William Kloefkorn: His Works and His Women

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William Kloefkorn:
His Works and His Women

by

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the 
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William Kloefkorn:
His Works and His Women

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

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Introduction

Bright, clear sky over a plain so wide that the rim of the heavens cut down on it around the entire horizon...Bright, clear sky to-day, to-morrow, and for all time to come.

...And sun! And still more sun! It set the heavens afire every morning; it grew with the day to quivering golden light--then softened into all the shades of red and purple as evening fell.... Pure colour everywhere. A gust of wind, sweeping across the plain, threw into life waves of yellow and blue and green. Now and then a dead black wave would race over the scene...a cloud's gliding shadow...now and then....

(Rølvaag 3)

Generations have passed since the first pioneers ventured onto the plains and viewed this scene from Rølvaag's Giants in the Earth. These courageous settlers came to the Midwest seeking fertile land and the chance to make a living for themselves and their families. Some did not survive to fully enjoy the rewards of their hard labor; however, they left a rich legacy for their descendants. The modern Midwesterner is still known for the conservatism, competitive spirit, and strong sense of egalitarianism of his forefathers. The literature that comes out of this area reflects a morality related to these beliefs. One man, in particular, writes intimately of Midwesterners. William Kloefkorn, Nebraska State Poet, captures the moods, hopes, frustrations, attitudes, and aspirations of the prairie's people.

Kloefkorn's poetry explores the relationship between people and their land, an integral part of the psyche of a people whose
livelihood depends upon this relationship. His first book of poetry, *Alvin Turner As Farmer*, deals almost entirely with learning to live with the land instead of trying to dominate it. After writing poetry on other subjects, Kloefkorn returns to this theme in *Platte Valley Homestead*, his eleventh collection, as he incorporates both the river and the land as learning experiences for the Midwestern farmer. In other collections, he goes beyond farm people and writes of small town life, especially as it affects boys and young men.

But what about the Midwestern woman? She was there with the first settlers, crossing the prairie in a covered wagon. She fed and clothed her usually large family, and she worked side by side with her husband in the fields. She was responsible for the education and religious instruction of her children. She felt the harshness of the prairie, and sometimes she succumbed to the loneliness of life there. But she also became aware of the beauty and fertility of the land. She planted large gardens in this soil and washed her family's clothing in the prairie's shallow creeks. Often she literally was surrounded by the land if her home was a sod house, which was built into the creek's bank. She learned to live in harmony with this land, and with this knowledge, she survived.

Kloefkorn writes of the Midwestern woman in his poetry. Martha Turner knows the hardships and rewards involved with living on the land. Later Kloefkorn writes of Anna in *Platte Valley Homestead*. Anna is one generation away from the modern Midwestern
woman, Doris, whom Kloefkorn creates in the volume *Honeymoon*. Kloefkorn also writes of his grandmother, a German immigrant, and of his mother in several poems. Even though he writes of many women, Kloefkorn always maintains his male point of view. This viewpoint enables the reader to trace the Midwestern woman's evolution, according to Kloefkorn, and in addition, to trace the maturation of Kloefkorn's male persona in his relationship to women.

This study will focus first on Kloefkorn, the man, because most of his poetry comes from his personal experiences and attitudes. Then there will be an overall critique of each volume of his poetry. Since women have been especially influential in Kloefkorn's life and have served as models for many of his poetic characters, this study will closely examine the female characters in his poetry. The woman's role in the male narrator's evolution, as well as the change in the female characters themselves, will be traced. The study will also note possible influences from William Faulkner and Mark Twain, two authors who Kloefkorn says have affected his writing. The emphasis of this study is on the women in Kloefkorn's poetry. His female persona develops from a symbolic Mother Earth figure to a complex, independent character. In addition, she has an important function in Kloefkorn's male persona's development. Kloefkorn confesses that his attitude toward women has changed since he began writing (Interview 1985), and these changes can be traced in his poetry.
Chapter One: William Kloefkorn

On a small farm two miles north of Attica, Kansas, William Kloefkorn was born on August 12, 1932. He tells of his mother and how she remembers milking the cows and carrying a full bucket of milk to the house before calling the doctor. Doctor Galloway was paid in milk and eggs for his assistance in Kloefkorn's delivery. Kloefkorn adapts this story in the first poem of his collection Houses and Beyond. There his admiration for his mother is evident, as he credits her with being the center of his world, his "everything" (Houses 2).

The farm on which Kloefkorn was born belonged to his paternal grandfather, Charles (Charlie) Kloefkorn. The Depression of the 1930's caused Charlie Kloefkorn to lose this farm, but it did not cause him to give up farming. He bought a smaller farm near Cedar Vale, Kansas, where he was able to make a decent living for himself and his wife. Kloefkorn recalls that some of the happiest moments of his childhood were spent at this farm. He confesses that his grandfather let him and his brother John and his sister Bernadine get away with practically anything during their infrequent visits to the farm (Interview 1985). He remembers especially his grandfather's storytelling. His grandfather was locally famous for the stories that he memorized and recited at the local "literaries," much to the chagrin of his very straight-laced wife, even though the stories were never
"off-color." Kloefkorn remembers begging to hear a story, and his grandfather never failed him. It is this grandfather who serves as the model for Alvin Turner in Kloefkorn's first collection of poetry (Interview 1985).

The farm that Kloefkorn was born on was not able to support the growing Kloefkorn family, so Kloefkorn's father Ralph moved his family into Attica, where the economic opportunities seemed better. Ralph Kloefkorn had been working this farm from the time he quit school after the eighth grade until William was two years old. Kloefkorn feels that his father was not too heartbroken at having to leave the farm, and that he probably did not even like farming (Interview 1985). After the move into town, Kloefkorn's father went to work for Harper County. Within the span of a few years, this job cost him a double hernia, a floating kidney, and the ends of two fingers. Kloefkorn's father worked long, hard hours which kept him away from his family. Consequently, Kloefkorn did not have a close relationship with his father as a child; however, he never felt antagonistic toward his father, either. His father was naturally not a talkative person (Interview 1985).

After the Harper County position, Kloefkorn's parents went into a series of small businesses, beginning with a cafe. Then they operated a grocery store, then a gas station, and finally a cafe again. Along with these business changes, the Kloefkorn family moved twelve times within the town of Attica during a period
of eighteen years. These changes enabled Kloefkorn to know his 
hometown, each alley, building, and vacant lot, more intimately 
than did many of Attica's life-long residents. He had access 
to the characters who populate the small town gathering places, 
such as the cafe and gas station, and he has preserved these 
people, with creative exaggeration, in many of his poems.

Kloefkorn describes Attica as a small, "self-righteous" 
community of about 700 people who were "heavy on churches and 
light on sin" (Interview 1985). Attica was "dry" at that time, 
but Kloefkorn is sure that the local pharmacist sold moonshine 
out of his back room. The town offered only Protestant churches, 
and Kloefkorn belonged to the Evangelical United Brethren Church, 
"the poor man's Methodist Church." He attended regularly with 
his maternal grandmother, Anna Yock, and his brother and his 
sister. His parents did not attend church, but they insisted 
that their children do so. These churches also provided necessary 
social gatherings for Attica, as the town did not condone dances. 
Kloefkorn speaks of bearing a grudge against his home town that 
he only began to forgive when he moved from Attica and found that 
it did not have the market on "vice or narrow-mindedness or pre-
judice" (Interview 1983). Kloefkorn also admits to having his 
fill of organized religion, and he has not been affiliated with 
a church for the past twenty-five years (Interview 1984).

In contrast to his relationship with his father, Kloefkorn 
feels that his early relationship with his mother, Katie Marie,
was very close. He describes her as a "warm, outgoing person who has a sharp wit and loves to laugh a lot" (Interview 1984).

Even though she had to work in the cafe and grocery store to help make ends meet for the family, Kloefkorn remembers her as a "home-body," and credits her with giving him the security he needed during his childhood. He remembers her drilling spelling words into him in the evenings, and he gives her credit for his spelling expertise. He records many memories of his family in his poetry, but especially in the volume Houses and Beyond.

Kloefkorn also speaks highly of his maternal grandmother, Anna Yock, "a stubborn German woman who caused quite a controversy in Attica during World War Two" (Interview 1985). Although she came over to the United States from Germany many years before that war, her accent made her suspect during those years. She displayed courage and strength in dealing with her paranoid neighbors. His grandmother was on Kloefkorn's paper route, so he stopped by her house every day to give her a free paper and spend time talking with her. She was very influential in Kloefkorn's early religious training, as she would give him a silver dollar, "that sweet substantial bribe," for going to Sunday School (Dance 8). When he was a teenager, he drove her to the cemetery to visit his grandfather's grave. Although Kloefkorn did not look forward to doing this particular favor for his grandmother, he sees it now as a privilege that she asked him especially to share this pilgrimage with her (Interview 1985). Kloefkorn has written at least ten
poems using his grandmother as a character, demonstrating the
great respect and love he had for this woman.

Kloefkorn maintains that he had a relatively typical
childhood, and he has commemorated many of his experiences in his
poetry. The discriminating reader needs to keep in mind the poet's
license to use hyperbole in his art and should not read Kloefkorn's
poetry as pure autobiography. Kloefkorn suggests the character
Ludi, Jr. is much like his own reclusive side, however, and admits
to being Ludi in the poem "during the sermon ludi jr dreams of the
girl in the next pew" (Interview 1984). But he has not admitted
to being the Ludi who fantasizes killing "one cow, seven frogs,
and fourteen toads to make a fur piece to adorn the shoulders of
his lady fair" (ludi jr 67).

Kloefkorn describes his childhood economic situation as
"poor, but not destitute" (Interview 1985). He had a paper route
and carried such papers as The Hutchinson Herald and The Wichita
Beacon. Evidently he was not oblivious to his economic situation,
because he remembers being "bothered" while around rich people.
He recalls especially the embarrassment and humiliation he felt
when he had to keep asking for the money (eighty cents) for his
paper delivery from the local Chevrolet dealer, who apparently
was totally insensitive to the young boy's feelings (Interview
1985).

In contrast to this sensitive young Kloefkorn, there is
also the turbulent adolescent Kloefkorn who is evident in many of
the poems in luđi jr. Kloefkorn writes of such adventures as gazing through a forbidden keyhole at some unnamed act, and in another poem, watching Cindy Kohlman undress in front of her bedroom window. In these poems Kloefkorn explores the emotional highs and lows of the male adolescent, including a rather crude attitude toward the adolescent female. Kloefkorn admits his early attitudes toward women were those of the stereotypical "macho" male, but he adds that it was just the way he grew up (Interview 1985).

Kloefkorn survived his adolescence and went on to high school, where he was one of twenty-three students in his class. "There were eleven girls and twelve boys or maybe the other way around. I can never remember" (Interview 1985). He participated in football, and calls his degree of expertise in that sport "fair to middlin'," but he admits that his basketball playing left much to be desired. He threw the javelin for his track team because he felt he could not run or jump, and he wanted to somehow participate in track. Kloefkorn recalls that there were no "jocks" as such in his high school, and that the boys went out for sports out of habit, "a non-thought participation" (Interview 1985). His only memory of his senior prom is that he took his high school sweetheart, who later became his wife.

Kloefkorn met his wife Eloise when she moved to Attica in her fifth or sixth year of school. In fact, Eloise's parents owned the only other cafe in Attica. They became sweethearts and were dating seriously by the time Kloefkorn graduated from high school.
They were married during Kloefkorn's second semester of his junior year at Emporia State College. The ceremony took place at a small church in Attica, after which they "packed their belongings, such as they were, in a green Ford coupe and headed for Emporia" (Interview 1985). They did not get to go to Niagara Falls for their honeymoon as Kloefkorn's characters Doris and Howard do in his collection *Honeymoon*. However, Kloefkorn recently was in New York State for a poetry reading and did get to see Niagara Falls then. Unfortunately, Eloise was not along, so it did not "count because it takes two to tango at Niagara Falls," as Kloefkorn sees it (Interview 1985). Eloise helped Kloefkorn finish his undergraduate degree by going to work for Kansas Power and Light in Emporia. Apparently, Mrs. Kloefkorn is a very supportive spouse, judging from Kloefkorn's happiness and success and from certain poems, not only the poems specifically dedicated to her, but also those with the positive wife persona. Kloefkorn revealed that there is some of Eloise in Anna, the wife of Jacob in *Platte Valley Homestead* and in Doris in *Honeymoon* (Interview 1984). From the evidence in his later poetry, Kloefkorn and his wife seem to have a warm, loving, comfortable relationship.

While Kloefkorn was still an undergraduate at Emporia State, the Korean War was heating up, and he was about to be drafted. Instead, he joined the Marine Corps and went into the officers' training program. He took half of his basic training between his junior and senior years of college, and finished boot
camp after graduating from Emporia State in 1954. Kloefkorn's next move was to the Marine base at Quantico, Virginia, where he completed officers' training. While on a thirty-day leave, Kloefkorn learned that the Korean War had ended and that he was to be transferred to Camp Pendleton near Oceanside, California. There he was assigned to a platoon of flame throwers and rocket launchers who had just returned from Korea. Kloefkorn remembers these months before his release in 1956 as "not being a very good experience, not pleasant" (Interview 1985). He felt that most of his battalion acted as if they were still in Korea and could not leave their war attitudes behind them. He also expressed disgust at the unnecessary "grab-ass" he found in the military (Interview 1985). However, Kloefkorn's military experience allowed him to travel for the first time beyond the boundaries of the Midwest, and he admits feeling more tolerant toward his hometown after seeing both coasts. Some of these experiences and attitudes are material for the collection Leaving Town, Kloefkorn's effort to write himself away from the Attica area. He feels now that this attempt did not work because he could not run away from the impressions his hometown made on him (Interview 1983).

After his military service ended, Kloefkorn returned to Kansas and began his teaching career at Ellinwood High School in Ellinwood, Kansas. He recalls many pleasant experiences in his relationships with the students, and only became disillusioned with his position after a conflict with the administration. Along
with his teaching duties, Kloefkorn was responsible for the school's newspaper, and he had determined that certain new equipment would make that publication better. When he asked for the equipment, he was promptly turned down, which would be understandable if there were no funds available. However, this was not the case. Kloefkorn was also painfully aware of the disparity between the coaches' and music teachers' salaries and those of the English faculty. Therefore, Kloefkorn said "to hell with this," and went on to graduate school at Emporia State (Interview 1985). He received his master's degree there in 1958, after which he began teaching at the college level. His first position was in the English department at Wichita State University, where he taught for several years. He then moved his family to Lincoln, Nebraska, and received an appointment at Nebraska Wesleyan University, where he is still teaching.

Kloefkorn wrote his first poem in 1970 after being impressed by some of his Midwestern contemporaries. He was almost an immediate success, and has published poetry in numerous "small" magazines, national anthologies, and collections. His first collection, Alvin Turner As Farmer, was published originally as Road Apple Review, Volume IV, Number 2, Summer 1972, and it went on to multiple printings by Windflower Press in Lincoln. Since then, Kloefkorn has published fourteen additional books of poetry. In the fall of 1982, he was named Nebraska State Poet, which brought him plaudits from his public, students,
and peers. His schedule has been very full since then with readings, poets-in-the-schools programs and writing workshops for Nebraska's elderly, in addition to his regular teaching duties at Nebraska Wesleyan.

During these workshops and classes, Kloefkorn shares his views on poetry in general and on his own writing. He finds it easier to write than not to write: "I don't work writing into my schedule; the writing works itself in, urges itself in, makes a place for itself. Writing is an uninvited guest that takes the head spot at the table, and when it says something like pass the potatoes, I pass them" (Common Ground 30). Kloefkorn has revealed at several workshops that he tries to write the same assignments that he gives his college students, but that other commitments sometimes interfere with his good intentions. In his Collective for the Wichita Beacon, Kloefkorn explores the technique that grew out of writing essays for his class; he calls this "pre-writing the poem, having one piece of writing lead to another" ("Personal Essay" 30). In Part Three of Collective for the Wichita Beacon, Kloefkorn presents several examples of this technique. One of his most successful efforts is "Corn silk," which tells of his father-in-law's funeral. By prewriting the poem in an essay form, Kloefkorn is able to choose from the essay an attitude and a certain word or phrase. He builds on these for a central image in the poem. He works with several striking images in the essay, including the appearance of the old man in the casket and the sound
of the minister's voice, but it is the poet's vision through his
grandson's hair that Kloefkorn takes from the essay to be the
central image in the poem. Kloefkorn uses lines from Ecclesiastes
in the essay which give it a steady, musical rhythm; this is
echoed in the poem, which becomes lyrical in its repetition:

and I turn us slowly clockwise
because I am playing the game called
viewing the world through the upblown suspended
corn silk hair of my grandson: 

corn silk the Chinese elm and the wide green catalpa,
corn silk the red earth fresh from plowing,
corn silk the high August sun, the western horizon,
corn silk the buffalo grass and the near nervous
corn silk sweep of the kingbird,
and under the spray of red carnations
corn silk the mind's last memory of my wife's father,
all the days of his life recounted
as if strands of corn silk
moving light and eternal
in a warm fixed partial
hour of wind.

(Collecting 75)

The most outstanding feature of Kloefkorn's poetry is his
narrative style. The majority of his poems relate stories which
are completely contained within one poem or which are part of the
larger story of the whole volume. For example, Alvin Turner's
story takes an entire volume to relate, while Urie, the barber in
Stocker, is summarized in one poem and never mentioned again.

Kloefkorn's poetry deals with most of life's enigmas: love, hate,
death, birth, evil, and goodness; and he uses ordinary people to
express attitudes about these riddles. Perhaps that is why his
poetry is so accessible to such a wide audience; it is "accessible
without being simplistic" (Common Ground 30).

Kloefkorn is a product of his Midwestern heritage. His poetry reveals his strong belief in the work ethic and in democracy. He exposes the hypocrisy of small town life through poetry just as Sinclair Lewis does through prose in his novel Main Street. Kloefkorn's faith in the traditional family unit is evident throughout his poetry. In conjunction with his belief in the traditional family, Kloefkorn also portrays men and women in their traditional roles. Altogether, Kloefkorn's poetry generally reflects the attitudes, disappointments, and dreams of the Midwestern people.
Kloefkorn's first collection, Alvin Turner As Farmer, explores the intricate relationship between man and the land. Alvin Turner is the main character in this collection, and through him, Kloefkorn tells of the turmoil of farm life. Alvin is a typical farmer in many ways. He is ambitious, independent, and a bit stubborn. He is humbled very often by nature: during a drought, by the death of a child, and especially by the constant presence of the rock:

There is always the rock:
That, first and last, to remember.
The rock, at times at dusk the rabbit,
Robbing the garden in its own leaden way.
And I remember how once
I lost time deliberately,
Reining the team to a stop
And raising the rock high to crush it.
Underhoof it had wanted to trip
Even the full-rumped mares,
And I stood there in the furrow
With the rock raised above my head,
Powerless at last to reduce it
Or even to lose it to sight.
Yet I tried. (For in those days
I had not learned to say
There is always the rock.)
I threw it into the soft plowed ground
And dreamed that it disappeared.
How many times then it rose with the rain
I cannot say, nor can I boast
That ever its usefulness
Was fully cause for its being:
The fences failed to deplete it,
And it collared the hogs but partially.
Yet somehow I expected yesterday's blunted share
To be the last. That part which I cannot see,
I said, cannot reduce me.

(Alvin 1)
It is in this first poem that Kloefkorn introduces the ambivalent feelings that Alvin has toward his land. Alvin is determined to rid his land of rocks, but the rocks seem to literally grow back each year until Alvin learns to live with the rocks instead of fighting them. It is in this struggle with the rock that Alvin displays his will power and his stubbornness.

Farm life is not easy; Alvin gets discouraged occasionally when everything seems to go wrong: "The price of corn is up. / Hogs are down. / The next thing you know / The government will place a tax / On prayer" (Alvin 4). During one moment of despair, Alvin reflects on his image in a photograph:

I stand beside the house,  
Loose inside my overalls.  
At my left the house leans north,  
Unpainted as the day I first restored it.

A walnut tree looms nearly leafless,  
And beneath me breeds a rock.

I posed for this one.  
That is why I am holding my hat.  
I am in the center of the picture,  
So small that I have lost all easy faith  
In human weights, in human measurements.  
(Alvin 10)

The unpainted, leaning house, the almost bare tree, and the everpresent rock all reflect the depression that has almost overwhelmed Alvin to the point that he sees himself as physically smaller than he is. It is at this point that many farmers give up and leave the farm, but Alvin has the courage and determination to accept the land, his inheritance, and to work with it:
I am ready now to admit
That I failed at everything
Except perhaps at one quick span
Of crisis, when I said yes
To my dying father and
To his only piece of acreage.
Gifts are not easy to accept,
Not when they nudge you to
The sudden wall of your stubbornness.
But at thirty I lay awake, alone,
Dreaming growth. I had failed
At everything, but when
I touched the land again
And heard my father's voice
I saw but one image:
Not the pondless pasture
Or the unpainted house
Or even the rock,
But a single seed.
I said, Yes.

(Alvin 7)

Alvin Turner learns to say "there is always the rock," but this is not what makes him different from the typical farmer. It is his perception, his poet's eye that makes Alvin unique.

I am a dirt farmer
Who dreams of poetry.
Is that so strange? Is anything?
I have bent myself thankfully
Over the heat of cowchips.
When the lespedeza flowers
I breathe its blossoms.
The calf I winch to birth
Grows legs like oaks to graze on,
And stuck hogs bleed for breakfasts.
This morning at milking
I kissed the cow's warm flank
And she kicked the milk to froth beneath my knees.
I forgave her,
Then cried with the cats.
Now the manure is in bloom,
Thistles defend the driveway,
And corncobs gird the mud beneath my boots.
Plotting harvests,
I roam my acreage like a sweet spy.

(Alvin 13)
Kloefkorn's creation, this farmer-poet, is very aware of his surroundings. He is a man who "reaches with both arms / To describe a world" (Alvin 21). His world is at times jubilant with life:

Our latest calf has found its legs. 
Behind a slatted gate 
the boys look on, laughing. 
Today the world is upright, 
blue-headed and fine and clear as quartz. 
Don't all men, sometime or other, 
deserve such openings?

