

“ . . . AND THEREBY HANGS A TALE. . . ”

By Tim Pfau

Most good poems include “story”. Sometimes the tale of the poem is plain, sometimes the poet only suggests or associates and the readers construct stories of their own.

In some exceptional poems, when the poet is a master story teller, both happen.

Richard Dankleff was such a story teller. Born in 1925, Dankleff spent his younger years in the Merchant Marine and the Army traveling the world before pursuing formal education. He then settling in Corvallis to write and teach at OSU. He published three books before his death in 2010.

In “Off Watch”, based on his life as a merchant sailor, and “Popcorn Girl” he established his writing skills and related his own life experiences. In “Westerns”, his last book, he turned his talents outside himself with perhaps his best writing.

Dankleff researched the written records left by the pioneers who changed the west and from them produced a volume of tightly constructed tales of life in the real West. Through the power of “story”, and his skill in presenting it, he caught, and released, poetic reflections in which we may easily see ourselves. *Publishers Weekly* suggested that “Westerns” might be the only book of American poetry that should be translated into film.

All three books are included in State Library’s Oregon Poetry collection.

The following pioneer love triangle is excerpted from “Westerns” published by Oregon State University Press in 1984 (IBN 0-8707-340-X).

First Wife

Down on her knees to plant spuds,
Sis raised the dew-soaked burlap bag—
hit twice by a prairie rattler. But
she did, tough as a weed,

push through. (She sent for me
to tend their kids.) That spring, down
two more weeks, she blamed
her old canned corn.

With their last,
another daughter, her down again , , ,
and him sad, as ever,
as even in love, taking no blame.
(In the grove he said he'd lain alone
before he met the likes of us.)
Sis propped in bed apologizing—
spring again—she couldn't get out
to plant. Face like a shriveled spud.
Right arm, snake arm, going lame.
She wrote our folks in Illinois:
The first half-section is paid.
Awake in the night coughing, she may
(and no one need feel shamed)
have felt along the shelf for the berry wine
put by for children's croup, or special
guests, uncorked carbolic acid.