

B. H. (Pete) Fairchild (1942 -)



One of the most successful poets from Kansas is B.H. Fairchild. He grew up in Liberal, Kansas, the far southwestern edge of the state. Early mapmakers once labeled this region the Great American Desert. His poetry evokes the isolated small-town landscape, including Main Street buildings and the wild edges of town. He also conjures the emotional landscape of those who dream and survive the arid Great Plains. Here, a literary imagination is not a frill, but rather a tool of endurance. Fairchild mythologizes Kansas by enlarging it in his personal memory. Also, he shows how European traditions lie alongside those of mid-continent America. He is a complex American poet.

Fairchild's "desert" is a busy crossroads. In another poem, "The Big Bands: Liberal, Kansas, the Summer of 1955," the poet explains how swing bands toured the region after their popularity faded elsewhere. The poem "Hearing Parker the First Time," about Charlie Parker, shows how radio airwaves also cross this flyover region. In the poem, "Eleusinian mysteries" are ecstatic Greek rites. Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young are saxophone players with ties to Kansas and Kansas City. And "Ornithology" is the title of one of Parker's albums (he was known as Bird). This poem is an homage to jazz as understood by a poet who first learned to play the saxophone and then the instrument of American language.

HEARING PARKER THE FIRST TIME

***The blue notes spiraling up from the transistor radio
tuned to WNOE, New Orleans, lifted me out of bed
in Seward County, Kansas, where the plains wind ruffed
telephone wires in tones less strange than the bird songs***

***of Charlie Parker. I played high school tenor sax the way,
I thought, Coleman Hawkins and Lester Young might have
if they were, like me, untalented and white, but Ornithology
came winding up from the dark delta of blues and Dixieland***

***into my room on the treeless and hymn-ridden high plains
like a dust devil spinning me into the Eleusinian mysteries
of the jazz gods though later I would learn that his long
apprenticeship in Kansas City and an eremite's devotion***

***to the hard rule of craft gave him the hands that held
the reins of the white horse that carried him to New York
and 52nd Street, farther from wheat fields and dry creek beds
than I would ever travel, and then carried him away.***

Education: B.H. Fairchild, born in Houston, attended Liberal, Kansas, public schools and the University of Kansas (M.A. in English 1968). His Ph.D. is from the University of Tulsa (1973).

Career: Fairchild's books of poetry are *Early Memory Systems of the Lower Midwest* (National Book Critics Circle Award, Norton 2003); *Local Knowledge* (Quarterly Review of Literature 1991); *The Art of the Lathe* (Alice James 1998); and *The Arrival of the Future* (Swallow's Tale 1985). He taught at California State University-San Bernardino from 1976 to 2005. He has won numerous awards.