(Alvin 25)

This morning I am dizzy 
With the plump brown evidence of fall. 
The granary is full. 
The bucket at the cistern glints its use, 
The baby is solid as a tractor lug. 

(Alvin 11)

The poet's perception is also evident as Alvin deals with the death of his child:

The baby's cough was still in my ears 
When I shot the rabbit. 
Maybe that was why I found it so easy 
To pull the trigger. We needed 
Every peavine our plot could muster. 
I don't know, maybe I 
Should never have started farming. 
I just don't care to see blood 
On the lettuce. But the baby's cough 
Was deep and going deeper, 
And more than onion soup seemed necessary. 
So I shot the rabbit again and again, 
Sliding a deheaded stove bolt 
Down the barrel to dislodge 
The smoke-smeared casing. Then 
In winter the blood was bright 
Upon the snow as I anticipated 
Spring. But the rabbit 
Was always there, like the rock, 
Singular as buckshot. Still,
I did what I could to save the garden,
Even long after the baby was buried.
We needed its savings for other ailments,
Other medicines. So into the seasons
I fought the rabbits,
The chamber of my .12-gauge
Like a little throat, coughing.

(Alvin 9)

Although this is Alvin's story, he is not alone in his celebrations and lamentations. He has his helpmate, his muse, his woman--Martha. Alvin courts Martha in a style that is unique to him. He is blunt, "I need a wife," as one may expect from a farmer; yet he is still the poet, too, when the subject is love and commitment:

I need a wife.
So tonight I'll try some words
I practiced today in the hayfield.
Because I want you
on a leaseless,
unbegged ground,
I'll say,
where I can spread
like ridges burst
to hold you,
I promise
porousness:
I will gather rain
to store against
your tendriled throat
if
on every side
beside me
you will drink
and grow
and clustering
like the readiness
of opened fields
ripen yearly,
daily yield.
Martha Anderson,
I'll say,
I love you.
Will you be
this farmer's wife?

(Alvin 6)

Martha accepts Alvin's proposal and becomes Mrs. Turner. Martha is almost totally defined through her relationship to Alvin and their children. She never speaks in the poems, and the reader discovers her character only through Alvin's words and interpretations of her actions.

Alvin describes Martha several times in the book, and at one point he sees her as a reflection of himself: "I. Alvin Turner. Male. Farmer. / You. Martha. Female. Farmer's wife." (Alvin 56). "Farmer's wife" opens the door to many detailed descriptions of Martha. She occasionally participates in the chores, including chasing pigs, which leaves her "hip deep in muck" (Alvin 4). As is typical for a farmer's wife, Martha is not only asked to help with the outside work, but she also is expected to keep a clean house, raise the children, tend the garden, feed her family, care for their clothes, and provide religious instruction for her children. Her life is Alvin and the children.

Martha is very close to being the perfect farm wife. When the outside work becomes too strenuous for her, she can still be seen cheering Alvin on in his struggle with the land. "And Martha, on the south-porch steps, / Is on her toes, / Clapping like a congregation, / her face apples in sunshine" (Alvin 35). When not helping Alvin outside, Martha is usually found in the kitchen, the center of a farm house and symbolic of woman's
traditional roles. She keeps a neat house; in Alvin's words:
"Martha, waving lye soap, shoos her kitchen clean" (Alvin 48).
Being clean is essential to Martha, which may stem from the adage
"cleanliness is next to godliness." Martha even sees something
holy in the rain water she uses for washing. "I see her with
a dishpan / Catching rain. She wants the water / Straight from
heaven, untainted even / By my soldered tin. With it / She will
wash her hair, / With it rub her clear face clearer" (Alvin 17).

Physically, Martha is described as having a "small nose, /
Active eyes, / And a high forehead that / Under a wrap of hair
shampooed / Will smell like rain" (Alvin 17). Later Alvin speaks
of her standing at the stove, "her body like a wide bed / blanketed
in apron, / sampling broth" (Alvin 20). On one occasion when the
baby is frightened by noise in the kitchen, Alvin comforts him by
explaining that it is only "mother / with her masher / humbling
the potatoes" (Alvin 36). One may gather that Martha does not
have a modern model's figure but probably is not fat. She is full,
wide, strong, and fertile. Neither is she sluggish; Alvin says
she "outhustles the dusk / ... I have never seen a woman so quick,
so deft" (Alvin 23).

To keep Martha from being a saint, Kloefkorn lets her be
frivolous and buy new bedroom curtains without consulting Alvin
first. This is one of the few instances that Martha does some-
thing mainly for herself. Her love of beautiful things and her
assertiveness are exemplified by her actions, and although Alvin
"fusses" about the needless expenditure, he later repents:

i'm sorry
i fussed so
much about those new
organdy curtains they
don't seem nearly so
expensive now
filled as they are
with this wild september
air you know
if i wouldn't have to push
our sheet away
and put something on and
if tomorrow wasn't
a school day
i'd wake the boys and
bring them in to see it
priceless!

(Avin 3)

Because money is not plentiful on the Turner farm, how
to spend it often turns into a problem. This time Martha, as a
protective mother, stands up to Alvin, not for herself but for her
sons. Alvin has bought a new canvas for the combine while the
"boys' shoes turn to skin." Martha does not scold or nag Alvin;
she responds by sighing and "gathering up her yarn." Alvin defends
his actions: "Can't a woman understand / A simple thing like that?
Each man has his own machine / To keep in tune, I say, / And I
don't like to think / He has to sacrifice one vital cog" (Alvin
14). Alvin does not deal with his sons' bruised feet, nor does he
mention any of Martha's sacrifices at this point.

Along with being an almost perfect farmer's wife, Martha
Turner is also the source of religion for her family. It is not
that Alvin is atheistic, but he lacks enthusiasm for the rituals
of formal religion. He daydreams during the sermons at church and
has his highest religious experiences while he is in the barnyard: "O brothers and sisters! / The meaning all is here-- / here in the barn and the milk" (Alvin 29). Therefore, the teaching of religion falls to Martha. She is the one who insists that their baby be baptized when Alvin feels it would be a waste of good water since there is a drought at the time. Alvin agrees to baptism not out of religious conviction nor out of respect for Martha's wishes, but because he thinks "Martha's voice by lamp-light / Is worth at least one waste of rain" (Alvin 12).

Alvin does not dispute Martha's role as the religious head of their family. One Sunday morning when Alvin suggests that they "leave the chores to heaven," Martha does not allow him to stay home and finish the chores. She just urges him to "hustle / Or be late for Sunday school" (Alvin 28). Alvin acknowledges Martha's leadership to his sons, also: "look boys / i don't honestly know / whether jesus wants either of you for a sunbeam you'll / have to check with your / mother..." (Alvin 18). Alvin implies that organized religion is something for women to know about and for men not to fuss with. His only instruction is his nonverbal example for his sons to learn from. He possibly does his sons a disservice by not being as conspicuous with his primal religious feelings as he could be.

Alvin's own religious convictions consist of a deep and abiding faith in the land and nature as a whole. He sees holiness in his land and even in his own barnyard:
Together we make a church of it:
I and the cows and the cats,
and the flies that swarm like music
at the worshippers' backs.

With careful hands
I direct a stream of milk
into the mouth of
one soft beggar.
In the midst of steaming dung
I am more than priest:
confessor to cats,
I sit in total ignorance,
intermediating only substance.
Alpha and Omega are
somewhere in the pasture, perhaps--
perhaps playing brackets with lives.

I couldn't care less.

(Alvin 29)

Alvin is not being sacrilegious with this attitude; he finds
birth, growth, and life itself holy, and celebrates these mysteries
in his own intimate world.

Martha is a farmer's wife, a mother, and a religious
person, but Kloefkorn makes her much more than that. Through his
rich imagery, she becomes a Mother Earth symbol. She is fertile;
she is a nurturer; she represents the full circle of life and death.
This Mother Earth image is extremely old; Mother Earth goddesses
are represented in ancient Egyptian sculpture as well as sculpture
discovered in Ice Age caves. Robert Bly expounds on a physical
description of Mother Earth by noting she has "breasts and hips
immense to suggest her abundance":

This mother, who brings to birth and nourishes what is
born, we could call the Good Mother. She loves children,
rams, rabbits, fish, bulls, all infant things, all things
capable of giving birth. All the vegetation mothers, the
Demeter and Isis mothers, share in this energy. The oven is her womb inside the house; in matriarchies, only women are allowed to use it. Her image is the joyful spiral, the cornucopia on the Thanksgiving table full of pumpkins (though the Puritans did not understand that); she is the seashell, old men hear the sea in her. The ancients usually sculpted her sitting, holding a child in her lap, in her thirties. Her colors are russet and brown; hearths, ovens, and water jars are statues of her. She likes men, though she treats them as children. She threatens no one. She is called "good" because she wants everything now alive to remain alive.

(Bly 34)

Initially, Alvin sees Martha as a fertile being, as he remarks in his marriage proposal to her: "You will drink / and grow / and clustering like the readiness / of opened fields / ripen yearly / daily yield" (Alvin 6). Alvin basked in Martha as a benevolent extension of the land and directly connects her with nature, calling her body "warm as cowflanks" (Alvin 6). Their sexual relationship appears satisfying, at least from Alvin's point of view, because Martha does not get to comment on this:

Though Martha is small
I have yet to have to shake the sheet to find,
Or rouse, her.
Sometimes on an icy Saturday morning
Deliberately I calm her animation:
At such a time I view my hand as anvil,
And leaving it poised gently on her breasts
I slip away to do the chores.

And sometimes, sure enough,
I reappear to find the anvil holding,
With Martha's form beneath it, warm as cowflanks.
And 0! these are the truly sweet, the sacred times.
The anvil gone,
The boys asleep,
The smell of milk and breath and chill
Against my woman.

(Alvin 59)
Martha is pregnant in many of the poems in this collection, and the full, fertile images are connected with her as the one who brings forth life. Even Alvin renews his winter-dulled spirit through Martha's pregnancy. "Martha! / I cannot soon enough uncover you. / To watch you blink again. / To hear you fret. / To part your hair. / To kiss the stretch marks on your stomach's skin" (Alvin 30). Along with the spiritual renewal Alvin receives from Martha, she also provides physical needs for Alvin. As Alvin draws upon her as his nurturer, she is able to respond—not because it is her duty, but because giving is an essential part of her being. When Alvin demands a giant-sized breakfast, it is not a master's orders to his slave. It is a celebration of the fullness and abundance of life which is reflected in Alvin's surge of emotion:

This morning I am dizzy
With the plump brown evidence of fall.
The granary is full.
The bucket at the cistern glints its use.
The baby is solid as a tractor lug.
In the kitchen
Martha glows fuller than her cookstove's fire.
I want a dozen pancakes,
Ma'am,
A ton of sausage,
Half a crate of eggs,
Some oatmeal and a loaf of toast.
Feed me,
Woman,
Then kindly step back!
I intend to do some pretty damn fancy whistling
While I slop the hogs.

(Alvin 11)

Alvin grows to depend on Martha for meeting his needs. She is almost totally unselfish, and Alvin remarks that "the
closest thing / that Martha ever had / to hoarding / was her
hair" (Alvin 47). Because of her unselfish dependability, Alvin
connects her steadfastness to the rock which has become a symbol
of his communion with the land. "Only the rock / Describes such
tenderness! / There is always the rock, / I say for the first
time, / And tonight, Mrs. Turner, / There is also you" (Alvin 31).

Ironically, it is in the middle of the ripeness of summer
when Martha becomes ill. Alvin is so filled with this abundance
of life that he believes "nothing near is ever going to die"
(Alvin 16). He is incredulous when Martha asks to see the doctor.
"I laughed, seeing she tried to. / I called him to the farm, /
Where from that day an order shifted" (Alvin 16). Alvin acknowled-
ges Martha's importance in his life with the words "from that
day an order shifted." He is losing his fertile helpmate, his
provider, his rock. He makes a pallet beside her bed and realizes
she is dying. "Beside, above me, Martha disappears. Can that
be it? (Alvin 16). Perhaps it is appropriate that Martha "disap-
ppears" as symbolic of her earthiness--"from dust to dust."

Alvin wants to leave her grave, saying what he is feeling but can-
not do so:

And now, at the turn of an aftermath,
I wanted some special word to leave her by.
The day had room for words, I thought,
Its topless sky like damp-ironed denim,
Workshirt blue.
From the cemetery hill
All treelines seemed remote,
And beneath my knee
The ground through thick green grass
Rose warm and firm, vast as a comforter.
Yet for all the room I left no word.
And I remember rising
To see what must have been
The reason why:
A crow half the height of a yearling,
Usurping the lawn.
I had grown its unsplit tongue,
And in the evening,
Back home at the hush of my acreage,
I began again by grunting single syllables.

(Alvin 53)

Although Alvin is unable to verbalize his grief, he does what is natural for him to do. He returns to his land, his acreage, for comfort. Since Martha is now literally part of the earth, Alvin again has her as his comforter. Even after her physical death, her spirit still sustains him.

Kloefkorn does not present Martha Turner as a fully developed character because it is essentially Alvin's story, not Martha's, that he is telling. Therefore, she has no voice of her own, and the reader sees her world only through Alvin. Because of this, Kloefkorn does not allow the reader to get close to her or to know her intimately, so she appears superficial and almost more of a symbol than a real person. He only keeps her from being insufferably perfect by allowing her the occasional whim, such as new bedroom curtains.

Although Kloefkorn has not suggested it, Martha may be modeled after his maternal grandmother, Anna Yock. Martha's physical appearance matches Mrs. Yock's because they are both described as "wide." They are both solid, dependable mother images who are devoted to their children, grandchildren, and
husbands. Martha and Mrs. Yock may be from the same era and would probably share similar values, including a strong belief in the work ethic. Although Martha works well as a symbol in *Alvin Turner As Farmer*, she is not a good example of Kloefkorn's ability to write insightfully about women, which is evident in his later poetry.

**Uncertain The Final Run To Winter**, Kloefkorn's second collection, is quite different from his first. It does not focus on a main character with an almost continuous narrative plot. This collection explores such diverse subjects as hints for touring southcentral Kansas and the Loyal Temperance Legion. He includes poetry which is noticeably different in style, leaving the narrative poem and going to the image-centered poem. He also has many short character poems which focus on single traits of his characters, much in the same style as Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*.

There are four "touring" poems in this collection, and each is a montage of images reflecting specific areas of the Midwest. In "Some Directions For the December Touring of Westcentral Nebraska," Kloefkorn's persona is giving his local, expert advice on what to do and what not to do if one would truly see and know westcentral Kansas:

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Turn right at the Standard Station
And head due west. Do not
Eat at the Hungry Indian
In Ogallala or stop for
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Free tea at the Big Farmer
In Oshkosh--By Gosh. My
Advice, Sir: go cold and
Hungry over these wintered ranges

Where only on a cloudless night
Can the sky outstrip the land.

(Uncertain 14)

Kloefkorn rejects the local "tourist traps," and suggests that hunger and cold are needed to be aware of the land's beauty. This beauty is praised also in "The Exquisite Beauty of Southeastern Nebraska" which is written for Cliff Fawl, who appears to be the "he" of the poem. Again Kloefkorn links specific images of the area, and this time he sees them as if they were on a postcard:

Speaks then of the smell of soil
Just last night rained on.
Is there gold in these here hills?
Ask the winesaps at Nebraska City.
The milo. The corncribs south of Bennett,
Dear as inlays
(Did you know that kernels of hybrid seed
Are angels' eyeballs?)
...It is there like a postcard, for example,
This exquisite beauty of southeastern Nebraska.

Enough almost by god to make a fellow
Not ashamed to worship.

(Uncertain 34)

Without apology, Kloefkorn exhibits intense feelings for the land he lives on. In "Midlands Profile: November," he captures as if in a photograph the "country's best side" in the late autumn afternoon:

Slatted grain bins go golden at the cracks.
A red deep-bedded truck sits near a barn,
half buckled under the unloaded pleasure of baled hay.
Two pheasants shuffle husks among the spilled Kernels of dinner.

Towns jut suddenly forward, their elevators warm jowled with grain.

Fat, now, and quietly proud.

(Uncertain 42)

Kloefkorn surly knows this area, and although these poems would definitely be labeled "regional," what better subject for a poet to use than that which he knows best? He injects a sense of history in "Some Directions For the Touring of Southcentral Kansas":

Drive west out of Medicine Lodge, Breathe. The lungs go filled With arrowheads. Weeds, Clumped on mounded clay,

Whistle of painted ponies. Listen. To the south are Kiowas, Whooping history.

(Uncertain 46)

Perhaps Kloefkorn's most beautiful image poem is "Cottonwoods," with its haunting first line:

Teach us of roots, Of the soft diurnal showering of seed. Aware of soil and water, speak then to us of fire: How driftwood moves on borrowed streams, How elemental are the gatherings. With branches splayed Describe the broad blue seasons, And their winds. Say it: Because of me the roosted bird is tiny, The lightning more than likely. However then transected, Chant with your breadth a liturgy of growth rings. Ooze from your impacted pores The simple juice of need: Of roots, becoming as they are, Of the soft diurnal showering of seed.

(Uncertain 36)
The primal elements of birth, nourishment, death, and rebirth are all symbolized in the cottonwood, one of the most inspirational and refreshing of the prairie's flora.

Kloefkorn's expert powers of observation are evident in the character poems in this collection. He presents such characters as Floyd Fenton, who drinks so much beer that "his kidneys could float a cruiser" (Uncertain 17). Another small town pool hall regular is Andy Silcott, whose luck finally changes for the better, and he ends up "playing slop-pool / against a perfect stranger, / Stocker said, / and at the showdown / shutting both eyes / and scoring" (Uncertain 35). Stocker is the town's fountain of information, and he is not shy about sharing his opinions. Kloefkorn uses this character often to comment on other characters; however, Stocker does merit his own poem:

Said himself
he was planned laid out and constructed
on that green bench
in front of the pool hall,
that he had neither first name nor kin:
and no matter where you found him--
playing dominoes in the pool hall,
at breakfast in Bake's Cafe,
picking his teeth at the streetcurb,
whittling on the familiar green bench--
Stocker looked as if he had always been there
and had no intention ever of leaving.
For he was a huge man,
giant everywhere,
especially in the calves and belly,
looking a lot like a baby building.
Said as much himself,
and more than once,
each time grinning like a sophomore.
Even in his casket he seemed larger
than those of us looking on,
as if even in death
he had been given
the last word.

(Uncertain 48)

Stocker makes a few comments about some of the local
females in his town and reveals that he is not the most sensitive
of males. He feels little sympathy for Elsie Martin, a widow who
has a difficult time making decisions:

Her face so knobbed with indecision
You'd swear she has hemorrhoids.
Heard of another case just like her,
He said,
Who starved to death in a grocery store,
Comparing labels.
Always and forever between a rock and a hard place --
Not fishing, quite,
And not quite cutting bait.
So precisely between the devil
And the deep blue sea
That she lives with one foot in heaven
And the other in hot water.
Split her right down the middle,
Stocker said,
And it wouldn't make a dime's worth of difference
Which half you reached for.

(Uncertain 18)

Stocker does not condemn Marvel Roderick, though, because of her
prolific procreation. But, because he does not berate her, one
may wonder if maybe Stocker had fathered one of her children
himself:

so it was actually no single mortal's fault
that Stella Cleveland's husband,
for example,
couldn't control himself --
and that all over Marvel's farm,
in chinks and cracks and unattended doors,
children sprung up full-blown, almost,
almost like flowers.

(Uncertain 26)
Stocker also comments on Mrs. Wilma Hunt, who "knew everything / There was to know / About nothing" (Uncertain 41). Wilma seems to be the typical small town gossip, and perhaps because Stocker does not realize he is her male equivalent, he paints a rather nasty picture of her:

As if someone some time or other, he said,
Had twisted her one notch too tight,
Stripping the threads,
So that now she's like a cattle truck
On its way home,
The wind whistling Dixie
Through the slats of her sideboards,
The whole kit and caboodle
Going hellbent for election,
As Stocker put it,
But running empty.

(Uncertain 41)

The reader cannot be positive that it is Kloefkorn speaking through Stocker, but one may suggest, as Kloefkorn has implied, that there is a side of Kloefkorn that could make these statements. There was a time, also, that Kloefkorn could voice these opinions before he had forgiven the grudge he held against his home town.

Kloefkorn writes of several other female characters in this collection, but without Stocker's help. The first is Zelma Lee Crenshaw, who is the featured attraction at a children's "show and tell" session. Here Kloefkorn captures the ambivalent emotions of the prepubescent girl:

Then did Zelma Lee, as if long at practice,
turn inch by inch to show herself,
her small, flawless, oval face,
her bosoms like grapes,
the joining of her legs
a creampuff neatly creased.
Only in her eyes,
which were green
and quite large for their age,
was Zelma Lee Crenshaw,
who by now was laughing,
crying.

(Uncertain 4)

Kloefkorn's sensitivity here comes from a sympathetic adult's
point of view, but one can imagine the inspiration for the poem
may have come from an actual experience as one of the prepubescent
males in the audience.

Inklings of Kloefkorn's first love are found in the poem
"Virginia Mae Galloway." The male narrator has thrown Virginia
Mae's lunchbox into the cowyard as an adolescent prank to get
attention, and it works because "after school, / under the bridge
near Marvel Roderick's greenhouse, / Virginia Mae Galloway was there"
(Uncertain 38). There is no underlying adult imput with Virginia
Mae; it is pure adolescence, as is the treatment given Miss Mavis
Cunningham. This "rich little rich bitch's girl" is the object of
the fantasies of the narrator and Stud Halsey, who decide to paste
her picture inside the outhouse and "practice their escape" before
it:

But we never quite made it.
Miss Mavis, her eyes relentless,
sat like an untouched goddess
at the center of our fantasies;
her charm, her money were simply too much
for our uncouth, unwashed little bodies.

(Uncertain 33)
The boys satisfy their frustration by tearing up the photograph and dropping it down the outhouse hole. This may be one of Kloefkorn's initial experiences with an unreachable female; however, his experience evidently did not remain so for too long. Toots Slocum is the football cheerleader who is a negative distraction for the football team. "How else explain the opening loss to Kiowa?" The players have:

- goonhands bearing the pigskin
- like a brown leather chalice
- directly to the sideline,
- to the airborne X where Toots Slocum sprawled upright,
- arrested in midcheer,
- her breasts defiant inside a lettersweater,
- the triangle of her tights exposed and magnetized,
- more luminous, more precious than a goalpost.

