property from 1845 to 1847, a time when he allowed his imagination to buy farms from his neighbors, then plow, seed, and harvest the rich loam near Concord. Of that farm ground Thoreau wrote, in *Walden*: "I have frequently seen a poet withdraw, having enjoyed the most valuable part of a farm, while the crusty farmer supposed that he had got a few wild apples only. Why, the owner does not know it for many years when a poet has put his farm in rhyme, the most admirable kind of invisible fence, has fairly impounded it, milked it, skimmed it, and got all the cream, and left the farmer only the skimmed milk."

Today's American poets, still enjoying "the most valuable part of a farm," have separated the cream from the farms for their poems. From the bean fields and vineyards of California's San Joaquin Valley to the hog farms of Iowa's Henry County, from the cattle ranches of Nevada sage land to the number 2 yellow corn fields of the Heartland, from the wheat fields of the Dakotas to the apple orchards of Free-

dom, New Hampshire, poets continue stretching invisible fence wire in their poems, creating from the sharp emotions and details of this shared farm poem an inspiring reverence.

The poets in this anthology have in common a farming background or an absorbing interest in farm life. The poems were selected for their distinct diversity and sensitivity to farm life. Each poem in the collection is an apple picked from the barrel because it provides another sustaining image of the contemporary American farm.

## Contents

---

Acknowledgments / xi

Preface / xiii

### I. Sharecroppers

A Human Condition *William Stafford* / 3

When I Was Young *William Stafford* / 4

Eclogues *Dennis Schmitz* / 5

Freedom, New Hampshire *Galway Kinnell* / 8

Farmer's Daughter *Annie Dillard* / 13

The Farm on the Great Plains *William Stafford* / 14

The Man Who Buys Hides *Dennis Schmitz* / 16

The Sheep Child *James Dickey* / 20

Maple Syrup *Donald Hall* / 23

How to Make Rhubarb Wine *Ted Kooser* / 26

The Wife *Peggy Shumaker* / 28

The Orchard *Gretel Ehrlich* / 29

The Tenant Farmer *Ai* / 30

The Country Midwife: A Day *Ai* / 31

Young Farm Woman Alone *Ai* / 32

Gretel *Tom Crawford* / 33

Gretel (II) *Tom Crawford* / 34

A Sheeprancher Named John *Gretel Ehrlich* / 35

Picking Grapes in an Abandoned Vineyard

*Larry Levis* / 36

Getting the Mail *Galway Kinnell* / 39

From Letter to an Imaginary Friend

*Thomas McGrath* / 40

## II. Stretching Fence Wire

- For the Hog Killing *Wendell Berry* / 47
- Prayers and Sayings of the Mad Farmer  
*Wendell Berry* / 48
- Fence Wire *James Dickey* / 53
- Male Image *Ted Solotaroff* / 55
- The Snake *Wendell Berry* / 56
- Trees and Cattle *James Dickey* / 57
- In the Upper Pasture *Maxine Kumin* / 59
- In an Old Apple Orchard *Ted Kooser* / 60
- Field Theory *Robert Morgan* / 61
- Hubcaps *Robert Morgan* / 62
- Hay Scuttle *Robert Morgan* / 63
- Horses *Wendell Berry* / 64
- At Nightfall *Jane Hirshfield* / 67
- Some Ashes Drifting above Piedra, California  
*Larry Levis* / 70
- Landscape in Spring *Gary Soto* / 73
- A Place in Kansas *Ted Kooser* / 74
- In the Corners of Fields *Ted Kooser* / 75
- Nebraska, Early March *William Kloefkorn* / 76
- The Mad Farmer Shuts Himself inside His Silo to  
Sing Away the Storm *William Kloefkorn* / 77
- Bows to Drouth *Gary Snyder* / 79
- Discovery *William Stafford* / 80
- Grandfather *Tom Crawford* / 81
- The Bean Eaters *Gwendolyn Brooks* / 83
- Vespers *Gary Short* / 84