(Uncertain 29)

She was discriminating with her favors, "for Toots never did screw / an interior lineman," but there is an ominous side to this cheerleader. Not only is she blamed for the Fairport team's poor record (0-8 season), but she is also implicated in Galen Tucker's suicide. According to the narrator, it is not clear which is more tragic.

Toots is the stereotypical high school cheerleader, object of most of the male students' lusts and dreams. Whether or not Toots was actually as sexually active as the narrator claims, this is her reputation. She may have been the victim of vicious locker room gossip and fantasies that were boasted into a reality of sorts. Or she may have been free with her body. In any case, blaming a losing season and a suicide on her gives her a very powerful
position for a teenaged girl, which may be an easy escape for young males who cannot or will not take responsibility for their own actions.

In this collection Kloefkorn includes three poems about elderly women. Ruby, "one of Christ's unwanted many," is described with images of decay. She says "the good Lord never gave her anything," and she has lived her life with this corrosive attitude. It is suggested that she was a detriment to her husband and her children, and finally she rots away: "Rocking her pure despair, / Like a stillborn child, / Into the vast satanic hush of evenings" (Uncertain 21).

Miss Valerie Teal and Aunt Dora are both dying, also, but there is nothing sinister connected with their deaths. Miss Teal is a spinster who sits in "her room, alone, repeating / Chaucer" (Uncertain 44). There is no one there to comfort her in her last hours; although the narrator is aware of her condition, it only brings him thoughts of his own mortality, not of easing her pain. Aunt Dora epitomizes the woman who accepts, without question, whatever life hands her. She responds, "This isn't so bad" as she suffers migraine headaches, an "explosive varicose," her husband's death, and cancer, which ultimately kills her (Uncertain 53). Her attitude may be commendable, but one cannot help but wish to hear her complain just once.

The poem that Kloefkorn writes for his wife on their twentieth wedding anniversary, "Unloneliness Poem," reflects an
uncomfortable, not entirely intimate relationship:

Let us shake hands.
Rub noses.
Press unshod feet.
Skin of skin
we seek
the impervious covering
to wrap our isolations in.

And though it is
as always
only tissue,
brief as morning,
we go at least that
single span unlonely
in the joining.

(Uncertain 52)

Shaking hands is for business people, and rubbing noses is for
playtime with babies. Pressing bare feet together is reminiscent
of Kurt Vonnegut's novel Cat's Cradle, in which rubbing bare feet
together is the substitute for sex. But none of these actions
speak of the mature love that should be present after twenty years
of marriage. Instead, the relationship is reduced to a brief
meeting of skin during which each person experiences unloneliness.
Because Kloefkorn only mentions his wife's skin and not any of
her qualities nor any of what she may have contributed to this
marriage, one may wonder how Mrs. Kloefkorn responded as she read
this poem. There does not appear to be the ideal spiritual union
here.

Whether described by Stocker or by the unnamed narrator,
the women in Uncertain The Final Run To Winter are treated rather
superficially. For the most part, they are presented through an
unsympathetic male narrator, and their characters are limited to single traits which, in turn, are subject to hyperbole.

Kloefkorn returns to a single main character and the narrative strain in his next collection, *Loony*. Loony is an aphasic who lives in a small Nebraskan town, and Kloefkorn uses him as his spokesman to reveal this town and the attitudes of the townspeople. Loony's affliction places him in a unique position because people may say or do things in front of him that they may not do in front of someone they would consider "normal."

Therefore, Loony is privy to a wealth of information about the townspeople, and he also has a unique way of perceiving this information because of his sometimes limited understanding. Kloefkorn plays with the question of who the real "loony" is, Loony or the townspeople. He prefaxes this collection with a quotation from John Steinbeck's *The Pastures of Heaven*:

[Tularecito] can work; he can do marvelous things with his hands, but he cannot learn to do the simple little things of the school. He is not crazy; he is one of those whom God has not quite finished.

The first poem begins "Call me loony," much in the manner of Melville's *Moby Dick* and "Call me Ishmael." One may wonder if the man just wants to be called that, or if it is really his name. In Loony's case, it is a matter of joining the crowd, for everyone calls him "loony" except the minister, who calls him by his given
name, Larry. How is a young man affected by being called "Loony"?

I confess
that I am guilty,
that I am the one with fits,
that when the spittle and the blackness come
I am at the mercy of this gentle town.

I must have chosen
to make a wrong turn in the womb,
and of course there can be no cure:
What I must have done
must still be bouncing
somewhere.

Is it any wonder then
that everybody and his dog
calls me only
by another
name?

(Loony 3)

This poignant confession does not come from an idiot; it comes from a sad person who blames no one but himself for his situation.

Because Kloefkorn uses Loony as a device, imagining what he might think and say if he were able to do so, Loony is much more articulate and insightful at times than is credible for a person with his affliction.

Loony lives alone at the edge of town and eats his meals at the local cafe. He is not friendless, and his closest friend is Troy, who takes care of his money and defends him. Loony gets money from his brother, who appears to be Loony's only living family, but his brother does not take time to visit Loony:

It is from my brother,
who thinks of me
and misses me
and hopes before too long
to spend a visit
or to have a meal
or at least to wave his free hand
on his way through.

(loony 9)

The money is essential to Loony for his survival, yet it also
affords him a short-lived status in the town: "that is why on one
day of the month / they offer me their chairs / why sometimes
even Mr. Terrell / calls me loony, / sir." (loony 9).

Loony cannot always control his emotions, and may find
himself smiling when he is most afraid or angry. Some of the
children torment Loony by throwing rocks at his house when he is
home at night. This hurts him terribly, because it is for these
same children that he dances each Fourth of July:

Last night, for example,
I sat for hours and hours in the dark
counting rocks.
They hit the sides and the roof
like short jabs to the loony's groin,
and he was so afraid and so angry
that he must have smiled
well into dawn.

(loony 1)

Along with the emotional suffering, Loony also has the physical
suffering associated with his attacks:

Sure as kingdom come
the long dark ends.

Sure as Shorty Coleman
has the time of day
the light begins.

And this familiar juice
that drools the lips and chin
will soon be over,
sure as the weld
that keeps the back of loony's head
together.

(loony 33)

The townspeople react generally in a positive manner
toward Loony. It is true that they call him Loony, but it is
not in a hateful manner. Shorty Coleman, the depot agent, calls
Loony "Dogears," and relies on Loony to be the "first to hear the
Santa Fe train" (loony 4). When Lloyd Fetrow's "picture show"
burns down, the townspeople rescue Loony, who is unsure whether
or not the fire might be part of the movie he is watching. He is
rather forcibly pulled from the theater:

Because they said that
even a mongrel has feelings,
and that no respectable,
God-fearing Nebraska town,
without a fight,
lets its loony die.

(loony 11)

Here the townspeople show their ambivalent feelings for Loony:
they rescue him, but their reason is more selfish than not. They
would not want to be known as uncaring people, so they act.

For a young man with so many forces working against him,
Loony maintains a relatively bright outlook on life. He con-
centrates on what he can do, such as helping Mrs. Carlson across
the street (loony 16) and saving the life of an accident victim
(loony 13). Bert lets Loony help him fix bicycles at Bert's
Garage (loony 14), and he racks the balls for the pool shooters
at the pool hall (loony 28). Loony also maintains a fairly
positive image of himself. He beats Pete Corser in arm wrestling, the traditional contest of strength between men at the pool hall, and he earns the name "Strongpaws" and a chocolate malt (loony 24). He feels accepted into the adult world of males after this display, and later Loony proudly states: "Sometimes Mr. Terrell talks to me / like one man almost to another" (loony 61). This feeling of belonging to society is very important to Loony.

Loony realizes that he has the same sexual urges as other men when he sees a woman in her nightgown:

And when I see her there,
the gown like gauze beside her breasts,
the aching that is at my heels
spreads upward.
Then does loony say
to loony's self,
he wants a woman.

(loony 10)

Because Kloefkorn gives no evidence to the contrary, one may assume that Loony remains a virgin, but his ears do not remain so:

Tight as a coke bottle,
Cecil said,
and more ready than rain.
Of course Cecil was only guessing,
but he said that if a girl like her
could find some stud who didn't know
the meaning of enough,
that'd make a pair.

(loony 39)

The girl Cecil refers to is the "little Mendenhall girl" who happens to walk in front of the pool hall where Loony and Cecil are sitting on the bench. Loony is not corrupted by such talk, and in his mind he counters with "it is early spring, / and there
is something warm and sweet / all through the air" (loon 39).
It is to Loony's credit that he does not see this girl in the
same lustful manner as Cecil.
In his own simple way, Loony discovers a substitute for
sexual activity. He obtains a knife, his Barlow, and then proclaims
he is "man enough / to shape a stick" (loon 55). The phallic
symbolism of the knife and stick is evident, and yet it is not an
aggressive attitude that Loony takes as he whittles. It is an
outward show of his manhood, "so they should not laugh" (loon 55).

Religion is a meaningful part of Loony's life, too. He
is baptized: "I did feel different, / as if I had just waked up /
on a cool morning / to find myself / not alone" (loon 5). When
people laugh at Loony for standing in the rain, he demonstrates
his understanding of the water's cleansing properties and of God's
grace:

And the rain that sweeps the street
and makes an echo
on the platform
at the depot
smells like grace to me,
and listen:
grace is where we are
and what we stand in:
this water at the face and neck and hands,
a simple space like this
between the freight train
and its victim.

(loon 15)

At the preacher's camp meeting, Loony comes to realize that "all
of us, it seems, / [are] full of wrath and worms and vinegar, / all
slightly disconnected in the head / and needing mercy" (loony 29).

Loony has the unquestioning faith of a child, the ultimate goal
for Christians.

In several poems in the collection, Kloefkorn approaches
the question of who is really "loony," the young man or the town-
people. On several occasions Loony reveals that he knows more
than the people give him credit for. When Delbert Garlow, who
makes his own beer and "sells it off as rat poison," offers
Loony a drink, he responds, "Nosireebob, this loony wants to say,
this loony wasn't born yesterday" (loony 8). Loony also notices
Roger Catlett, who appears to be homosexual, and Loony realizes:
"sometimes I think that Roger Catlett / should have a nickname
too," (loony 34):

Silk is the look from Roger Catlett's eyes.
Roger Catlett's hands and neck
are lily white.
Roger Catlett walks almost upon his toes.
And often there is someone silk and lily going
Wherever Roger Catlett goes.

(loony 50)

By observing these townspeople doing what they consider to be
normal, Loony appears much better off than some of them. In one
of his man-to-almost-man talks with Mr. Terrell, Loony contem-
plates normalcy:

Mr. Terrell says that sometimes he thinks
everybody in the world
has at least one screw loose,
except me and thee.
And sometimes, Mr. Terrell says,
he wonders about thee.

(loony 61)
In Mr. Terrell's eyes, Loony's case does not appear entirely hopeless. Kloefkorn agrees in an earlier poem in the collection:

Listen:
this is something not so small to have,
and something very large to look for:
cup and spoon and coffee steam,
the hands of Selma from behind the counter.
And he must be the loony
who cannot be thankful
for the merest order:
who can only know that
life is good
when life is over.

(loony 47)

Although this collection is Loony's story, it is essential to note the influence and importance of women in his life. One mysterious woman, Loony's mother, is not present, nor is there an explanation for her absence. Another mysterious woman is the one in the window who inspires Loony's moonlight vigils. He calls her a "wild woman," and he begs her not to be frivolous with herself:

O wild woman,
do not feed your long arms
to the animals!
Who gag and spin
and suck the heavy air,
clutching for dear sweet mercy
at they know not what.

(loony 41)

Loony feels differently about the youngest Cunningham girl, whom he calls a "tease and a thief" because he sees her shoplifting from the Rexall Drugstore (loony 18):

some of us here
in the heat of this jungle
are being burned very badly
by the youngest Cunningham girl.
Although Loony connects the Mendenhall girl with the sweetness of spring in one poem, he later sees her in a more mature light:

**Look:**
there are the melons,
beneath the moon
unplugged and green,
and loony,
choosing.

And **look:**
there is the Mendenhall girl,
 astride the moon
homegrown and firm,
and loony,
bruising.

*(loony 53)*

Loony still does not stoop to the pool hall mentality that Cecil and his cronies exhibit about women.

Selma is the most important woman for Loony. She is his mother figure, a nurturer, and a dependable element in his life.

He begins each day with a visit to her cafe:

**In the mirror is a face**
that only moments ago
was saying hello to Selma,
then to the wedge of Selma's pie
that Selma never fails to give away.
Selma is rich with pie,
uses it to paint the Corners of the mouth
that in the mirror now is opening.
Today the paint is crimson,
and some of it has spilled onto the face's teeth,
who do not object.
From a wide snarl
they are showing themselves
in praise of Selma,
who always tastes like the beginning
of a dewberry day.

*(loony 2)*

Even though there are few women mentioned in this collection,
and even though these few are not fully developed characters, they do play an important part in Loony's story. The Cunningham girl and the Mendenhall girl provide opportunities for Loony to explore his own manhood. Ironically, it is Loony who exhibits the more mature attitude toward these girls as compared to some of the townspeople. Loony is able to see clearly that the Cunningham girl is a thief and that the Mendenhall girl is guilty only of growing up. Without Selma, Loony would have no mother figure in his life. She is his center; because of her morning nurturing, Loony is able to face his day knowing that someone cares about him. Clearly, Loony's life is richer because of these women.

_ ludi jr_ is Kloefkorn's fourth collection of poetry. He maintains a single main character and a narrative strain in the book, although the time frame is much shorter than the one in _Alvin Turner As Farmer_. There are also other noticeable technical differences in this collection. As in _loony_, _ludi jr_ is not capitalized, but in _ludi jr_ Kloefkorn does not capitalize anything else either, except the pronoun "I." He does not punctuate the "jr," nor does he use much punctuation at all in the poetry. He does use the colon, the exclamation point, and the apostrophe in the poetry, but the comma is used only in the titles. Kloefkorn relies on the length of the lines for breaks and does not use a period except in one poem, "ludi jr sits quietly / through the
passing along / of his father's advice," where the poem ends with "say no." The period here at the end of the poem becomes even more emphatic when one considers it is the only one Kloefkorn uses in this collection. Perhaps it is because his narrator is a "free-wheeling" character that Kloefkorn limits the use of restricting punctuation.

Kloefkorn's poem titles in _ludi jr_ are quite long and explanatory. Some of the titles are so delightful and intriguing that the promise of the title is not always fulfilled in the poem. Perhaps one could deal with some of the titles as separate poems:

- **every day ludi jr**
  - eats a package of lifesavers, just in case
  - *(ludi jr 8)*

- **when ludi jr opens his suitcase,**
  - hate malice and afterthought, and one pair of shoes marked hope, fall out
  - *(ludi jr 51)*

- **ludi jr kills one cow, seven frogs,**
  - and fourteen toads to make a fur piece to adorn the shoulders of his lady fair
  - *(ludi jr 67)*

- **after spending 97 years with his nose to the grindstone,**
  - _ludi jr_ admits that he has failed in his effort to invent the wheel
  - *(ludi jr 91)*

Such thought-provoking and grin-provoking titles deserve their own space.
Kloefkorn is quite free with his use of language in this collection. He uses profanity and certain four-letter words, but not excessively, considering his narrator is an adolescent male. Nevertheless, his use of these words is noticeable and may offend some readers.

Kloefkorn experiments with rhythm in several of these poems. In "ludi jr runs all the way around / his paper route without stopping," he uses sixty-two two-line verses to imitate the breathlessness of Ludi as he runs his paper route. Kloefkorn uses the repetition of chorus-like verses in several poems to give the rhythmic quality of hymns:

    and there is mighty rain upon the cellar door!
    and there is mighty lightning at the ventilator!
    and there is mighty thunder thunder thunder!

(ludi jr 27)

In "from an easy chair in the living room / of his treehouse, ludi jr / attends a prayer meeting," Kloefkorn uses actual lyrics from a hymn in an antiphonal manner. The words from the hymn are like a persistent Sunday school teacher trying to get into the young boy's heart: "are you washed in the blood of the lamb?" (ludi jr 58). Finally Ludi answers "I am I am I am / I am I am" (ludi jr 58). Kloefkorn uses this technique also in "ludi jr chuckles like a mad trinitarian / when he is told that the pentecostal church / has burned to the ground." Here Kloefkorn creates a Biblical-sounding chorus that he repeats three times:

    and there was ham and there was sham
    and there was jepheth ah
said the bearer of the news
and all ran out of the ark ah

(ludi jr 84)

The Trinity is also suggested in Ludi's reaction to this news:

and ludi jr says it aloud
precisely three times

tee hee

pee hee

pee hee

(ludi jr 84)

It is this use of repetitive choruses and lines that gives some of
the poems in this collection the qualities of songs. From Kloefkorn's
enforced church attendance while he was younger, he extracts the
words, sounds, and rhythms for these particular poems.

Kloefkorn's narrator is Ludi, Jr. who, in Kloefkorn's words
on the book's cover, is "a small-town imagination, half scamp, half
prodigy, whose words try to come to grips with what his free
wheeling mind both admits and envisions (for better and for worse).
He is a young fellow trying to tell the truth. Thus he is, roughly,
the first half of ludicrous." In Kloefkorn's introductory poem,
the reader is invited "into the ripening of his garden":

come:
into the mulch of ludi jr's mind

hear there such sounds

the mating of worms
the call of coyote
the pecking of small birds

and in the spaces
between the sounds
the germ of silence

(ludi jr 1)

The last line of this poem begs the reader to try "with ludi jr / to understand!" Kloefkorn gives Ludi much to deal with, much to understand. His mother dies, giving birth to Ludi, and his father retreats into his own grief, leaving Ludi to cope with his loss:

my father has big eyes
he says that with the help of my mother
he created me in six days
then he says he rested
the trouble being he says
that when he had his sleep out
and rolled over and shook my mother
she went absolutely rigid
as if petrified
as if dead
which she was
the trouble being
that from that time on
my father lost interest:
six tough days like so much cabbage
down the drain
so he went back to sleep
which is fine for him
but for ludi jr it
doesn't seem the best
of all the best
possible endings
which is why
he is standing just outside
his father's narrow doorway now
his right fist knocking

(ludi jr 49)
When his father does come out, he passes along advice to Ludi in a poem with the rhythm of the Ten Commandments:

- do not shoot the rabbit through either its good eye or the one that most offends you
- do not sit too easily in the lap of you know who I mean
- return the air freshener
- the comicbooks the lifesavers to the drugstore
- remember one of the following:
  - father
  - mother
- do not neglect
  - the days of the calendar
- that bar of soap
  - you carved the other night:
  - shred it like ripe cabbage
  - into the throat of the drain
- do not want the words
  - that the unkind give you
- do not tell betty jean's mother
  - what under betty jean's underwear is growing
- remember this trinity
  - to keep it holy:
  - blood is sour
- and verily verily
  - when the dark asks you say no.

(ludi jr 15)

Armed with his father's advice, Ludi is off to explore his world. He has a vivid imagination as is exemplified in the titles of two poems: "shot squarely in the center of the gut, / ludi jr
manages to hang on just long enough / to finger the culprits" and "who is that masked feller / not on a white horse / not riding away into the sunset? / why that's ludi jr, buster / hanging around to claim his fair share / of the reward." Ludi also spends time catching the "world's great catfish," which makes him "the highest of the world's great catfish / fishermen" (ludi jr 6). And once, just for the pure joy of it, Ludi runs all around his paper route without stopping (ludi jr 9). He has a close encounter with Crocker's dog, after which he plans revenge by plotting to murder the dog (ludi jr 19). Later when Ludi learns that the dog has been killed, he recants his nastiness to the dog, but he warns the dog "do not return" (ludi jr 59). These escapades are not exceptional for a boy growing up in a small town, but Ludi's adventures go beyond the town's limits.

Ludi has access to farm life, perhaps on a grandparent's farm. Here Kloefkorn's attitude toward the sacredness of life is apparent, as it is in Alvin Turner As Farmer. Ludi milks the cow in "ludi jr as conductor, / by which means the cow and the milk-stool / are however briefly united":

and in between
the feet the head the bended knees
of ludi jr
his fingers drawing ropes of
milk like nectar
from the bursting udder

between the sunlight
and the shadow
sits ludi jr
between the swallow
and the damp compacted dung
sits ludi jr

between one substance
and another
sings ludi jr

isn't this the way
that the world begins
world begins world begins

isn't this the way
that the world begins

with two bloods joining?

(ludi jr 7)

Ludi, like Alvin Turner, celebrates the miracle of growth (with
the help of some natural fertilizer):

and it works! it works!
the mulberry and the maize
row and row of cornshoots
the wide exploded kernels of ludi jr's eyes
filled now with the sweet thick rot of life

all part of ludi jr's plan
all green as glory

(ludi jr 21)

Ludi's affiliation with formal religion parallels Kloefkorn's,
too. Ludi is "saved" at a revival meeting, "only seconds before
the end / of the final service," but his "going hot with the holy
spirit" does not seem to work miracles in his everyday life (ludi
jr 16). He takes the words he has heard and preaches them at a
captured chicken at one point (ludi jr 31), and later a delegation
from the Pentecostal Church kicks him out for being too obstreperous:
and the good delegation says
there are times to be quiet ludi jr
you see the lord jesus christ loves a joyful sound ludi jr
but only in the right spaces

and the good delegation
talks on and on
ludi jr shouting
hallelujah! and amen! and glo-reee!
right into the middle of things

until by and by
the good delegation
puts on its hat and leaves.

(ludi jr 41)

The "good delegation" leaves Ludi feeling "darkened and alone";
ideally, this is not the reaction one should have after a visit
from church people. But, Ludi does have a sense of sin and guilt,
which he feels he can alleviate through physical cleansing in the
poem "ludi jr refuses to get out of the shower this time / until
he is clean":

fortunately there seems to be
no end of water:

but ludi jr
steam from his ears like geysers
sends out for more soap

he knows he knows

that already the snow
atop the highest mountain
is thinking seriously
of joining in

(ludi jr 68-9)

Ludi's religious fervor may spill over into his love life,
especially when the sermon is not as exciting as the girl in the
next pew: "how her long blonde hair / must follow her /
everywhere / in potter's grocery / the hair polishing the apples / catching their fire / and at night / oh at night! / the tipends sparking the linen" (ludi jr 3).

Ludi's love life is more fantasy than reality. He borrows Larry Schmidt's new binoculars and spies on Cindy Kohlman who is supposed to have "hair / hair black as a crow" (ludi jr 22). Cindy stands in front of her open bedroom window and apparently has forgotten to close the shade: "and she turns around / and there at the center / sure enough / the crow!" (ludi jr 24). This moment is the culmination of Ludi's evening of voyeurism, and from his reaction, it is an evening of epiphanies:

and ludi jr
aching at his knees and elbows
flap flap flap flapping
wise and warm and wounded

home
(ludi jr 24)

Betty Jean is Ludi's "lady fair," and he connects her with religion, especially the communion service: "it perfect in every way / but one: not enough / my girl like the small cup of crystal / that holds the small dark wine" (ludi jr 39). His love is not always this blissful when he realizes that fantasies are not very fulfilling. Because he is disappointed in love, he "trades places with the bacon at the breakfast table" (ludi jr 25). He enjoys the thought of his lady's searching for him fruitlessly and feels quite safe from any possible confrontation with her while he is so disguised.
Along with his thwarted love life, Ludi experiences real crises in his life. His friend Marvin drowns in the swimming pool, which provokes Ludi to this tirade: "I never want to see / that dirty reckless two-timing piss-completed / son of a bitch ever / again" (Ludi jr 35). Ludi is angry and sees no reason for Marvin's fatal accident, so he takes it as a personal insult. The most overwhelming crisis for Ludi is his mother's death. Because she dies giving him life, Ludi feels responsible:

\[ \text{do not tell me} \]
\[ \text{that there is any other sound} \]
\[ \text{but that of the young woman} \]
\[ \text{strangling on my birth} \]

(Ludi jr 87)

Ludi is a remarkable young man, however, and does not wallow in despair or self-pity. He takes positive action in the poem "in an effort to offset some of the things / that happened during the year, / ludi jr plants a tree":

\[ \text{surely to someone we owe something more} \]
\[ \text{than one simple death} \]
\[ \text{and so it is that ludi jr} \]
\[ \text{plants this tree} \]
\[ \text{let the bark} \]
\[ \text{which seems to hold in everything} \]
\[ \text{be my father} \]
\[ \text{let the juice within} \]
\[ \text{be that woman} \]
\[ \text{that we did not ever see} \]
\[ \text{let the lowest branches} \]
\[ \text{be the hard silver slugs} \]
\[ \text{that were the eyes} \]
\[ \text{of crocker's bulldog} \]
let the next two be the hands
of my friend marvin

let the others
except for the highest
be the words
that ludi jr never said

let the highest
be the first one
that he did

(ludi jr 90)

Again Kloefkorn returns to the belief that comfort and redemption are found in nature, in the acts of planting and nurturing. Ludi's tree planting exemplifies the circular vision of life that is shared by most native Americans. In this belief, death is a natural and necessary part of life because the dead nourish the Earth in order for her to bring forth life again. Ludi demonstrates this belief by planting his tree.

The narrative strain in ludi jr focuses on Ludi, but there are a few females who play important roles in this collection. The first female Kloefkorn associates with Ludi is the little girl in the church pew. Ludi openly worships her as a symbol of purity and goodness. This first little girl may be Betty Jean, who later is proclaimed Ludi's "lady fair."

Cindy Kohlman represents another aspect of woman, sexuality. Through her unintentional revelation at her bedroom window, Ludi learns what a maturing female body looks like and also how his body reacts to this knowledge. His attitude toward Cindy is one of a person looking at an exhibition at a carnival side show. He
shows no sign of recognition of Cindy's existence as a person.

Perhaps because of what he learns from Cindy, Ludi's attitude toward Betty Jean changes from pure worship to tainted lust. Kloefkorn suggests an important adventure in Ludi's life in the poem "ludi jr categorically denies / that he ever had a plan / to bump off (kill) betty jean." The night of March 16 is to be the big night, but evidently nothing happens: "I'm so innocent / I throw off light" (ludi jr 54). Betty Jean's mother is suspicious and warns Ludi in "ludi jr, who knows his place, / speaks respectfully to the guillotine":

```
  yes ma'am I understand
  my hands are large
  yes ma'am
  larger even than I myself understand
  though I do understand now ma'am

  I'm probably stronger
  much stronger than I realize
  I realize that

  and if I turned them loose on someone
  only the good lord himself
  knows what they'd do ma'am
  yes ma'am how far they'd go

  yes ma'am you bet I understand
  I know that betty jean
  is an only daughter ma'am
  her hands by contrast of course
  no bigger than soapbars
  I understand

  I'll never do anything
  that either of us will ever be sorry for
  ma'am
  I do mean it
```
Because Betty Jean's mother forces Ludi to see Betty Jean as a very special person, perhaps Ludi will not treat her as an object.

When one's life is threatened, one tends to change his behavior.

As in *Loony*, Kloefkorn again has a young male character who has no mother. Whereas Loony has a mother substitute in Selma, Ludi has no such person. Kloefkorn does not even give Ludi a grandmother or an older sister to act as his nurturer. Kloefkorn is not suggesting that Ludi can get along well without a mother figure in his life, because he is so painfully aware of his loss. Perhaps because of the emptiness Ludi feels, he is so eager to get close to a female. He needs the physical warmth that his mother would have provided, and since his father is unable to supply this, Ludi chooses Betty Jean.

Betty Jean's mother interferes with Ludi's search for physical closeness. Her mother makes Ludi understand that his behavior is unacceptable, but she is unable to discern what Ludi's real problem is. In her zeal to protect her daughter's virtue, she overlooks an opportunity to provide the mothering that Ludi needs so desperately. Because he gets no guidance from anyone, his yearning for closeness is frustrated, and his only escape is in a bawdy interest in his female peers.

Kloefkorn's male point of view is exclusive in this
volume. There is no hint of the positive aspects of womanhood; he portrays women either as teenaged sexual objects or as insensitive old bitches. Clearly, Ludi needs nurturing, but in this respect Kloefkorn leaves him orphaned.
Kloefkorn's next published collection, shared with fellow poet Hale Chatfield, is *Voyages to the Inland Sea VII*. Kloefkorn's share of the volume includes poems that have been published in other collections, which will be examined in the context of their original publications. Kloefkorn does include an essay that is not included in earlier or subsequent collections.

This essay is in the form of a letter to an audience member at one of his poetry readings; the title reveals the rest of the background information: "An Open Letter to the Blue-eyed Straw Lady on the Front Row, Who Said that She Likes My Poems, Even Though She Understands Them." Clearly, Kloefkorn is still in his long title stage as he writes this.

In this essay, Kloefkorn discusses "understanding" a poem and the possible stages one goes through to attempt this "understanding." He uses his own son as an example in tracing these stages. First in the stage of hearing a poem, one hears and "understands" the rhythm and rhyme present in the poem. After reading a poem, Kloefkorn and his son would delight in playing with the rhyming words, and his son "understood" the poem. The second stage is being able to "see" the poem, literally as Kloefkorn's son who drew a picture of the poem, or else mentally. This visual image is also a step in "understanding," but it should not be the last one. Kloefkorn urges the reader to take
the poem's literal meaning and view it as an analogy:
"possibilities unfold, limited only by the narrowness of the head in which they are unfolding" (34).

But, Kloefkorn warns against thinking the poem is "understood" versus the poem's "being understood." He wants the poem "to have it both ways: to be understood at the same time that it leaves something to be wondered about." He further elaborates: "I am saying that any subject worth its salt is too expansive ever to be covered, completely, by the poet, and too many-sided ever to be assimilated, completely, by the reader" (35). This idea leads to his definition of poetry: "words nibbling at the edge of something vast." He also believes that "it is better to have nibbled and lost than never to have nibbled at all" (35). Kloefkorn suggests that for a poem to be "understood," the reader must be able to put forth some effort if he is to get beyond a cursory knowledge of it.

Although this essay is mainly written to clarify attitudes and ideas about "understanding" poetry, there may be another attitude to consider, that of Kloefkorn toward the woman he addresses. He must have been caught off guard at this poetry reading by her comment to have been moved to write the essay. He is ambivalent toward her when he says he is not sure if he is glad she understands his poems. To be "understood" by a "blue-eyed straw lady" may somehow undermine the integrity of his poetry. She implies that there is nothing left to "wonder about" in his
poetry. Kloefkorn's defensiveness becomes apparent when he belittles her by calling her "Honeyhair" (36). One doubts whether he would ever address a male listener with such a term. He appears to be telling her that maybe she does not "understand" quite as much as she thinks she does and that:

if he believes that complete understanding is a matter only of alliteration or rhyme or lampchimneys pictured vividly, he has stopped growing and should perhaps consider being embalmed or enlisting in the PTA.

(Voyages 37)

Here the use of the generic male pronoun may be deceptive, but the reference to the PTA, an organization seen by many as mainly for socially active mothers, is a clue to Kloefkorn's true intention. He feels threatened by this woman and strikes out by questioning her intellectual abilities. He reduces her to "honeyhair" and speaks condescendingly to her. Evidently, he feels vulnerable in his position as a poet; therefore, he targets a woman who was outspoken enough to say she liked and understood his poetry. Again, one doubts whether Kloefkorn would make such insinuations about a male listener. He ends this letter-essay:

I just wanted you to know that I do appreciate, I think, that you like my poems even though you understand them. Be careful, though, not to say such a thing in the middle of the wrong crowd. Some loosely-strung poet, drunk on honey dew and indirection, might take it personally and never make himself unknown in print again.

And how in the world would the world ever manage to turn without him?

(Voyages 37-8)
One might easily imagine that just for an instant (maybe two), Kloefkorn assumed the role of the "loosely-strung poet," but he seems to recover nicely.

In 1978, several of Kloefkorn's admirers urged him to put together a collection of the poems in which the character Stocker appears. The result was published by Wolfsong, and entitled simply Stocker.

Stocker is the same character who appears in many of the poems in Uncertain The Final Run to Winter. There are several poems in Stocker that are not included in the earlier volume. Among these is "Dollard," about a man who anticipates his death and gives away all his possessions: "Tomorrow, according to Stocker, / he'll shed his boots and his shirt / and his overalls: / next week, likely as not, / his hair and his eyebrows" (Stocker 8). Stocker calls him "generous to a fault" and compares him to Christ, "desperate for a cross."

Stocker's people are not always harmless. "Urie" is the local barber who drinks too much, and while under the influence, he accidentally slices Leland Corser's throat:

Corser, moments before he died, vowed that for such sorry slipshod work
Urie should not be paid.

(Stocker 12)

Stocker says that Urie spends the rest of his life dreaming about fishing. This may suggest that Urie drowns himself or dreams about
fishing while serving a life sentence in prison. Maybe he retires from barbering with impunity and literally dreams his life away while fishing. Such verdicts are possible in small towns.

"Javelin Jim Nelson" may have come from Kloefkorn's own experience as a javelin thrower in high school. Javelin Jim takes his throwing expertise off the track field to "impale Wilma Hunt's sorrel Siamese / against an outhouse door." Javelin Jim is stopped by the night watchman who breaks the javelin to "kindling":

It was the first time in his own life,
Stocker said,
that he ever saw a naked boy
with his clothes on,

and the last time,
he said,
that he ever wants to hear
a dead man cry.

(Stocker 14)

"Harold Spitzmiller" is a character who resembles Loony, but his poem tells of life after Harold's death. Stocker feels Harold is "probably better off / where he is, / amusing the worms," but he also notes that Harold is missed in his traditional places such as the pool hall bench (Stocker 15).

There is only one poem about a woman in Stocker that is not included in Uncertain the Final Run to Winter, and this poem is about Rosetta Thornton. Her story centers on her name, which Stocker believed she would outlive:

But it was Rosetta herself
who failed to keep up the bloom,
so much so that Stocker said
he couldn't any longer bring himself
to call her by her first name.
Like tipping your hat to a headstone,
Stocker said,
and saying How are you?

(Stocker 13)

Kloefkorn does not reveal what causes Rosetta to lose her "bloom," but he alludes to Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet when Stocker says he cannot call Rosetta by her name anymore because she has faded. Juliet asks, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet" (Rom. 2.2.43-4). Perhaps one may conclude that Rosetta, too, has loved someone and lost him, as her "barren dress" may indicate.

Stocker's women are all stereotyped characters. They are not taken seriously unless they are evil, such as Ruby who corrupts her family (Uncertain 21). Otherwise his women are empty-headed gossips like Mrs. Wilma Hunt (Stocker 7) or amoral baby-makers like Marvel Roderick (Stocker 9). Stocker blatantly advertizes his general lack of knowledge about women in his superficial summaries of these women.

Leaving Town is Kloefkorn's attempt to write himself away from the Midwest (Interview 1983). His narrator is a sixteen-year-old boy who runs away from his small hometown in Kansas. His father has abandoned him, and he has recently buried his mother and finds "no strings attached" (Leaving 2):

Mid-August, and something hot as Kansas wind is at me.
I am done with the memorizing
of initials in the bench
outside the pool hall!
I don't care whether what loves who,
or when.
I am not excited even
by the span of Wilma's bosom.
The stories in this bench
irk and depress me:
so deeply-grained their lines
not even Jesus Christ
the Lord of Hosts Almighty
could undo them.

That is why I am leaving town.
I want to carve myself a place
too wide for wooden histories.
Thus I stuff some bare belongings
in a feed-sack--
then looking back
spit stoutly on the sidewalk.

There is a sizzling.
So long, suckers, I say.
I'll see you in the funny papers.

The narrator, "Maddog Miller," is ready to see the world and make
his mark in it. He is "free, white, and at least sixteen," but he
still "notches every other tree" with his knife as he goes, which
suggests that he is not ready yet to cut all connections to home

This collection provides a vehicle for Kloefkorn to write
about people and places other than those in Nebraska and Kansas.
He has a few poems which deal with specific places, such as his
poem about Oklahoma: "Everything in Oklahoma has rusted out, /
except for the rust itself" (Leaving 3). Maddog Miller sees
Washington, D.C. through his own Midwestern viewpoint:

Mr. Lincoln is square
and solid as a John Deere tractor.
He sits upright, not quite at ease,
in his eyes the glint of small slaves

(Leaving 21)

Kloefkorn mentions other specific places throughout the book, but usually the references are to the women at those places, such as the St. Louis woman, the waitress in Sedalia, and the girls in Tijuana. These references reflect the main interest of Maddog Miller.

Kloefkorn brings in another character with whom he may want to work as he works with Stocker in his earlier collections. This character, Old Pierce the One-Eyed Prophet, appears in four of the poems and utters less than witty axioms. Old Pierce has this to say about wisdom: "it's where you find it: / one place as good as another" (6); about wandering: "even the unmarked creek / meanders somewhere" (30); and about death: "just another whore" (41). Old Pierce also decrees that "28% of all the globe / is dog-turd ugly" (45). Old Pierce the One-Eyed Prophet has a narrow vision of the world, and his aphorisms lack the wisdom one might expect from a character with such an intriguing title. If Kloefkorn intends Old Pierce to be a failure at wisdom, then Old Pierce fits in well with the cursory treatment Kloefkorn gives to all of the places and people in this collection.

As Maddog Miller jumps from state to state, he searches for some unnamed revelation, but he finds only one-night encounters
with disreputable women. Maddog meets the mechanic's ex-girlfriend Jolene, who "screws like a mink" (Leaving 4) and the St. Louis prostitute, whose "joining of her legs, / as it turns out, / is smoother than a snooker cue" (Leaving 10). Maddog experiences a "bourbon sweetheart" in New Orleans, whom he pays for with "bourbon bills" (Leaving 17). In one poem, Kloefkorn rushes Maddog through three states: Wyoming, where the women "are wearing the hemline / half a hand above the knee;" Montana, where their underwear reflects "the brightest flushes of the rainbow;" and Nevada, where "they are carrying themselves / on high, enduring heels, / and the hair this year / is long and blown and light as lace" (Leaving 26). It is interesting to note that these states are remembered only through the women, or certain parts of these women. Kloefkorn presents a stereotypical situation: a young male looking for sexual gratification and women who have nothing better to do with their lives than to provide this gratification.

Perhaps Maddog is not searching for answers to life's mysteries and is interested only in looking for the easy woman. He is quite honest about his intentions while he is in Tijuana:

Ole, I say,
and tossing a wide hat into the ring
I probe my pockets for a red condom.

Just a couple more passes
and I figure I'll be ready
to thrust home.

(Leaving 48)

Maddog is especially thrilled with Hollywood and the beautiful
women there:

O sweet Jesus,
I have died and gone
a long way from my birthplace!
Here in a land of manna sweet and lotus
the blooms are all the best
of the prairie flowers
I ever knew.
They are rosy and ripe
and rich as pearly gates,
and what is more they
keep on coming coming coming
coming at you.

(Leaving 45)

The imagery in this poem indicates that Maddog finds a type of
salvation in these women, and that this may be the culmination of
his search. It would be an easy assumption to conclude that this
is all the young male narrator has on his mind except for one poem:

I am serious when I say
I need her.

She swears softly, then begins to cry.

She knows her own appeal, she says,
like the back of her withered arm--
then presents to me that darling defect,
as though with unstrung flesh and bone
to confront a lie.

I lift the arm,
cool and dry and light as an eggshell.
And though it is smaller even
than I thought possible,
clinging and queer to the touch,
I am serious when I say
I need her.

(Leaving 15)

It is difficult to imagine that this is the same narrator
who has a fixation on the "rumps of cheerleaders" (Leaving 29).
This narrator seems genuinely interested in a woman whose notable
part is her withered arm, not her hair, breasts, legs, or rump. Because this poem is so different from the others in this collection in its attitude toward women, one must wonder if the narrator is "serious" when he says he needs her. The purpose of Maddog's sudden desire for this woman is unclear. She evidently fulfills some need he has; she may even be a savior figure for him. He touches her arm much as the sinner who touched the hem of Christ's garment and was healed. The narrator repeats that he needs her, not that he wants her or loves her, and it is a curious relationship because it goes no farther than the narrator's declaration of need.

Kloefkorn's treatment of women in Leaving Town is stereotypical and superficial. The narrator sees women only as a means to his own gratification, and even when he does notice the woman with the withered arm, it is only to express his need for her. The narrator has no intention of fulfilling any of these women's needs, nor does he care if they have any needs. The narrator displays an immature attitude toward women, but then he is just that, an immature male.

Kloefkorn shares his next collection, Cottonwood County, with fellow Nebraskan poet Ted Kooser. Kloefkorn's part of the book is entitled "Beginnings," which is quite appropriate. Kloefkorn seems to have written himself into a corner with Leaving Town and his other male-centered collections. Something, someone, is missing. Up to this point, Kloefkorn's writing is male-orientated,
not just because the collections have male main characters, but because the ideas, attitudes, and emotions seem to be products of Kloefkorn's male psyche. In "Beginnings," Kloefkorn starts to explore the female side of his psyche and begins his development as an androgynous being.

In the first poem of this collection, Kloefkorn uses birth imagery, but his narrator is only a spectator at first:

This morning the leaves on the cottonwood
made their first apparent move,
the new blades of grass,
timorous and delicate,
presumed to breathe.

And all morning I loafed beside the house
to watch them.
I figure this,
that someone has to mark such things,
someone know, beyond all other knowing,
that recurrency is something more
than a primate's dream.

And this:
that evidence of the most essential type
is what we break our legs for,
the bud about to burst,
the grassblade rising
from its dram
of water.

O I have been in the earth too long, too long!
Yet I am not so much amazed
as I am dumb
to fill again this space
expired from.

(Cottonwood 1)

The narrator himself is part of this rebirth after he laments "O I have been in the earth too long, too long!" and is speechless because of his experience. This poem differs from the
attitudes Alvin Turner expresses concerning his part in nature's
miracle of growth and spring:

Today the world is upright,
blue-headed and fine and clear as quartz.
Don't all men, some time or other,
deserve such openings?

(Alvin 25)

Alvin feels men "deserve" such beginnings, whereas the narrator
in "Beginnings" takes a much humbler attitude toward the miracle
of rebirth.

Kloefkorn includes several picturesque poems in this
collection. Among them is "Along Highway 2 in Central Nebraska,"
in which the narrator gleans "truth" from the roadside signs and
scenery along this highway. In the second part of "Lake Leba,
Early Spring," Kloefkorn returns to the rebirth imagery and
associates it with water:

Out of the small wet tombs of our dreams
we have come alive,
and along a stretch of granulated beach
we gather now,
our backs and thighs and bellies
taking in the offspring
of a generous sun.

A south wind rises.

The water begins to swell and crest
and spill itself
again, and then again,
along the sand.

We move into the nearest current,
skin and sun, wind and sand and water
becoming one.

The word in the throat of the meadowlark
is precise and clear:
O nothing short of death,
sweet death, sweet death,
can keep us from reviving here!

(Cottonwood 20-1)

The imagery associated with the farm in Alvin Turner As Farmer is changed in "If Only I Can Shake Off This Dream All of The Others Should Follow." The narrator, now an outsider, talks to the people who bought the farm:

just over there are what my nights alas are made of and he nods but he does not understand

he believes in the future the poor
demented bastard believes in the future and I want to explode I want to bleed and quarter him on the spot I want to throw my arms around him and crush him to the earth and call him father father father father

(Cottonwood 22-3)

The narrator longs for an idyllic past that has eluded him and he also longs for his father. The land, here, does not offer him comfort but seems, instead, to haunt him with sleep-interrupting dreams.

Kloefkorn seems to have a different attitude toward the land in these poems. He seems to question a simple faith in "the rock" and the inevitability of spring. In "Words for a Long Mid-Winter Night," the narrator pleads for reassurance that spring will arrive. Instead of stating this truth, he questions:

Can't you sense it swelling?
Can't you hear it growing?
O can't you see that nothing dead
  can last?

(Cottonwood 18)

The narrator is not entirely sure that spring will arrive.