### III. Shanks, Sawgrass

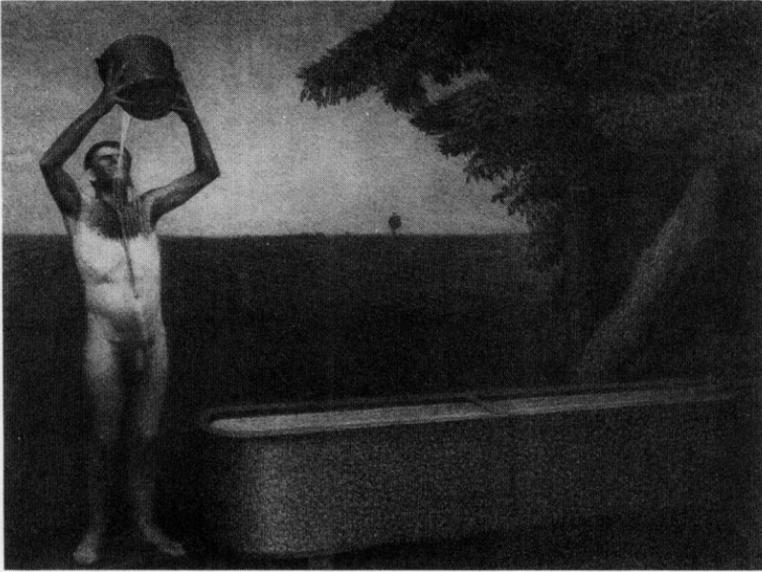
- Names of Horses *Donald Hall* / 87  
Near the Bravo 20 Bombing Range *Gary Short* / 89  
The Flying Change *Henry Taylor* / 90  
Blackberry Light *William Heyen* / 91  
Jim *Mary Swander* / 93  
Short Story *Ellen Bryant Voigt* / 100  
Barbed Wire *David Lee* / 102  
Blue Corn, Black Mesa *Peggy Shumaker* / 106  
The First Birth *Rodney Jones* / 107  
During the First Three Minutes of Life *Jim Heynen* / 109  
The Sow Piglet's Escapes *Galway Kinnell* / 111  
Cutting the Easter Colt *Paul Zarzyski* / 112  
The Vealers *Maxine Kumin* / 113  
Strut *Maxine Kumin* / 115  
Hay for the Horses *Gary Snyder* / 116  
The Horse *Faye Kicknosway* / 117  
Somewhere along the Way *Henry Taylor* / 122  
The Bull God *Joe Salerno* / 123  
Uncle George *William Stafford* / 124  
For the Eating of Swine *Rodney Jones* / 125  
Saint Francis and the Sow *Galway Kinnell* / 127  
Earth Dweller *William Stafford* / 128  
Farmer *Lucien Stryk* / 129  
Barn Fire *Thomas Lux* / 130

#### IV. Open Furrows

- Hard Red Wheat *Paul Zarzyski* / 135  
Emergency Haying *Hayden Carruth* / 137  
The Elements of San Joaquin *Gary Soto* / 140  
Hoing *Gary Soto* / 142  
Field Poem *Gary Soto* / 143  
Plowing *David Lee* / 144  
The Drought *Gary Soto* / 146  
Mud *Maxine Kumin* / 147  
Roots *Lucille Clifton* / 148  
To Ms. Ann *Lucille Clifton* / 149  
I Once Knew a Man *Lucille Clifton* / 150  
Cornpicker Poem *Robert Bly* / 151  
Harvest *Gary Soto* / 153  
The Orchard Keeper *Robert Bly* / 154  
The Cherry *Lucien Stryk* / 155  
In the Farmhouse *Galway Kinnell* / 156  
Mood Indigo *William Matthews* / 157  
The Lonely One *Ronald Jumbo* / 159  
The Farm *David Lee* / 160  
Earth Closet *Robert Morgan* / 161  
These Obituaries of Rattlesnakes Being  
    Eaten by the Hogs *Roger Weingarten* / 162  
The Broken Ground *Wendell Berry* / 165  
Ornament *Gary Short* / 166  
Passing an Orchard by Train *Robert Bly* / 167  
The Black Faced Sheep *Donald Hall* / 168  
The Tumbling of Worms *Stanley Kunitz* / 172  
End of Summer *Stanley Kunitz* / 174  
The Farmer *Ellen Bryant Voigt* / 175

# I. Sharecroppers

---





## A Human Condition

---

If there is a forest anywhere  
the one you live with whimpers in her  
sleep or construes a glance wrong, awake:  
without intent she falls toward zero  
impact; like an indicator on a chart  
she rounds into terror, and the wild trees  
try for her throat,  
    if there is a forest anywhere.

If you concur with a world that has forests  
in it, the one you live with will indict  
you. If you like a farm, it will threaten.  
Some people casually help each other:  
if one likes a place the other finds  
a kind going out of the breath at evening there.  
    At your house any forest is everywhere.

But there are farms—to see them in the evening  
extends your breath; you hover their hills  
with regard for a world that offers human beings  
a lavish, a deepening abode, in the evening,  
like them. These places could have been home,  
are lost to you now. They are foreign but good.  
    There are these farms.

WILLIAM STAFFORD

## When I Was Young

---

That good river that flowed backward  
when it felt the danger of Babylon  
taught the rest of us in the story how to be good,  
but my mother said, "God, I used to love that town."

Animals that knew the way to Heaven  
wagged at the back doors of every house  
when I was young, and horses told fences  
the story of Black Beauty, and smelled of the good manger.

Those times tested the pre-war clocks, and  
cold mornings they rang and rang. I haven't recently  
seen rivers flow backward or animals that remember.  
The clocks, though, still pursue what they endlessly loved.

WILLIAM STAFFORD