Later Kloefkorn refers to spring as a "cruel ambrosia" in
"Persephone, In the Midst of a Late May Weekend":

But even now, against my fingers,
The petals of the rose go pale.
I understand. I yield. In time I'll go,
My mother's wayward loveliness, to Hades,
While truth once more comes clear:
There is no way to save this lovely flower.
This fact is father of the myth.
So starts, so ends, all family trees.
I live to touch the dry seeds into power
And giving birth sow death immortally.

(Cottonwood 19)

The reality of death's inevitability must be part of the understanding of spring and rebirth, and as Kloefkorn explores these concepts in these poems, he also tries to understand them.

Kloefkorn's narrators in this collection appear to be Kloefkorn, himself. Kloefkorn is writing from the viewpoint of an adult, but still reminisces about his boyhood. In "Riding My Bicycle Without Hands Down Huntington Street," he wishes that Virginia Mae Brown could see him now:

... she most certainly
  would repent that most wretched of all denunciations

  don't look to walk me home
  after choir wednesday nights
  and don't come sniffing and ogling
  into the kitchen for me
  billy you creep for you
  I have snapped my last bean
the poor child did not realize
the extent to which at forty-six
I should come to master this bicycle.

(Cottonwood 2)

This narrator is Kloefkorn, retaliating for a snub from
Virginia Mae some thirty years ago. This is childish, perhaps,
but Kloefkorn has said that he wants to hold on to the adolescent
part of him, of which this is an example. But these poems differ
from putting his personal experiences into Ludi's story. These
poems come from the viewpoint of a wiser man. In "At a Basket-
ball Game, 1970," Kloefkorn remembers his own basketball days
that "somehow one day disappeared":

The scene is ax sharp,
Bright as tilted knives.
O clamor that knows no other sound!
O Can-Can cleanly timed!
O firm fleshed scissors
Snipping at the bone-white edges
Of all the fast breaking lives!

(Cottonwood 7)

Kloefkorn laments the quickly passing years that have consumed
so many lives. He repeats this emotion in "For Doris Higgenbottom,
Dead From Epilepsy At Age 14." In this poem, he expresses
remorse for his former classmate's untimely death. Kloefkorn
reaches back to his past with the empathy he has now as an adult
in an attempt to alleviate someone else's suffering or perhaps
to assuage his own guilt for his immature reactions:

Doris, is it too late,
or much too soon,
to join the mute, the halt, the lame?

(Cottonwood 15)

Kloefkorn as narrator remembers his grandmother and
their annual New Year's Eve together in "New Year's Eve," but
he brings to this reminiscence his adult knowledge of what else
was occurring at that time:

later as a man I will imagine this wide explosive woman
receiving the news that the son of the son of her brother
was bombed dead by Americans less than a month
before the ending of the second great war
her false teeth meanwhile are the clicking of small
bayonets...

(Cottonwood 4)

This adult consideration is evident also in the poem "My Love
For All Things Warm and Breathing," which is written from
Kloefkorn's position as a teacher. Although he still notices
Laura Buxton, who apparently lives up to her name, Kloefkorn has
expanded his interests from noticing only shapely women to seeing
also the sad girl in the back row and the boy with a weight
problem:

I have seldom loved more than one thing at a time,
yet this morning I feel myself expanding, each
part of me soft and glandular, and under my skin
is room enough now for the loving of many things,
and all of them at once, these students especially,

(Cottonwood 13)

In this position, Kloefkorn expands his own image to include
a nurturing, caring personality that has not been evident in his
earlier poetry.
Kloefkorn appears as a father in his own voice in this collection. His children are growing up and leaving home, which he records in "Out-and-Down Pattern":

Late into an early morning
I stand on the front porch,
looking into my hands.

My son is gone.

(Cottonwood 11)

Kloefkorn's image as nurturer extends even further in "My Young Son, Sleeping." In this poem Kloefkorn feels emotions that he attributes to women, and yet he accepts them as part of his own psyche:

Neither wife nor mother,
I yet take liberties:
into the lively drone of night,
on linen white as the first cloud,
I heal again--
this time completely,
this time

O my last young son!
from the outside in.

(Cottonwood 12)

Kloefkorn also records an incident that his daughter experienced in "I Don't Like Having a Grasshopper in My Hair." Jimmy proves the hero as he kills the grasshopper and "rescues" Tracy Ann, and Kloefkorn explores the idea of another man in his daughter's world:

And when she sits on my lap,
and my hand hops upon her head,
I grow grasshopper legs for fingers.
They are slim and hard,
and though they mean no harm
they touch the fair small scalp defensively,
aware of Jimmy.

(Cottonwood 24)

Tender nurturing and protective caring are new emotions for Kloefkorn's poetry, especially when Kloefkorn uses his own voice as narrator. These poems are personal, written especially for his sons and daughters, and reflect an awareness of the cycle of life. Children are born and nurtured; then they leave home and later have their own children. Kloefkorn does not see this as an ominous foreshadowing of his own mortality at this point, but as an affirmation of the continuation of his blood after his death. He has captured these feelings in the poem "Benediction," which was written for his daughter Terry and her Dave:

We open our hands
to discover them empty,
the fingers small birds
ecstatic in their flight.

Let them fly.
From their vantage point in space
let them see both the measure
and the worth of distance.

Let them see.
Let them lower themselves
to gather all the tidbits
all birds gather.

Let them gather.
Let them fix the pieces,
end on end,
delivering at last the shape of hands.

Let them deliver.
Let them bring their own creations
back to those places
where the touch had been.
Let us touch  
This skin to that skin,  
let us join  
these hands.

Let us open them  
to discover them full again,  
these bones, these bones,  
these wild and delicate bones  
alive with children.

(Cottonwood 34)

Kloefkorn reveals himself as husband in this collection,  
and although this is not the first time he speaks as husband, there  
is a definite change in his tone. In Uncertain The Final Run To Winter, Kloefkorn describes a careful, cool relationship with his  
wife of twenty years (52). But in Cottonwood County he is thrilled  
to the point of inspiration just by a new leather coat his wife  
has given him and writes forty-one lines in its praise:

And he knows, even before he tries it on,  
that it is going to fit,  
that it is immeasurably perfect,

(Cottonwood 16)

It is almost as if Kloefkorn for the first time realizes all of  
the ordinary things his wife does for him and just now decides to  
celebrate this fact. In the fourth part of "Lake Leba, Early Spring," Kloefkorn experiences a special moment with his wife that  
seems to renew their relationship:

Wine in the bloodstream of the campfire,  
and the sticks and stones of ages  
let go their passion.

We raise our glasses
to touch each other's hands
Shadows on a soft, shifting screen
project the sound
as, from across the water,
other human voices reach us,
and once again, once yet again,
in mutual awe and love,
we drown.

(Cottonwood 21)

Although this moment at the lake may be meaningful for their relationship, the change in Kloefkorn's tone probably cannot be attributed to one night by a campfire. The change in Kloefkorn's attitudes is apparent and found first in Cottonwood County.

Kloefkorn's next collection, Not Such A Bad Place To Be, includes poems that describe Nebraska, explore fatherhood, and consider death. The attitudes expressed in this collection are those of someone who tries to convince himself that life is not really so terrible, but he is not very successful. Even the title reflects this attitude: instead of A Great Place To Be, Kloefkorn qualifies the statement with Not Such A Bad Place To Be. The use of qualifiers occurs frequently in this volume, and it suggests a struggle within Kloefkorn as he wrote these poems. The growing awareness in Cottonwood County that Kloefkorn expresses toward his children and wife is not found in this collection. The overwhelming emphasis on death in this collection may indicate that Kloefkorn wrote many of these poems before some of those in Cottonwood County.

Not Such A Bad Place To Be may refer to Nebraska as is
exemplified by the first poem which has the same title. In this poem, Kloefkorn lists all of the calamities these people endure before he uncovers the precious instant that enables the people to survive the unpleasantness:

Even so,
it's not such a bad place to be.
At certain moments
an element swells the lungs
with something akin to faith:
and all else falls away
as if dark appendages let loose
when the child stops dreaming.
And we know what we know so clearly
that not even the heft
of whatever follows
can altogether obscure
the meaning.

(Place 9)

In another poem in this collection, Kloefkorn makes a random tour of Nebraska, noting such specifics as the "young lover not far from Thedford / [who] spitshines the manure / on his best boots" and the "covey of quail / [that] struts the main street of Brownville / like vaudeville troupers up from the dead, / claiming first privilege" (89). These specific references capture the character of certain Midwestern scenes which may not be entirely flattering. However, Kloefkorn does end on a positive note:

Nebraska.
This place, these people
blaze like firebushes.

Water and soil and wind,
color and light and heat:

Something forever plump and firm
above the ground
the itch forever
of something small but ripening
underneath.

(Place 90)

The title of this volume may also refer to a rather
resigned attitude toward life itself. Although Kloefkorn in-
cludes poems that explore the happier side of life, there is an
undercurrent of uncomfortable questioning beneath the surface of
the poetry. Kloefkorn seems to be asking, "Is this all there is?"

Kloefkorn unleashes his accurate perceptions of the
ordinary in poems which picture The Moose Lodge on a Saturday
night, a Thanksgiving dinner, and a particular evening in November.
Along with the gentleman at the pool table and the woman who "threw
up her toenails," the narrator especially notices the "lean girl in
a seersucker blouse / [who] is beginning to shimmy" at The Moose
Lodge. The narrator looks for more entertainment from the girl
than she can provide:

And if that gal in the seersucker blouse
had something more than peanuts for mammaries,
she'd be slapping herself, and her partner with her,
clean into the middle of next Wednesday.

(Place 22)

This narrator is from the same school of thought on women that
Maddog Miller (Leaving Town) attended. However, the narrator's
attitude probably fits the location as well as the punch cards,
the sizzling steak, and the Blue Ribbon beer do. All are indic-
ative of a "redneck" attitude which includes machismo, gambling,
and eating one's steak rare.

Kloefkorn's Thanksgiving scenario is filled with memorable images: "Uncle Howard's new blue shirt / gapes like a goldfish" and "the flesh on Beulah's upper arm / hangs so low it / brushes the broccoli" (63). But the typical family scene gives way to melancholy:

You can do the dishes, Vivian.
I'm going outside
to dropkick a football
through the Virgin Martha's window.
Curious I am, and lonesome,
to know the sound of something trapped escaping.

(Place 64)

Even after describing the "color and the charm / of this November day," (78), Kloefkorn slips into a foreboding mood:

this day, adrift in time,
trying its freckled hand
at being holy.

And

except for the long shadow
of the year before

succeeding.

(Place 78)

Kloefkorn's discouragement with life is evident in other poems of this type. He summarized a drought: "It's no use: /
Hell has moved her headquarters / into southeastern Nebraska"
(51). In "The Loose Dog," Kloefkorn takes a stray dog and makes a child killer out of it:
and most folks agree that we're lucky as sin
not to have lost a good deal more
than the one little Williamson.

Which, they say, is what
Ethel herself is saying,
she thumbing to death
the pages in her Old Testament,
looking, they say,
for the right reason.

(Place 58)

Kloefkorn appears to focus on life's atrocities in these poems,
and then cry out for an explanation.

Kloefkorn seems overly concerned with death in this volume.
A large share of the poems consider death as the main idea, and
many imply death as closely related to the main idea. Kloefkorn
is reluctant to accept the inevitability of death, but he does
become resigned to mortality and perceives much of the world as
being doomed. In "Adjusting to Light," Kloefkorn compares living
to getting one's eyes accustomed to a bright light:

We conclude this or that,
our eyes now closed, now opened,
our friends dying like unschooled urchins
all around us.
We peel back the lids,
searching for a way out.
It is there, of course.
We call it a looking forward
to the rising of another sun.
We call it tomorrow and tomorrow
and tomorrow,
and speak of children.
We call it (if pressed too near
the edge of breaking down)
the hallelujah!
gloss of resurrection.

(Place 13-4)
Now the promise of tomorrow and children and resurrection is spoken of as an illusion. He repeats this feeling of hopelessness and unbelief in "No Longer Believing in Wind": "Our flights are fancies / no more enduring than the movements / of small wings" (52).

Although Kloefkorn keeps referring to the inevitability and finality of death, he denies his own mortality. Perhaps he is seeing himself in the not too distant future in "The Old Man Totters, Refuses To Believe His Age":

On his path to the bathroom
the old man finds himself
against the wall,
the off-white paint flowered now
with the splotches
at the back of his hands.

This has happened before.
But the old man is not yet ready
to believe it.
He was not put into this world
to stumble as if drunk or deficient.
He says this to the stool as, leaning heavily,
he relieves himself in the general direction
of porcelain.

On his way back to the living-room
he is steady again.
There is no cause for alarm.
There will never be.
Settling into the familiar folds
of his favorite chair,
the old man wonders:
has there ever been?

(Place 65)

Kloefkorn repeats this denial in the poem about his grandfather's funeral: "before the last fine grain of Scripture / scours the coffin, / several of the stoutest mourners' eyes / already are at
the axles of their Fords and Chevys, / wanting out" (88). The denial continues in "Caboose": "Death. Kiss it off. / Have it straight from the horse's own / calciferous mouth. / There is no such animal" (94). Even in a poem that mocks the end of the Gremlin car, a bitterness creeps in: "Let us believe that though we die, / crushed spines along the guardrail, / we shall live again" (80). Kloefkorn reiterates his version of the human condition in "In Defense of Hope":

We must not despair.
All over the world people are marching on, surely some of them learning something.
Hot air goes up, cold air down.
Each snowflake is unique.
Thus the worst perhaps is ended, or is only a league or so away, is certainly out of the reach of our younger children, or, at the very least, our children's progeny.
In any case, we must not rush headstrong into things.
We must proceed slowly and with caution, our teeth gritted.
The sun rises in the east.
Gravity is that which pulls our bodies toward the center of the earth.
We must not permit ourselves to be kicked around.
We must hang on.
We must learn over and over and over and over again everything that we have learned.

(Place 61)

Kloefkorn summons the rock from Alvin Turner's pasture and makes it a god that has the power to intervene in this human tragedy, but the stone has only one chance to speak and does not want to waste it. In this poem, he lashes out against this god:
Thus season after season
we plow and plant around it:
plow and plant, plant and harvest,
harvest and plow
around it.
Yet it remains silent.
We see it unmoved, and we tell ourselves
we understand:
it awaits that most propitious moment.
And more than understand, we worship:
praise to the stone,
all glory to the silence at the center of the stone,
to the budding of its thick compacted tongue,
to the wise, heavy heart engorged with mercy,
that has the power, but lacks the will,
to put an end to indeterminate suffering.

(Place 85-6)

This anger and resentment gives way to resignation in the last
poem of this collection, "Final Reflection # 14." The narrator
feels that perhaps there are questions that a man is better off
not knowing the answers to:

There is so much not to learn,
so many sprouts to leave untouched,
to let grow....

Let us walk then without shoes
over the old earth.
Let us feel how at each falling step
we take root,
how at the lifting of each foot
we become more delicate than air.
Let us breathe in, to live by,
that which we cannot answer.

(Place 100)

In this collection of poems which contain such a dreary
outlook for mankind, it is important to consider Kloefkorn's
attitude when his voice is that of a father. In "Exigencies,"
the narrator advises his baby son, and ends with hearing his
grandson's philosophy:
We talk mostly about the good old days, though we agree that most of those days lie somewhere ahead—
if indeed (as my older son's first son eventually informs me) they lie anywhere at all.

(Place 93)

The tone is still not very hopeful in "Exigencies," and it remains so in "A Story of Fathers and Sons." The feeling of barely having enough time to know or to learn what is really important in life is repeated in this poem of identities:

It is an old story:
the father rubbing the sleep from his eyes
barely in time to notice
that the son, who stands
rubbing the sleep from his own green eyes,
is at last ready:
and they open themselves into each other
as if close, distinctive veins unseparating.

I am your father, says the father,
and I, the son says (all eyes now equally obtaining),
am your son.

(Place 82)

In "Dialogue With a Child," the father takes time to answer a young son's questions at bedtime, yet the comfort the father gives is tainted:

In darkness the child needs to talk.
It is touching with words that he strives for,
He refusing to yield to the borders
That surround him and hold in the newness.
So I, blindfolded by time,
Give him lies that with the years he must master,
Until not even fear can sustain him:

(Place 41)
The denial, the lies, are passed from one generation to the next; the narrator projects a grim future for his son.

Kloefkorn's women suffer, too, from and because of the prevailing attitude in this collection. He includes three poems describing the deaths of old women. Mrs. Bonnie Harter Ballard's coffin "went into the earth partly open-- / agape like a wide pine mouth, / they say, / begging to differ" (34). This image may be comic, but it is the sardonic smile that Kloefkorn evokes here. Kloefkorn's German grandmother appears in "World War Two" in which the narrator admits having "mustered hate for her, when the headlines were bad" (45). The imagery in "At the Death of An Old Woman" is even more revealing:

Yet gall is on her big as marbles
as she pleads my hand.
Her touch is a butcher knife to knuckles.
Grasping my fingers,
she cuts them off, one by one,
and wailing rattles them
like baby's plaything
to the grave.

(Place 47)

Not only is Kloefkorn depicting a horrible end for this woman, but he is also making her an agent of death as she tries to take the narrator with her to the grave. None of his male characters are presented in a similar situation.

This attitude is not limited only to elderly women, as is apparent in "In Praise of the Girl I Am About to Marry, I Think." The use of qualifiers indicates the skeptical, undecided attitude of the narrator about marriage and his intended bride:
You are somewhat immaculate,
I believe, pedestaled as you seem to be
Upon what at first glance resembles
A high polished throne --
Though perhaps, under better light,
It is more a kitchen high chair,
And you on it seem it almost seems
To be putting the dishes away,
Badged by a thin, clean saucer.
But of course you are a nonpareil,
Or beautiful, at any rate,
At least not unattractive,
And beauty anyway comes from the inside.
I hear your loveliness in words,
Each a tiara, or at least a small brooch,
Singing a bit like quaint invisible birds
And calling me to come to love,
At least to dinner,
Where honey dew and manna
Burst the banquet that
Disguised perhaps as mashed potatoes
Calls me in to dine. It could be that
As soon as I wash my hands
I'll join you,
You who are somewhat immaculate,
I believe, girdled as you seem to be
By sapphires at your fragrant zone --
Though perhaps, under better light,
It is more an apron,
And the sapphires (if they are sapphires) might
Be the light's reflection upon your hair.
Anyway, at this point in my life,
Which is more than likely a crossroads,
Or perhaps a detour,
I am not altogether certain that I care.

(Place 16)

That the narrator is not sure he cares at the end of this poem
may be seen as a positive response because he sees his intended
wife as she is and not as a queen. However, it is more likely
that he really does not care whom he marries because of an
attitude toward this institution which is succinctly expressed
in "Legerdemain":


We must stare into the mirror
and marry the second woman to the right,
must honor her all the days of our life.
We must not be reluctant to correct her,
or to chop off a finger,
or if the going gets tough
to bury her eight paces south of the henhouse.

(Place 48)
The narrator speaks of the inevitability of marriage and discord
within marriage in the same language as Kloefkorn uses for
bemoaning man's unavoidable mortality. Even after a couple
experience a delightful romp in the park on an autumn day,
Kloefkorn's narrator interjects a heavy note:

Suddenly then it is winter.
For a period of time as yet unspecified
we'll stand silent in a
new blue slant of afternoon,
waiting for something
white and distant
to begin.

(Place 68)
"Winter" suggests death, and the "something white" is not the
white of virginal purity; it is the terrible white of a cold,
blinding blizzard. The imagery does not imply a happy union.

Kloefkorn may be speaking as himself in "Homebody,"
whose narrator closely resembles the old man in his chair (65).
This narrator refuses to go out of the house for a card game or
a party with the Governor; not even an orgy tempts him:

But I say No, thanks.
I say, This is my year for staying in.
Besides, I say, I'm smack in the middle
of a middle age,
and I'm reading a book
that is making me young.
Four children are in it, and a woman: outlandish how they move and speak and seem almost to give a hoot for one another.

The woman, for example, is in her own nightgown, speaking to her husband, who is smack in the middle of the living-room, thumbing a book,

(Place 95-6)

This narrator is not thrilled with his life, nor his wife, but has decided to tolerate both for the duration. The revealing lines are those which describe the family and how they "seem almost to give a hoot / for one another." Even the love within the family is a sham. This is the voice of an unhappy man who is discontented with his life but not sure he can change it or that he wants to. The poem is indicative of the overall attitudes of bitterness and hopelessness that are prevalent in this collection.

Let The Dance Begin, Kloefkorn's next collection, was published in chapbook form in 1981. The title suggests a new attitude, as "dance" implies a celebration. However, the title may be misleading. Kloefkorn's outlook is not always positive in these poems. He speaks in his own voice in many of the poems, and most of these poems deal with his family.

Kloefkorn invokes his grandmother in "Grandmother Comes Back From the Grave To Tell Me Not To Forget To Go To Sunday School," but as an adult, he has to disappoint her:
O God of Rote and Ritual,
get thee behind me!
And you who move now
at the center of this world
I move in,
grant me the strength to break,
and break again,
all dear and soulless vows
that must be broken!

(Dance 8)

Kloefkorn has broken his ties with the church his grandmother and
he attended during his childhood, but he has not denied the
existence of God. He asks his perception of the Higher Being to
help him break "soulless vows," but there is no hint of what soul-
ful vows he has or will take to replace these.

Kloefkorn still seems to be having difficulty coming to
terms with a Higher Being, and this at times becomes intertwined
with his relationship with his father. In "Poem for My Father,"
Kloefkorn describes a narrow, confined existence for his father
and does not see any change for the better:

aware that the Lord of us all,
of each mite of the Great Speckled Bird,
helps those the most
who by their own bootstraps
aspire to nothing.

(Dance 9)

He seems unhappy about his father's situation, but he has not
yet assumed responsibility for him.

Kloefkorn's attitude toward his children seems ambiva-
alent, too, in this collection. On his youngest son's seven-
teenth birthday, Kloefkorn responds by burning their barn down in
"The Barn I Wrote About." He implies that because so much has changed, he needs to symbolize it with this drastic move: "0 to be born in a blazing loft of love! / 0 to be awake and sober when our son, / laughing, straw like shoots of honey / in his dark thick hair, / comes home!" (15). Kloefkorn speaks of being "born in a blazing loft of love," but the barn's burning is indicative more of a destructive attitude than a nurturing one. He writes another "Benediction" poem in this collection for his daughter Tracy. It is a marriage poem with images of the full moon and the river, both suggesting fertility, and it ends: "Let the dance begin" (5). This poem reflects hope for his daughter's happiness, with none of the wariness evident in earlier poems.

Another encouraging poem is "Vespers, Early Spring," which is dedicated to Kloefkorn's wife, Eloise. In this poem the narrator, who appears to be Kloefkorn himself, realizes his relationship with his wife is not what he would like it to be:

I want to love you
while we are yet alive.
This is more to ask maybe

than is reasonable. And
I do want to be reasonable.
I want to be reasonable

and to love you
while we are yet alive.
Our days stretch out before us

long and unendurable.
Which is why we
must love each other
while we are yet alive. 
Not rushing into things, not 
unstrung or shrill. But 
cool and steady and 
above all else reasonable. 
We must want to love each other 
so much that even the air has 
taste and texture, so much 
that the earth beneath us 
finds no joy in things 
perpetual. Stand still! 
While we are yet enabled 
to know fear, the tremble of 
my hand on the sunlight 
at your hair, 
while we are yet alive, 
O God, dear God, 
I want to love you. 

(Dance 12-3)

Kloefkorn "wants" to love his wife. This suggests a conscious 
effort on his part to better their relationship. The poem also 
reveals his awareness of the necessity to fill his life with 
sincere relationships and to pursue them actively. The narrator 
speaks genuinely from the heart, with no impossible promises, 
but with a true desire to improve the relationship. This desire 
is a positive step in Kloefkorn's maturation in his relationships 
with women.
Chapter Four: Recent Works 1981-1984

In Platte Valley Homestead, Kloefkorn returns to the farm milieu, and in addition to the rock, he incorporates the river. He has the farmer, Jacob, and the farmer's wife, Anna; but there is no last name here, nor is there a father from whom the farm is inherited as was the case in Alvin Turner As Farmer. Kloefkorn uses only the male point of view, again; however, Jacob talks about Anna in the majority of the poems. Alvin seems more concerned with his pledge to his father and less with his relationship with Martha; Jacob sees only Anna as his partner in this risky endeavor.

The Platte River provides a rich and varied backdrop for these poems. The seasons are noted with the river: spring's floods, summer's dry riverbed, winter's ice. The river exemplifies both the destructive and the creative aspects of nature: the floods, which often kill animals, uproot trees, and drown humans, also leave a new layer of fertile soil for those who survive (3).

The river is also a cleansing, purging agent:

I want to wash myself in the water
as if to say, Let this be the end of everything
sordid and uncalled for.
Clinging to this body is the dross
of spite and rumor,
from upstream the aftermath of blade
and of sudden storm.
I want to walk unmasked, unshod,
into the river, there in the water to wash myself
until the skin gives way to something solid,
something at last, though burnished, undulant and warm.

Anna, come with me.
It is night, cold to the bone, and beneath the feet the sand that today was so tough with light is shifting.

(Platte 74)

The river's shifting sands remind Jacob of his own transience and also of the futility of trying to possess his land: "In early summer I bring my boot down / hard against the ground: / the current swallows at a sudden gulp / a brick of shoreline" (29). Jacob has to rearrange his fenceline as the river eats away the bank.

As with Alvin Turner, nature supplies Anna and Jacob with many calamities. Kloefkorn condenses most of these disasters in one poem which enables the reader to understand the difficulties involved in farming near a river:

The March sun shining, the flood water rising.
Anna with her skirt held high above the knee shouting Fire! Fire!
I drop a sandbag to grab a shovel to clear a break to halt the flames that through an expanse of infant pine and cheatgrass are sweeping closer, cracking, hissing, smoking. The milkcow meanwhile drops to her knees, the victim of bluetongue.
A rat the size of a haybale rises on his hand legs on the back porch, gnawing. I drop the shovel to run to the bedroom to gauge the baby's forehead with the flat of my palm. The water now is burying the front lawn. I meet Anna in the living room. She is bent over a bread bowl, disgorging a rope of green-to-crimson phlegm.
She straightens. She opens her eyes. You look tired, she says. It’s the dropsy, I tell her. Just too damned much Platte River serum. We hold hands. We ask each other, Has anything been left out? We pause, we scratch our heads. The wind howls, shattering windows. The garden! We arrive in time to watch the army worms march off with the corn. Anna says, I think I feel a headache coming on. We return to the house for aspirin and a double bourbon. An arrow with a sound like whoop! almost loses itself in the birch of the builtins. The note reads Ice. Anticipate the ice. When the ice is thick enough we’ll chop you down. The eyes of a wildcat appear at each transom. That should do it, Anna says. We pour another drink. We touch glasses. We write our names in the dust that is sifting like fallout onto the pink linoleum. We sleep, and ache and the thrill and the threat of life everlasting passed on.

(Platte 63)

Although Kloefkorn seems wild with hyperbole in the poem, it is not too far from the truth. Because of all the troubles they face, Jacob and Anna see life everlasting as a "threat," if it is anything as rough as this.

Anna and Jacob are not affiliated with an organized church. Anna is not the religious head of her family as Martha Turner is, and Jacob never falls asleep during the sermon as Alvin Turner does because Jacob does not attend church. This does not mean that Anna and Jacob are not religious people; instead, they profess much the same as Alvin Turner does: a belief in the holiness of nature. Kloefkorn refers once to organized religion when Jacob
notices the Pentecosts baptizing members in the river, and he is inspired by the beauty of the morning: "Now the sun comes all the way from heaven / to thaw the faces of the Pentecosts, / and I swear that if the word / was something yet / to be devised by man, / I'd almost rise to sing the music with them" (55). Jacob is not derogatory toward the Pentecosts and shows respect for their ritual, which is a direct contrast to Ludi's attitude toward organized religion (Ludi jr 84). Jacob also respects the Indian burial mound on his land and plows around it (70). He muses about the first Pawnee woman:

And of the corn she carried always
in a bundle,
dry and sacred,
the holy mother
the giver of life,
in search of which I turn the soil
in circle after circle below the mound,
in awe and fear
of who we are,
of what we might become,
of all we cannot live to understand.

(Platte 70)

Jacob acknowledges female origins of life and treats this knowledge with awe and fear. As Jacob plows symbolic circles around the mound, he, too, is part of the ancient ritual celebrating the mysteries of life.

Like Alvin Turner, Jacob is both an ordinary farmer and an extraordinary farmer. He plants, fences, harvests, milks, and feeds his animals just as any farmer would. What makes him extraordinary
is his perception of his surroundings. He sees his fences keeping out unwanted animals, and then perceives "a thin wall / cold, invisible" growing between Anna and him (9). He sees a fence that he dislikes in his own marriage and relates this to the fence he built around his land. Jacob is extraordinary in the lengths he goes to entertain himself and provide enjoyment for others. For his barn dance, he constructs a dumbwaiter to ease the food, women, and band to the haymow instead of letting his guests contend with a ladder (30). Jacob skinnydips with Anna in the stock tank, which is not the recreation of the ordinary farmer (46). One could not imagine Alvin and Martha in this situation.

Kloefkorn lets Jacob be more relaxed than Alvin ever is. Unlike Alvin, Jacob drinks alcohol and occasionally gets inebriated. He calls himself the "drunken German" in one poem (18), and in several others he is seen imbibing. Jacob reacts to a long-awaited rain by taking his shirt off and standing on a rock with Anna (40). Even though Alvin would appreciate the rain as much as Jacob, Alvin would not strip and dance in the downpour.

Jacob accepts his own mortality. When Anna asks why he has whittled a walking stick, Jacob replies:

Because I am two persons, I tell her:
the one who fears growing old,
the other who can hardly wait
to test his whittling against
the diminishing returns of death.

(Platte 42)

While he plows, Jacob feels the tug of the earth and acquiesces to his eventual death with a calm attitude: "Yes, I would lie forever / in the field that irks me, and repents. / So deep the plow could never reach me, / shallow enough that I might watch it / passing over" (65). Jacob is attuned to the natural cycle of life and death.

Like Alvin Turner, Jacob is also a father. He is especially nurturing in his relationship with his daughter, Katherine. She has collected seven stones from the river and later has thrown them back in. That night she wonders if she can find those same stones in the morning, so Jacob and she go out and look:

at last her
fists are thick

with seven small stones.
We take them home and dry them off,
feed them, give them names,
show them to all our friends.
When they are fully grown

we carry them back
to the ongoing lotus
of the river,
where one by one,
in mutual joy and pain,

we throw them in.

(Platte 48)

Jacob shares this special experience with Katherine and makes a
noteworthy statement about parenthood in this poem.

Jacob and Anna have five children, but only three survive to reach adulthood. Like Alvin and Martha, Jacob and Anna lose their children to disease: "And I think of Ruthie and George / lying cramped in a corner of the hayfield" (10). However, Katherine, Karl, and William grow to adulthood in these poems. Karl and William help with the farm as they grow older and "wash the homestead topsoil / from their plow-weary skin" (57). The adult Katherine "is the linden / we planted in a field of grass / for luck" (58). The outside world wrecks the isolation of farm life when war calls William away. He becomes one of the "missing in action" (60), and Jacob laments:

Nothing more empty
than the kitchen
in a farmhouse
with the face of a boy
who never knew a stranger
reported gone.

(Platte 64)

Jacob appears more intimate with his children and takes a more active role in parenting than Alvin Turner. Perhaps this is because Kloefkorn was a grandfather when he wrote these poems and realized the importance of a male's influence in a child's life through his experiences with his grandchild.

Anna is an intricate part of homestead life on the Platte River. Jacob is dependent upon her not only for moral support, but also for her physical labor. She is much more Jacob's equal
in farming than Martha is Alvin's. Anna is seen leading horses, witching for water, and milking cows, back to back with Jacob. Anna also will take a drink with Jacob, which Martha would not dream of doing (16).

Jacob describes Anna quite differently than Alvin describes Martha. Martha is often pictured in her kitchen, cooking and cleaning. But Anna is pictured in much more sensual postures. Jacob tells of her lying naked in the river:

Now indigo her eyes,
the tips of her breasts
beneath the overhand of willow
cochineal...
Anna on her back in the shallows,
that lovely wreckage of copper
and silk and Java,
its dark hair moiling suspended
on the crest of an inland sea.

(Platte 27)

The images are exotic, not those one would readily connect with a farmer's wife. Anna goes skinnydipping with Jacob in the stock tank and later lies nude with him on the platform of the windmill. Jacob mentions "the length of her body / from ankle to thigh / to nailtip" after their "mad gleeful naked romp" (46). Anna even takes the initiative in sex as she lures Jacob to the storm cellar under false pretenses:

I join the full sweet intention of her guile.
How clean the world then,
how circumscribed
the field we lay on:
there and over there
the green, the golden harvest,
here and over here
headlands furrowed damply with a broom,
with space enough for constants such as we
to turn upon.

(Platte 59)

Anna sets the scene among the harvest greens and golds of her
canned vegetables and fruits and brooms the floor into furrows for
them to lie on. Kloefkorn alludes directly to the earth and to
"planting" in this poem of fertile images.

Because Kloefkorn connects Anna to the earth in several
poems, she may be seen as a Mother Earth symbol. When she lies
directly on the ground, Jacob calls her the "first / truly
authentic mammal" (12). Anna's knowledge of witching for water
intimately connects her with the earth: "When the willow
quivers and trembles, / and plunges downward, / Anna shouts Hoka-
hey! / as if her own sweet skin, / and not the earth's beneath
her, / had been broken" (7). As Alvin Turner does, so Anna, too,
looks to the land for comfort and renewal. She searches for
spring in the flower patch: "Anna shouts, I see it! The Draba!"
(25). When the world around her seems to be collapsing, Anna
burrows into their hillside for comfort. Jacob follows her but
is not sure why: "And where, and in whose blue-blooded name this
time, / are we going?" (16). Instinctively Anna knows why the
land comforts her, but Jacob has to ask.

In Anna, the Mother Earth imagery is much more sensual
than the imagery associated with Martha. Anna lies on the river
bank drinking the fullness of summer (27). She and Jacob stand
on the rock during the rain, and her nipples, cooled by the rain,
become visible: "hugging and laughing, our wet lips touching. / With the tips of my fingers, / wrinkled with rain, / I can read each of the vertebrae / that linked by fibrous pads / shape Anna's spine. / Seed we are, and will always be" (40). Later Jacob and Anna slop the hogs through the mud and lose their shoes and stockings in the thick mud. They then wash each other's feet: "Anna, do you remember how that day / we soaped and rinsed and toweled each other's feet? / How bitter cold they were? / That night our bodies / purged and supple beneath the quilts, / how sweet the wine, / how warm?" (41).

Anna, like Martha, is associated often with full and round imagery and with being pregnant. Jacob and Anna are sleeping in the full haymow when he remarks: "How fine to have the harvest in, the age complete, another age beginning!" (47). Jacob also relates Anna to the fullness of the apricot harvest: "and in bed Anna's face / like a harvest moon / between the pillow / and the cool white sheet / now rising. / The tip of her tongue / ever so un- begrudgingly / against the tip of mine" (45). Again the sexual imagery is evident with the fertile images.

In order to complete the moon imagery, Jacob confronts Anna's menstrual cycle. Anna secludes herself in a cave at this time, much as the Native American women did. Jacob responds:

O half moon, hear me!  
What is all this fuss and bother  
over blood  
that for age after age
has been coming and going?

(Platte 37)

In sympathy and maybe out of a desire to feel as close to Anna as possible, Jacob slices "a game of tictactoe / on the skin of [his] belly" (37). Kloefkorn takes this imagery much farther than he ever did with Alvin and Martha.

After the pregnancies, the nurturing mother is presented. Anna epitomizes this as she nurses her baby in the rocker handed down from her mother. The mystery of motherhood eludes Jacob, as does the song she hums that he just "can't put his finger on" (49). Symbolically, Jacob sits on a milkstool beside her and is very aware of the magnitude of meaning in what he observes:

Yet I cannot imagine the universe managing without him,
how this one arrived on time
and in flawless form,
every inch of its way measured out
as if a soft deliberate tune,
many hearts with the beat
of one heart,
naturally.

(Platte 49)

Here Kloefkorn echoes his own poetry and the line "Let the dance begin" as he speaks of the baby's beginning with a "soft deliberate tune." Kloefkorn presents another picture of Anna as the nurturer when she tries desperately to keep her garden alive during a drought. Against this scene of arid desolation, she nurses her baby, "survival of the gentlest / bearing down" (38).

Several times Anna responds to Jacob more as a mother
would than as a wife. When Jacob throws a childish tantrum and
vows to give up the farm, Anna refuses to give him any argument
but her presence. Jacob admits that she is right:

If I leave,
it is that road which winds
only into myself
that I must take,
and holding Anna until the bones
are close to breaking
I recant: there is no earth
but the piece of earth
we walk on, no death
but the willful pose
of separation.

(Platte 11)

Kloefkorn is not presenting Anna as a surrogate mother for Jacob,
but he is exploring Anna's innate ability for nurturing not only
her children, but also her husband, when he needs it. This is a
full expression of her womanhood. Anna's ability to nurture Jacob
is apparent when after images of milk and honey, Anna says, "0
Jacob lay your head down gently / against my breasts" (12).
Although this invitation may be interpreted as sexual, it is much
more likely to be maternal because of the reference to milk.
Jacob acknowledges Anna's nurturing him as he sees himself like
a small boy "sad and grateful / deep in the sugar and the dough-
dust / of a woman's apron" (66).

Although Anna appears as a Mother Earth symbol, her
character is much fuller than a symbol. Kloefkorn presents her as
a helpmate, as a sexual being, and, ironically, as one who toys
with suicide:
Each morning with a length of metal thread
Anna hangs herself by the neck
from the most convenient ridgepole,
each afternoon an overdose of poison.
In the evening, then a butcher knife
across the ripest vein.

And if it wasn't for the terrible cost,
she tells me,
I'd help myself to the rifle
and the shotgun ammunition.

(Platte 19)

Clearly, something is wrong in Anna's life. Living on an
isolated homestead, losing two babies, and coping with nature's
harshness may have taken their toll on Anna's sanity. To help
her through the day, she asks Jacob to take her with him on his
round of chores: "If you look closely, children, / you can see /
in the upper right-hand corner / two figures moving together, /
between them nothing more / than a strand of wire" (19). Jacob's
ability to rescue Anna seems tenuous at best.

Curiously, Anna survives Jacob and lives to see the farm
and household goods sold:

Now how much for this old buffet,
the auctioneer had said, waving a cane,
how much for a piece of furniture
you couldn't wear out
in a month of Sundays?

And the widow at the edge of the crowd,
hands playing near her throat
as if a ritual
at the blood-red flow of rickrack
on her dress.

(Platte 60)

Again the suicide imagery, now a ritual, is present; but Anna,
like the buffet, survives.

Anna is Kloefkorn's most fully developed female character up to this point in his writing. She grows from a starry-eyed bride who plants flower beds to a throat-clutching widow who sees her whole life sold at an auction. She is able to assist Jacob through her labor and fortify him with her nurturing. When she suffers, she seeks comfort from Jacob, but she is restored only through her contact with the land. She is a modern Mother Earth symbol who teaches Jacob much about what is essential in life:

No matter the size of the acreage, a quarter here, an acre there tacked on, it comes to this: supper in a bright warm kitchen, the river in a circle flowing, clear water over fine clean sand, small world but 0 good God above! Earth Mother here below! immense! Immense!

Amen.

(Platte 51)

Through Anna, Jacob's life is greatly enriched and blest. But Anna does not receive the same enrichment. In her old age, she clutches at her throat and the "blood-red flow of rickrack / on her dress" (60). This is not the imagery associated with a
contented woman. This imagery suggests violent dissatisfaction
and an awful death for Anna. For one who gives so much, this end
is tragic.

When Kloefkorn returns to his childhood in his next
collection, Houses and Beyond, he writes in his own voice. He
thinly disguises his brother and sister with pseudonyms and
different birth orders, but "Franklin" and "Janet" are his
siblings (Interview 1985). He includes romps with his playmates
and his first impressions of the world of sex. Through the many
poems about his mother and grandmother, Kloefkorn reveals the two
most influential women of his childhood.

Kloefkorn prefaces this volume with a quotation from
Loren Eiseley's "The Mist on the Mountain," in The Innocent
Assassins:

Father, mother, take me back even though life was harsh
in the small kitchen.
Who would have dreamed
the universe so large? Through the mist on the mountain
I descend, beating the moth wings of thought,
hovering before the window
watching an hour long vanished,
myself, who never grew up, but simply
disappeared with all those others.

Kloefkorn captures this same nostalgic feeling in Houses and
Beyond.

Kloefkorn looks back "through the mist" to recall several
friends and their adventures together. In "Behind the Movie House,
Early July," Kloefkorn smokes "drip-grind Folgers rolled in toliet
paper" with his friend Norman as they look for the lark they had just killed earlier that morning. Kloefkorn's adult voice interjects: "Years later I'll discover / that the lark has only five notes / it can sing" (42). This combination of boyish mischief and adult wisdom is the basis of Kloefkorn's longest poem to date, "Spelling Summer." He introduces this thirteen-page montage:

   How do you stop the sun?
   How do you hold those children
   that most dearly in school
   you move among?

   The body, electric,
   seeks always to be so
   variously sung.

(Houses 67)

Kloefkorn "sings" of Ray Asper, whose pile-driving moves enable the Bulldogs to beat Plainview; he dies of leukemia thirteen years later (68). The third grade boys hold contests to see who can urinate the farthest, and Robert E. Lee Toar Grant holds the record for distance (71). Kloefkorn and Ray play hooky in order to listen to the World Series, but they are caught by "the bifocaled eye / of Mollie Cloud Huston," the English teacher (77). Kloefkorn utilizes the ubi sunt formula in this poem incorporating the childhood experiences he longs for with terse lines from various sources. He includes his class motto: "With the ropes of the past / We will ring the bells of the future" (67), and he paraphrases William Faulkner: "Someone said, / I have an idea. / The past is not dead, it is not even past" (74). The effect is comparable to having
Kloefkorn's life "flash before his eyes" and having a running commentary to augment it.

Kloefkorn displays ambiguous emotions toward his siblings in this volume. He is not happy with the new baby sister that his mother brings home. He blames Franklin for Janet, because mother seems to have "caught" the swelling from Franklin's swollen head. Kloefkorn warns Franklin never to fall off the porch and bruise his head again (13). When Janet moves in with grandmother, both Kloefkorn and Franklin see her in a different light when she comes to visit:

And each time, 
until the new wore off, 
we spoke of people 
and of places and of things 
as if we were not really 
closely related, 
not really family at all, 
but just old friends. 

(Houses 18)

The child's viewpoint that siblings must be adversaries evolves to the adult's understanding of siblings as allies. That this relationship is between a brother and a sister is especially meaningful in light of Kloefkorn's relationship with his brother.

Kloefkorn is very close to his brother Franklin. Their relationship is elemental, and Kloefkorn often connects their activities with a specific part of nature. The boys work together to build a treehouse in "In the Treehouse with Franklin," and together they learn the "music of wood":

...
you are rising to join me,
run by rung
by rung by rung
to join me,
to sit with me here in this gathering darkness
together
to hear the song.

(Houses 49-50)

Their connection with nature is further exemplified in "That
Voice from a Brain Evolved to Dream," in which the brothers build
a cave. They enter the womb-like chamber:

We have little to say:
the thrill of the cave has reduced us,

Earth, dark earth, is at the nose.
If we could see we might see
fingers scraping clay, inventing claws
We speak, when at last we speak,
the croak of single syllables.

(Houses 35)

That Kloefkorn uses primordial imagery to enhance this adventure
with his brother indicates the deep feelings he has for Franklin.
Although Kloefkorn may not have been conscious of this bond as a
child, he is fully aware of it as an adult.

Kloefkorn repeats primordial imagery in "Killing the
Swallows," as he and Franklin perform their bloody ritual in the
hay loft. This is a male initiation ritual, but there is no
older male to act as their leader. Therefore, the boys act in-
stantively, and Kloefkorn relates their ritual to "tribesmen
touch[ing] their fingers / to spears honed bright / with spittle
and flint" (33):

We will kill as many of them
as we have stomachs for,
and call it, if anything, man's need.

(Houses 33)

Kloefkorn and Franklin allow the cats "to do what remains of the honors" (33). The brothers are bound even closer through this experience. Franklin is so important to Kloefkorn that Kloefkorn dedicates this volume to him: "dirty little beautiful little lizard, / who scrubbed and thus unadorned / is my brother, / John" (xv).

Kloefkorn recalls his first awareness of sex in several of these poems. His first infatuation is with his teacher, Miss Watson, who helps him with the zipper on his coat. He delights in her closeness:

her face is fair and oval,
her lips the color of young carnations.
She smells like rain on the leaves of ancient trees.
Her body is the music
that if I dare to move
the smallest fraction of an inch
I'll sway to.

(Houses 69-70)

The imagery connected with Miss Watson is pure and natural. Her fragrance arouses primal feelings in the young Kloefkorn that he links with the smell of rain "on the leaves of ancient trees."

Miss Watson remains his virgin idol until "with the tipends of her holy hands / she fixed forever that / God-damned zipper" (70). Kloefkorn is conscious of his reaction to Miss Watson, but he is unable to articulate his feelings as a child.

As he matures, Kloefkorn's senses remain ever alert to any
intimations of sex. In "Taking the Milk to Grandmother," he overhears older boys talking about Virginia Mae, "who eats like a horse and screws like a mink" (29). In a grand series of connections, Kloefkorn links Mr. Thorton's minks, the smell of mink, his grandmother's kiss, the milk bottle, the cow's udder, and the feel of the empty milk bottle in his hand. This sensual experience is not sex for Kloefkorn, but it implies "the heft of sex, / the motion and the smell of sex" (29). This in itself is exciting for a young male.

An older Kloefkorn confesses: "Yes, it is Gloria / now that I love, and for now / that's final" (46). He sings her praises while he is in the outhouse thinning the Sears and Roebuck catalog:

Gloria is page six hundred seventy-six:
dark eyes, dark hair,
high cheekbones,
most of the rest of her likewise
dressed fit to slaughter.

(Houses 46)
The sound of ripe fruit falling on the roof of the outhouse and the inspiration of Gloria's picture intertwine, and "again and again explodes the dream" (47). Gloria unknowingly serves as the stimulus for young Kloefkorn's fantasy.

The narrator's relationship with women who are not his relatives is a selfish one. When Miss Watson actually does help him, he is angry because he loses her closeness. He is not aware
of his busy teacher's schedule; perhaps his stubborn zipper is keeping her from having a few precious minutes of quiet while the children are outside. He thoughtlessly accepts the opinion of the older boys about Virginia Mae, and never once does he wonder about her feelings or the damage being done to her reputation by such bathroom gossip. Gloria may be young Kloefkorn's "girl" in reality, but in his fantasy, she becomes a picture in a catalog that arouses him to orgasm. He treats her as an object, not a person.

Two influential women, Kloefkorn's mother and grandmother, are the subjects of several poems in this book. In "Sleeping with Grandmother," his grandmother inspires Kloefkorn to contemplate the significance of being related by blood. His grandmother feels that her grandson has been killed in Germany by her grandnephew who is a German citizen. Kloefkorn as an adult relives these blood connections as he watches his own son sleeping beneath a suspended model airplane (52-3). With his grandmother, Kloefkorn is much less selfish than he appears to be with others. Although he is not enthusiastic, he does take his grandmother to the cemetery in the spring. She lovingly tends her husband's grave as young Kloefkorn complains of the cold:

And though it is never very long
before grandmother returns to the car,
already beside her I am another full head taller.
It is my opinion, for whatever it's worth,
that my grandmother in some strange old-woman way
loves me. I tell her to take her time.
Why not? By now my ass is solid ice.
I am opening the door.

(Houses 45)

Not only is Kloefkorn impatient and opens the car door to leave, but he also opens the door to a fuller understanding of his grandmother and her needs. He realizes she is a devoted wife to his grandfather and loves him still through her careful attention to his grave. Kloefkorn is aware of her as an old woman who will die soon and who needs reassurance that she will rest in peace.

Kloefkorn reaches a similar level of understanding of his mother in this volume. Although she is presented as a stern disciplinarian in several poems, Kloefkorn is able to see her love for him through punishment. When Kloefkorn accidentally sets the kitchen on fire after playing with matches, his mother first whips him "raw" and then rocks him: "I said yes yes yes / to the birth of fire" (6). He instinctively associates his pain and his mother's pain with birth, their closest bond.

Young Kloefkorn has a problem with controlling his mouth. In "Coming Clean," He calls Franklin a "goddam stumpsucker" and gets his mouth washed out:

Mother washes and washes
my mouth out with soap,
at one point going white

when I come within an inch
of swallowing the bar.

(Houses 20)

When this action does not cure Kloefkorn's swearing, his mother resorts to stronger measures:
I had been chained and padlocked and snapped to the clothesline because I called my brother a son of a bitch.

Then let's see how much you enjoy being one of my puppies, mother said, and by evening, when father came home from work, I was barking almost deliciously through the savage salt in my tears.

(Houses 9)

Whether this episode is a part of Kloefkorn's childhood or an example of his hyperbole in action, the method of punishment is effective as Kloefkorn "swallows a growl" to apologize to Franklin. Kloefkorn here reveals his mother's awareness of her status with her children. She does not tolerate Kloefkorn's swearing at his brother nor his use of derogatory language which attacks her. She demands her children's respect.

Kloefkorn's mother's concern for his education is recorded in "Occurrence" in which he recalls spelling lessons on cold winter nights. Even with his mother as his "sweet inclusive muse" (39), Kloefkorn fails to outspell Donna Davis and laments:

Is it Donna's fault that her father, highbred superintendent at the high school, does in fact know everything, and, thus knowing, has passed it on to his darling offspring? That her mother, roseate with money and the soft touch of distinction, did her part to share her bright unsullied blood with her blue extension? (who unlike my mother never had to sweat real sweat to make a living.)

(Houses 39)
Kloefkorn appears to blame Donna's breeding and his mother's sweat for his own failure. Even though he realizes his mother is his "muse" in spelling, he directs his frustration toward their economic situation.

Kloefkorn does not limit his mother to the role of disciplinarian in his poetry. He examines her as a wife and as a woman in her own right. Before the Kloefkorns move from the farm into town, Kloefkorn pictures his mother worrying over bills:

Mother pinched the slack skin at her elbows and said that in the morning we must decide.

(Houses 3)

Kloefkorn suggests that she may have brought about the decision to leave the farm. When they move into town in the loaded pickup, images of the farm's harshness and poverty follow. His mother's bony hands lay in her lap, "shaping a silent cup," (3) as if she holds the fragile essence of her very life in her hands. Her real feelings about the farm are revealed when they reach their house in town:

how downright smart it was of us to leave the farm:
how this little nest in this little place, she said, swatting, could be the start of something a good deal less than terrifying.

(Houses 4)
Even though she is terrified by farm life, she does not expect a utopia in town. She is a special woman to survive the many moves and changes in her life and still to maintain a positive outlook:

Mother said she was glad now that we hadn't bought that new rug for the living-room, because father would have worn a path there with his infernal pacing.

(Houses 25)

Her husband has just lost two fingers in an accident, and yet she does not give in to desperation. His mother's sense of humor in the face of disaster gives Kloefkorn a remarkable example to follow for his own philosophy. Through these poems, he demonstrates a mature understanding of both his mother and grandmother as his relatives and as women.

This attitude toward his mother and grandmother is in contrast to his attitude toward the girls of his youth and to his attitude toward his wife in "Trying to Love You in These Words":

Trying to love you in these words
I choose these words:
palm of the hand
small of the back
ankle, eye.

(Houses 66)

After thirty years of marriage, Kloefkorn chooses to write of his love for his wife in just a few words, and the words he chooses are parts of her body. If "palm of the hand, / small of the back, / ankle, eye" sum up his love, it is a poor example of a complete
relationship. It is as if Kloefkorn regresses to his adolescence when a woman's parts are more important than her whole. His attitude is selfish: "in the wash of you, / ankle to eye, / I am going under" (66). She exists only for him, so he is able to submerge himself in her. There is nothing here to suggest that she has a life separate from Kloefkorn. After thirty years, surely a relationship should have progressed past a woman's parts to her whole being.

In Houses and Beyond, Kloefkorn demonstrated a growing understanding of both his mother and grandmother. He sees how important they are in his own development, and he examines their lives apart from their roles as mother and grandmother. Kloefkorn's narrator still maintains an adolescent attitude toward the women he relates to sexually. He seems unable to come to terms with a woman as a sexual being without her remaining only an object for his pleasure. He is not ready to acknowledge the existence of a complete woman: one who embodies both the traditionally female traits of nurturing and sustaining, and the traditionally male traits of independence and assertiveness.

Honeymoon, Kloefkorn's next volume, is an intimate romp through the modern marriage of Doris and Howard. Although Kloefkorn has written of two other couples, this collection is remarkably different. In Alvin Turner As Farmer, Kloefkorn presents Alvin and his land with Martha on the porch cheering him
on. In Platte Valley Homestead, Jacob and Anna stand together against whatever nature has in store for them and their farm. But in Honeymoon, Kloefkorn writes only of Doris and Howard together. Kloefkorn does not diminish their story by including details of their livelihood and anecdotes of their children. Doris and Howard easily fill the volume by themselves.

Again Kloefkorn has his male character narrate the poetry, but unlike Alvin Turner or Jacob, most of what Howard says is said first by Doris. Therefore, Howard's perceptions do not dominate this collection, and one may actually say that this is Doris' book. Kloefkorn traces her development as a complete woman and also notes Howard's progression toward a complete manhood.

Howard's proposal of marriage differs completely from Alvin Turner's. While Alvin offers Martha his farm, it is Doris who makes the offers to Howard. As her dowry, Doris reveals that she is "crazy like a fox" and that her "favorite great-great uncle, / on [her] mother's side, / is at the edge of being named a saint" (1). When Howard remains unimpressed, Doris uncovers the extent of her generosity:

And for a final thing, she says,
I forgive you all your gross
and idiotic ways,
your dumb devotion
to the whims of flesh.

(Honeymoon 1)

Howard realizes that Doris is an exceptional woman and proposes
immediately: "Shitfire, angel. / Name the day" (1). From such unpretentious beginnings, Kloefkorn molds a remarkable relationship.

Their courtship takes place on "Putout Point" in a Bel-Air Chevy. When Doris rejects Howard's advances, he crudely reminds her of where they are: "Which means, I suppose, she says, / that I must either put out / or find another way home" (2). Howard's intentions must not have been entirely unwelcome because "by eleven o'clock [they] have named all four / of [their] darling children" (2). Both parties seem satisfied with the evening's outcome.

Kloefkorn does not write a "wedding poem" for Doris and Howard, but he jumps ahead to their honeymoon, which they spend at Niagara Falls. Howard muses: "There are too many things / yet to be done, to have changed, to be changing. / Doris, I say, wake up! / It is time for the honeymoon to begin" (4). Howard speaks of their whole life together, not just this initial visit to Niagara Falls, when he says "it is time for the honeymoon to begin." They return with souvenir pillows "for everyone we know" and a new Dalmatian dog (5).

Neither the pillows nor the dog is mentioned again as Kloefkorn chronicles Doris and Howard's marriage. He describes their day at the county fair when Doris outlasts Howard on the Tilt-A-Whirl and wins a dollar bet (32). Doris also manages to convince Howard that he needs to go to the family reunion and will
actually enjoy hearing Uncle Elmer's stories again (47).
Kloefkorn writes many poems in which Howard and Doris' day centers on making love. These encounters take place in their bedroom, in a hayloft, on a bear rug, and in the storm cellar; and never does Kloefkorn hint that any of their joinings are less than satisfying.

But Kloefkorn does not limit Doris to her role as wife; he allows her to grow and develop as an individual. First of all, Doris declares that she is not a field:

Doris looks squarely into my mind to say that, no, she is not my pasture, that, no, her belly does not spread like a hill, no hill no wind moving across the gray-green blades, no blades, no patches of sand or rain washing the dust down the stems of yellow flowers. No sand, or rain, no dust, no stems, no yellow flowers.

No no.

I am a bird circling in the night drafts, Doris says. Doris says, No one knows my color. The stars move in the back above me. They wheel below in the pond.

I watch for movement, she says.

She says, There is no place to rest. (Honeymoon 20)

Unlike Martha, whom Alvin urges to "ripen yearly, / daily yield" (Alvin 6), Doris rejects the traditionally passive role of women. Instead she wants to be a bird, free to fly, to observe,
to act. This independence exacts a price that Doris is aware of as she comments: "There is no place to rest." Even so, Doris firmly refuses to be Howard's "pasture."

At times Doris appears to have a secure grip on her identity. She feels a strong bond with her mother and grandmother, and believes she shares many of the same troubles that they experienced:

These pebbles were my mother's and my grandmother's. When I suck these pebbles I know the collective agony of tongues.

(Honeymoon 43)

Doris reaches back through the generations of her family for comfort when she has troubles. She feels secure in the knowledge that what she faces is not new and that she will endure like the pebble (rock) that she sucks on.

Howard is skeptical of Doris' manner of finding security. He feels she is naive in the ways of the world and that she "believes too stoutly in God" (8). When Doris gets up early for church on Sunday, Howard would rather have her stay in bed with him. Later, she returns to their bed:

Yet now there is something almost sacred about her, more sacred even than before, coming together as they do, the will and the word and the deed,

(Honeymoon 8)

Her attention to church attendance compels Howard to speak of her as "sacred," even though this is the only poem that mentions
Doris' going to church. Because of this, Doris does not appear to be as dedicated to church attendance, nor as determined to get her husband to join her, as Martha Turner.

Doris relates more closely to the religion of Alvin Turner than to Martha's. Howard often connects her to milk and to the land, which suggests she is a modern Mother Earth. Howard describes her:

```
Doris is bountiful,  
a long chapter in a brief 
but powerful novel.  
When I touch her 
I touch the graciousness of milk.
```

Now where am I?

Close to me, Doris says,  
and I burst into an incredible bloom.

*(Honeymoon 6)*

Not only does Doris nurture Howard and enable him to "bloom," but she also is not happy until she plants "the entire back forty" as her garden (15). As she works with the land, she benefits from it, too:

```
That night she smells slightly 
of soil newly rained on, 
her face returning in a small steady glow 
the afternoon's sun. And what I love 
is the love that others call upon 
to lose themselves in.
```

*(Honeymoon 15)*

Doris embodies the fertility of nature with her smell of the soil and her glow of the sun. Howard uses Doris as his means of communion with a spiritual world, as he "loses" himself in
her. Doris, however, is not naive in understanding Howard's true intentions and reminds him that he can only proceed so far into her world:

Under a full moon Doris plants potatoes. When the sign is right, she says, even the wariest of the catfish bite.

She is barefooted, wearing only a feedsack, the moon through the cotton describing her legs precisely, making them lean and dark and mysterious, her thighs and buttocks highlands to be guessed at.

She will not permit me to help her because, she says, I am not a believer.

So I open a cold beer and sit on the back porch, watching.

(Honeymoon 30)

A part of Howard longs to experience the same closeness with the land that Doris does, but Howard can only attempt this closeness through intercourse with her. Afterwards, Howard is able to "sleep like a small anointed animal / no longer consumed by fire" (30).

Howard's answer to life's difficult questions is always the same. He answers by making love to Doris. When she contemplates the miracle of birth and asks Howard to explain it, he evades her with talk of explosions and asks "how long has it been / since last we fucked together / in the new-mown hay?" (14). At times, Doris does get disgusted with Howard's "solution":
You dummy, Doris says, 
you blind incorrigible fool! 
When are you ever going 
to grow beyond the confines 
of your jackstraw world?

(Honeymoon 9)

This outburst indicates that Doris has found other "worlds" and 
that Howard's growth has not kept up with hers.

Doris is not selfish with her knowledge, though, and 
several times shares her essential femaleness with Howard.

Though these experiences, Howard awakens the dormant female in 
himself. During a pause in a pillow fight, Doris guides a feather 
across Howard's stomach:

My stomach opens, 

and what appears to be a lamb 
steps out and onto the floor. 
Doris closes the incision with a wry smile.

(Honeymoon 7)

Through this fantasy of feathers, Doris helps Howard experience 
birth. Her "wry smile" indicates that she knows the significance 
of her deed.

Doris also helps Howard change his own image from the 
"hard-hearted hardness / of this awesome dumptruck" to a canoe:

Doris tiptoes backwards across the high narrow hand-bridge, 
the water below seeming to rise and watch her. 
you are walking in the reverse of the usual way, 
I tell her, but she does not respond. 
I quicken my pace, threatening to run her down. 
You are in imminent danger of being run down, 
I tell her, of being crushed as if a bug 
under the hard-hearted hardness 
of this awesome dumptruck.
You are not a large motor vehicle, she says, but only the shadow of the shadow of a man.

I rev my equivalent of a heavy-duty engine. By now the water is lapping just above the boards, dreaming, no doubt, of torsos.

In the nick of time I become a canoe.

Now that's more like it, Doris says, we ebbing now, now flowing, like virtuosos.

(Honeymoon 13)

Doris teaches Howard that the male images he uses when he calls himself a truck do not make him a man in her eyes. This aggressive hard-heartedness only proves he is "the shadow of the shadow of a man." When he turns into the canoe, he reveals the female part of him which is open and sustaining. Because they ebb and flow "like virtuosos," they are both satisfied with this experience.

Howard feels alienated from Doris when she is at her closest with the land. The night she plants potatoes, Howard is left out:

I go into the kitchen for another beer. That sound from within the freezer is my own muted voice, weeping. Here lately, I tell Doris, even the smallest thing can set me off.

She understands.

(Honeymoon 30)

Compared to Doris' full Mother Earth imagery, Howard feels empty and cold. He weeps. By weeping, Howard reveals himself as vulnerable, quite a contrast to the earlier dumptruck imagery.

His weeping and vulnerability are both traditionally attributed
to women, but Doris does not tease him. By her understanding, she implies that Howard is more of a man, not less of one, for his emotions.

Howard does get past his obsession with sex as the only way he can prove his manhood. He is able to come out of his selfishness in order to nurture Doris when she needs him. When Doris' father lies on his deathbed, Doris refuses to accept his death and would rather give up her own motherhood to keep her father "the way he used to be, / his days before him like a feast of family" (33). Howard comforts her:

When I hold Doris she is so small
I must be careful not to crush the bones.
And what is missing from her
stays like a headstrong child
who simply does not know
both sides of the story
beside that dear brown beautiful old man.
Ashes, ashes,
we all fall down.

(Honeymoon 33)

Howard accepts his own femaleness to the extent that it is he who mothers Doris and reminds her of death's inevitability.

Perhaps because Howard symbolically experiences birth with the lamb (7), he becomes intimately involved with the birth of his son. The doctor tells Howard that he is having difficulty hearing the baby's prenatal heartbeat. Howard imagines deformed fetuses and then pleads:

O god, I say, half prayer, half command,
bless Doris, bless our home, bless the heartbeat
that, with your sweet blessing, must be found.

(Honeymoon 35)
When the baby is born "solid as the jawbone of a horse" (35),
Howard rejoices with Doris in a manner that is even more meaningful
because he has suffered with her. The miracle of birth is a reality
for him now; it is not just a topic to be evaded.

Howard takes this enthusiasm a step farther one night when
Doris "wants to initiate no more / babies" (36). He imagines all
the babies that they would not be having and grieves over his loss:

I hear the forfeiture of bones
like cribslats being gnawed at
in the bell jar
of a grave.

(Honeymoon 36)

Curiously, Howard's intimate experience with birth has brought
about his own desire to procreate. If he were physically able to
give birth, Howard would.

Through Doris, Howard grows from a sex-centered male to
a man who has discovered and accepted the female part of his
psyche. Howard is a complete man who embodies both the tradition-
ally male attributes along with the female attributes which often
remain buried in a man. Howard is an excellent complement to
Doris.

Even though Doris has an especially understanding husband,
she still is not satisfied with her own life. She is sure of
herself when she relates to her female ancestors and when she
connects herself to the land. But occasionally she loses track
of herself:
All day long my lovely bride
says she has not been here.

Been where?

Here, she says, fumbling as if blind
for something to put the hands to.

(Honeymoon 21)

Doris' search for something solid to sustain her continues in
several poems. She is sure that her life is meaningless and that
there is little she can do to change it:

Doris, I say at last, there will be no
rejoicing in heaven over the finding of
your life's waste. There has been no waste.

Shit, Doris says.

(Honeymoon 37)

Although Howard tries to convince her that her life has not been
a waste, he fails. Kloefkorn's free-wheeling, modern woman is
not satisfied with her life. Doris has Howard, at least two
children, and her garden, but Kloefkorn does not present Doris as
a career woman nor as a socially active woman. Considering Doris'
self-proclaimed freedom, "I am a bird" (20), she has a very limited
life. Doris is a frustrated woman.

Doris' unhappiness with her life turns into a nagging
doubt of her own sanity. She "insists that she is a prime candidate
for the loony-bin," and she asks Howard why anyone would "want to
get mixed up with her" (22). Howard is uneasy about her questions
and tries to avoid any more by threatening not to be "mixed up"
with her any longer:
You have no choice, Doris says.
You are already mixed up with me.
You have been mixed up with me
since Cain and Abel.

Now why would I want to have done something like that?
I ask.

You didn't, Doris, says. It was Cain. But
you have your own swell way of slaughtering.

(Honeymoon 22)

By connecting Cain and Abel with Howard, Kloefkorn suggests
Howard somehow "murders" Doris. She feels that Howard has his
"own swell way of slaughtering," which implies that Howard is not
consciously trying to harm her, but that he has harmed her just
the same. Howard responds by reminding Doris of Niagara Falls:
"Have you ever seen anything / so desperate, so beautiful?" (22).
Howard is clearly unstrung by Doris' accusation, but he does not
know how to cope successfully with it. He reverts to his favorite
solution, reminding Doris of their physical bond.

Doris reveals what she feels is missing from her life
when she describes her suicide:

We are watching the sun go down beyond the Falls
when Doris tells me how she is going to do it:
she is going to rip the cover of Cosmopolitan
and with an oversized safety-pin
attach it to the front
of her baby-blue blouse.
she will find a quiet spot
among the multitudes, she says
and then, she says, the poison.

(Honeymoon 29)

Doris describes the model on the cover of the magazine as a

"nut-brown woman about to taste a cigarette, / her eyes the color
of early clover" (29). Doris asks one thing:

I request only that she not be taken from me,
Doris says. I want to be that person,
dark and static and seductive
all the days of all my other lives.

(Honeymoon 29)

Doris chooses as her ideal a woman on the cover of Cosmopolitan, a magazine known for its worldly views about women. The model is about to smoke a cigarette, which some may see as a sign of sophistication, and she is "nut-brown," which implies she sunbathes. To Doris, this woman symbolizes a world that she will never be a part of, but she longs for it. Doris may also feel that she is growing old and would rather remain "dark and static and seductive" like the model. Curiously, Kloefkorn does not have Howard reply to Doris' plan. Howard should have been able to help Doris discover what is meaningful in her life, but from Howard, there is silence.

Kloefkorn does leave hope for both Doris and Howard:

Doris tells me this and that
about her maternal grandfather,
a pioneer, she says,
who went looking for the good country
and who, she said, said he was bound to find it.

According to the latest report
the worst is over.
Yet we remain enclosed together in the cave.
It is cool and moist, and by the light of a candle
we can watch the earth move:
a nightcrawler as if a charmer's indolent toy
measuring the far wall,
the tagends of our arms
in shadow urging him on.
We have drawn our own blood
as an oath against
the sweet temptation
to rise again to home,
the clay of this soil, Doris says,
sufficient against the urgent whim
of wind and flood and fire.

Our bodies are the gifts we bring
to this untampered space.
When the light of the candle
flickers, and is gone,
we will know in the marrow
what we guessed before:

we too have been searching for the good country,
and from the hour we took that first unlikely step
we too are bound to find it.

(Honeymoon 45)

Again, Kloefkorn connects satisfaction and happiness with the land,
"the good country." He implies that a close relationship with the
land and nature along with an understanding and appreciation of the
values one gathers through this relationship will provide content-
ment for both man and woman.

Kloefkorn creates a modern woman in Doris. She is inde-
pendent in her approach to her traditional roles. She is close to
nature and occasionally functions as an Earth Mother, but she
seldom interacts with her own children. She helps her husband
discover and develop his own nontraditional roles, but still Doris
is not content. Something missing from her life keeps her from
being completely fulfilled.

In his next volume, Collecting For The Wichita Beacon,
Kloefkorn returns to his hometown for inspiration. He narrates
in what appears to be his own voice, and he uses both his
adolescent and his adult viewpoint (Interview 1985). He divides
the book into four sections, which is new for his collections.
Kloefkorn explores the relationship between the essay and the poem
in one section and collects memories of his high school sports
days in another. His initial section is written from the adoles-
cent viewpoint, while his final section is written from the adult
point of view.

Kloefkorn writes of special moments of revelation in his
life in "Epiphanies," the third section of this volume. He first
writes a personal essay describing the incident, and he follows
each essay with a poem inspired by the same subject. By placing the
essay and poem together, Kloefkorn reveals much about how he
chooses words and the central ideas for his poetry. For example,
in the essay "Why I Don't Love Betty Grable Any More," Kloefkorn
remembers his loss of innocence when Betty Grable's real life
shattered his illusion of her infallibility. He regains his faith
in innocence as he watches his young granddaughter dance in the nude
after her bath. In the related poem "Jubilation," Kloefkorn chooses
to leave Betty Grable out and focuses on sharing his granddaughter's
dance of joy:

O grandma is going topless,
Parson,
this heel to that brief toe,
this cancer, cured,
to that unsullied skin!

(Collecting 50)
Kloefkorn remembers his grandmother's reaction to breaking her only piece of Dresden china in the essay "Patterns." He connects her tearful reaction with that morning's sermon about the "laying up of treasure" and with his own hunger for his grandmother's roast beef. In the poem "After the Ice Storm, Early January," Kloefkorn focuses on the sound of ice falling from tree limbs and associates this with the sound of the china platter shattering:

I walking around and around the block,

trying to take it all in,
trying to believe in the fact
of the whole and the broken,
but knowing better.

(Collecting 56)

The child narrator of the essay is more concerned with eating Sunday dinner on time than worrying about his grandmother, but the adult narrator of the poem leaves the concrete to ponder the abstract idea of "the whole and the broken."

Kloefkorn uses the child's viewpoint first in another essay, "One of Those," in which he recalls an uncomfortable confrontation with Virginia Mae's father. Kloefkorn's father makes young Kloefkorn return Virginia Mae's lunch bucket after he had thrown it into the cowlot as a sign of his affection. Kloefkorn's father accompanies Kloefkorn on this uneasy trip, and afterward his father sings as they walk home together. It is this song about redeeming coupons that Kloefkorn builds upon in the related poem, "One of Those."

Kloefkorn, as an adult, remembers the coupons his father saved
and ponders what wonderful gift he may have been saving for.
Kloefkorn realizes the best possible gift during a reunion with his father:

    I blink
    to see the coupons gone. Father,
    I understand. Father,
    with three short steps
    I could touch your hand. Christ,
    I cannot help myself. I am singing it
    truly to know it with him.

(Collecting 72)

Kloefkorn speaks mainly as an adolescent in the first section of this volume, "Collecting for The Wichita Beacon." The poems are images of what is on the young man's mind as he delivers his papers. He describes people on his route such as Ruby Shoemaker, who "reads only the obituaries, / hoping one day to find her own name" (13), and Grandmother Moulton, who "receives her copy of the paper / as if a blessing, her lips / thanking God incessantly" (23).

Relating to his job as deliverer of the news, Kloefkorn contemplates what is really important to know in "The Essential." His mother purchases the Lincoln Library of Essential Information, and young Kloefkorn is initially impressed with its authoritative appearance. However, he begins to doubt the book's omniscience when he cannot locate what he considers to be essential information:

    Wednesday evening. I search in vain
    for a listing of the twelve disciples,
    Monday in vain for the workaday names
    of Batman and Robin. At the back of my brain
    I begin to suspect a gyp.

(Collecting 14)
Kloefkorn's exploration of "the essential" does not end with his disillusionment with a book. He ponders the significance of the headlines in the papers he delivers and remembers his customers' reactions to the news of Hiroshima in "Sowing the Whirlwind":

O receive
from the hand of the older son
of Ralph and Katie Marie
both the lines and what lies between:
that something larger than mere imagination
has taken place, that the heat of this day,
this hour, this moment, though insufferable,
is but a beginning.

(Collecting 23)

The war haunts young Kloefkorn as he goes about his daily routine in his small town. He reacts by losing himself in the solace of Betty Grable movies or playing pool: "slop or 8-ball, / make it easy on yourself. / I don't / really give a damn" (13). The reality of the atomic bomb casts a shadow over young Kloefkorn's adolescence.

In a lighter vein, Kloefkorn recalls his participation in sports as a young man in the section "Waiting to Jell." He remembers his teammate Flickinger, who after scoring the winning shot, cannot stop laughing:

He showered, laughing,
and he dressed and left, laughing,
and with the eye at the back of my mind
I could see him screwing
his proud, subservient steady,
laughing, laughing, laughing,

(Collecting 33)
Not only does Kloefkorn recapture the joy of winning a close game, but he also conjures up the tradition that the sports hero deserves a "screw" after the big game. He repeats this idea in "Asper." Asper is the football hero who risks death to beat the Medicine Lodge Indians. His injuries do not seem so bad when he remembers:

a kiss for every 36 inches gained,
the feel of an angel's bosom
for a touchdown.

Asper left the dressing-room
as if born again
(Collecting 32)

Another high school sports tradition is the coach's locker room pep talk, and Kloefkorn remembers his coach's favorite line, "One of these evenings, boys, / we are going to jell" (31). Kloefkorn plays with the idea of "jelling" in the poem, as he recalls his teammates and how they may still be "waiting to jell":

Anspaugh, waiting to jell,
is bottle-feeding a naked caveman
with Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.
Skeeter, an instrument in one eye
like a telescoped lens,
is putting together a necklace
made of dime stores.
And Kloefkorn, having slopped the hogs,
turns up the wick on the lamp
and, with a fresh quill
plucked from the nether eye
of a noncommittal goose,
writes on and on about waiting to jell,
he himself waiting to jell.
(Collecting 40)

Kloefkorn includes himself as part of this team. Each member has
attained some success, but each is still waiting for some sign from his coach that he has indeed "jelled."

Kloefkorn's treatment of women in this volume offers few surprises. His adolescent voice still speaks of women either as sexual goals to be attained or as old, untouchable hags. However, there occasionally is a hint of his further understanding of women.

Young Kloefkorn delivers papers to a lonely war bride and notes her terror:

Before releasing the coins into my hand
she moves the tip of an index finger
ever so lightly
against my palm. 0
she has seldom been quite this frightened, never
this lonely. She thinks maybe, honestly,
this time she is going all the way
crazy. Against my face
her kiss is how much more
than a mother's.

(Collecting 3)

Kloefkorn captures the panic of this young woman, but unfortunately, he is too inexperienced to offer the strength she needs. Instead, he interprets her touch and kiss as purely sexual. The young woman's pain is not lessened, and Kloefkorn has a new object for his fantasies.

Fantasy may play a large part in Kloefkorn's reminiscence of "old man Kinzer's green coupe" (9). He imagines Cheryl ("Angel Tits") next to him in the front seat:

How
you didn't once object to the bunchgrass
on the floorboard,
How
when my heel grazed the domelight,
and the light came on,  
you called it the replication  
of a far sweeter, far richer,  
far more productive  
moon.

(Collecting 10)

This old, abandoned car is either the scene of Kloefkorn's many 
conquests of Cheryl, or it is the setting for another of his 
adolescent dreams.

Through Kloefkorn's adolescent eyes, older women do not 
fare any better than the younger ones. Fannie Young is on his 
paper route, and Kloefkorn describes her as an "old insane tight-
wad subversive hold-out woman" (6). Fannie hides beneath the 
table when Kloefkorn comes to collect for the paper each month:  
"old woman in a feedsack dress / hiked upward all the way / to  
central Georgia, / her jaws obese as Goering himself / with  
peanut butter" (6). Although he maligns her wholeheartedly, he 
guesses that the old woman has somehow connected his pounding at 
her door with the war:

You ever try to collect for a paper  
in a small town,  
in the middle of a war,  
at the house where the smell of screwiness  
is everywhere?

(Collecting 6)

Young Kloefkorn also makes an attempt to understand his 
Aunt Flora and her reasons for leaving Uncle Glen:

when the showdown arrived, and I had every reason  
to believe that he was about to raise a hand,  
I raised something of my own, and in much less time
than it takes to tell it I had shown him once and for all how the cow eats the cabbage.

(Collecting 18)

Aunt Flora may be a very smart and courageous woman who moves quickly to get out of an abusive situation. Or perhaps a hen-pecked Uncle Glen's first intimation of rebellion is immediately met with Aunt Flora's cabbage artillery. Kloefkorn is less than serious in his treatment of Aunt Flora, as he is in the treatment of many of his subjects.

In the last part of this volume, "Waiting for the Bus at 63rd and Huntington," Kloefkorn narrates as an adult, and his main concern is one woman. He addresses these poems personally to "you," and the poems reflect an intimacy that is sensual and tender. As he waits for the bus, the fresh morning air reminds him of his woman:

I cannot inhale deeply enough
to both catch it and keep it: your body
so fresh, so revived from its shower,
ankle and thigh, belly, nipple, lip, lash,

(Collecting 79)

Although he again speaks of the parts of his woman, this time the attitude is different. She is precious to him for herself and not for the stimulus she may be for him sexually. Kloefkorn admits dependency on this woman as she greets him every night at home (80). She binds his wounds, whether they be physical, emotional, or spiritual:

How I laughed until a rib cracked,
and you, laughing too,
twirled me in gauze
until lucky for both of us
the night held on
just long enough
to see us through

(Collecting 80)

His woman is capable of nurturing him through each day and
evidently enjoys her importance to him. Their laughter together
implies a tender closeness.

Kloefkorn writes two poems about walking in this section.
In the first, he is alone and takes in the beauty of the evening:

What I want to say is that
of all the ways to love you
I count this way
among the most
endearing:
to be alone at the edge
of something vast,
letting the bad air out,
taking the good air in.

(Collecting 81)

Although his woman is not physically with him, he loves her in a
special way in his solitude and in his communion with the night.
In "The Walk at Sundown," Kloefkorn and his woman are together and
hold hands as they walk:

at that moment both of us
more alive than ever,
more even than possible,
today's low sun like each low sun
at its highest red before
diminishing.

(Collecting 84-5)

Kloefkorn wants to capture their special moments together before
they "diminish." He may be afraid their relationship will fail, or
he may be fearing that illness or death may force their separation.

This same urgency is evident in "Late Evening in Late September":

Who among us is going to live forever? Your dark hair splayed against the pillow relieves the face, relieving me. O Christ! I have wasted so much of my life not telling you that, avoiding this.

(Collecting 83)

These poems imply that Kloefkorn realizes an intimately complete relationship with his woman, his wife. The relationship is mutually nurturing and caring. He reveals this bond in "Before Winter":

Before winter in its deepest sense sets in, let us begin, I with my hands warming your hands, you with the breath of your words warming mine.

Is this a wrong anticipation, to want to break the chill before the chill comes?

No, this is the way we live when we live forward, behind us forever those dreams we left so far forever behind us.

Take these warm hands with you into the frost of the most unlikely wind. Give me the breath of words
to thaw the palm of silence
tonight, and for all nights,
all over and over again.

(Collecting 86)

This promise of communal caring contrasts with Kloefkorn's perception of his wife at their twentieth anniversary. From seeking "the impervious covering / to wrap our isolations in" (Uncertain 52), Kloefkorn matures to wanting to keep his wife warm before she ever feels the chill of winter. His perceptions of marriage and perhaps his marriage itself have changed remarkably.

*A Life Like Mine*, Kloefkorn's latest volume, was published in late 1984. The majority of the poems take the reader back to Kloefkorn's childhood and adolescence in Attica, Kansas. He has written about this time in his life in earlier poetry, but in this volume, Kloefkorn's attitude is more intimate, more forgiving. He shares remembered moments with his family and his friends, and several of the final poems reveal his contemporary family.

Two of the poems present Kloefkorn's father in a different perspective from his earlier poetry. In "Christmas 1939," Kloefkorn recalls their car breaking down on their way to his grandfather's house. His father's language "darkens the air," (3) but miraculously, the right part is found, and the trip is not canceled. The children, huddled in blankets, have complete confidence in their father: "What we yield to is the / insolence of faith: / when we
waken we / will be there" (4). This father, who does not let his children down, is evident again in "Sunday Morning." Kloefkorn's father follows him with the newspapers in the car to help young Kloefkorn on his paper route:

  giving me a hand to relieve this impossible Sunday morning weight, laying that hand on my shoulder to wake me, to tell me that the bitter cold is here, to say, without my asking, I'll take you.

(Life 10-11)

Kloefkorn insightfully connects warmth and security with his father; these poems contain none of the earlier resentment Kloefkorn may have harbored.

Kloefkorn focuses on the healing qualities of his mother in this collection. He remembers her onion syrup, the ultimate home remedy, and its healing power:

After a long spasm I push back the last quilt. In the silence I can almost hear my body cooling, losing its weight, detaching itself from the drag of rock-heavy bones. Mother with the flat of one hand holds me down. By and by, she sings, when the morning comes.

(Life 1)

The images of his mother staying by his bedside all night and of her hand touching his forehead speak of the wonders of a mother's love. As Kloefkorn recovers, she sings.

The picture is not as tender when Kloefkorn allows a
firecracker to explode in his hand. His mother heals him again, but she feels he has to learn a lesson from his experience:

Mother says
I hope you're satisfied. She has such good warm hands, flesh enough to last a lifetime.
Even so, the iodine stings: I bite my lower lip to blood to keep from crying.

(Life 26)

Even though he recalls the fiery pain, Kloefkorn remembers the comfort he found in his mother's hands, the symbol of her healing and caring.

Kloefkorn deals with his brother and sister with new understanding, too. He writes again of the time his sister had to live with his grandmother because of the Depression. As a child, he misses his older sister, and he does not understand the necessity of her absence:

her eyes
saying Nothing lasts forever.
Besides, she is going to learn to knit and to crochet.
At night I try to imagine my bedspread assembled by the thin fingers of my sister. Beside the bed, under a glass emptied of milk, some kind of delicate doily.

(Life 2)

He treasures his sister through touching the homemade bedspread and the doily beside his bed. The fragile imagery associated with the bedspread, and the doily, and her thin fingers implies the
uncertainty that Kloefkorn feels without his sister's presence.

Kloefkorn reveals a moment of pride as he watches his brother in the pool hall. This time Kloefkorn uses his brother's real name, Johnny Lee, as he writes of his brother's expertise with the pool cue:

I think how fine it is
to have a brother not
much bigger than a
minute who when the
triangle of the rack
is raised becomes
his own man doesn't
have to take any
cheap mindless small-
town happy happy horse-
shit nosiree off
anyone.

(Life 13)

Johnny Lee has grown from the little brother who needs rescuing to a peer who can hold his own in the pool hall. Kloefkorn's fond pride is justified.

Kloefkorn reveals his growing character in several poems about his life outside his family circle. In "Walking the Tracks," he hitches a ride on a freight train and returns a cosmopolite:

"I have been / everywhere. Listen, / listen to me now. I / know everything" (31). His worldliness grows as he learns how to market condoms in his father's gas station. Kloefkorn discovers the mysterious products beneath the counter and decides to display one to increase sales:

I sold it to a boy
who had to use a stool
to reach the gum with.
Gum in one hand,
Sheik in the other,
he left the station
happy as the fool
who knows enough
to stay young enough
to put his money
where the feel is,
and having been told
that some things sell best
displayed only one at a time,
I reached down and under
for another.

(Life 34-5)

Kloefkorn's innocence is diminished further as he finds out that it
is not enough to know right from wrong. He sees a classmate shop-
lifting a comic book and later confronts him:

I even saw the
name of the comic,
I tell him. Sub-
mariner. Isn't
that right?
So he
says, prove it, ass-
eyes. Just prove it.

You can go to
hell for swearing,
I say. Bubba says
Prove it. And for
stealing, I say,
and for not tell-
ing the truth. Bub-
ba says Prove it.

(Life 20)

All of young Kloefkorn's Sunday School knowledge is futile
against Bubba's view of reality.

Kloefkorn's childlike morality is placed under pressure
again when someone ["you can bet your bottom dollar / it was a
Southern Baptist did it" (32)] burns down the local theater. He
watches the inferno with his friend Bullard who "doesn't go to my church, / or to any. Mother says Which / is just as well" (33). The puzzle of holy arson is further complicated by Kloefkorn's mother when she suggests Bullard does not belong in church.

As Kloefkorn grows older, his friends and his problems change. He shares everything with Carlos, "the only / Mexican boy in / town" (39). They "cruise" around town and discuss life. Kloefkorn confides his fear: "fear of my parents' fighting."

This is the first time Kloefkorn writes about his parents' marital problems in a poem, and with this revelation, he uses the word "fear" twice. However, he deals with his fear on this particular Saturday night by looking for girls in the next town:

Amigo,  
Carlos says, don't  
you know? Always  
the pussy is greener  
on the far side  
of the lawn.  

(Life 39-40)

He covers his apprehension with crudeness and bravado, the adolescent's shield.

Kloefkorn reveals his most significant "loss of innocence" in "First Time." He does not name his fair partner because the focus is on him and his feelings:

what  
do I remember? all  
of this, and her thighs  
so white in that  
long darkness. And  
the swagger that  
comes from having  
not been struck
by lightning

Right now I could
shatter ice, con-
sume fire. Right
now I wouldn't
trade places with
anyone.

(Life 42-3)

Kloefkorn's selfish satisfaction is typical of the adolescent male's reaction to his sexual initiation. It is predictable that the girl is not mentioned by name nor is considered for her re-
actions.

Ironically, Kloefkorn sanctifies his sexual encounters by scheduling them "after prayer meeting" in the haymow of a nearby barn. Still the young lady remains anonymous. Kloefkorn justifies the evening:

Tired of words and
of high-blown theory
we fumble our way
into the moon-white
fact of one another.

(Life 46)

Even though he is "tired of words and / of high-blown theory," he prefaces the poem with words from Proverbs 30:33: "Surely the churning of milk bringeth forth butter." This is the work of the adult Kloefkorn, complete with a wry smile on his face.

As an adult, Kloefkorn's adolescence still finds its way into his dream world. He dreams of Helendean Hancock in "The Crush." In his dream, he pedals Helendean on the crossbar of his purple Monarch bicycle and sees her "new blue Angora / sweater
just beyond / the tips of [his] fingers" (51). The memory awakens him:

(see
in the bathroom
how the old goat
can't even find the light
switch?)

(Life 51)

His adolescence is still the present in his dream world.

In "October," he uses various images that are related to that month as he speaks to his love:

Now frost on all the windows
is denying the envious eyes
of the riff-raff. Sure
you may sit as close
as you like. Before the month is out
I'll say it: I love you so much
it's scary. So

you mind if I call you pumpkin?

(Life 49)

This gentle teasing indicates friendship, as well as love, between the couple. Friendship is also apparent in "Mowing the Lawn for the Last Time." After Kloefkorn finishes the final fall lawn mowing, he and his wife "sit on elm stumps drinking black coffee /
from thick white porcelain cups / left from the days of her dead father's cafe" (50). The old coffee mugs symbolize all that they have been through together. As the cups have not broken, neither have the Kloefkorns:

We hold the cups
with both hands, leaning our faces
into them. The morning
for a few moments with us
stands still. We are very happy.

(Life 50)

Kloefkorn may seem redundant at this point with his last line,
"We are very happy," yet it is refreshing to have him simply state
the obvious.

Kloefkorn's treatment of women varies according to the
point of view he chooses to write from. When he writes as a young
boy, his mother is simply the healer, and he misses the comfort of
his older sister. His grandmother punishes him for preaching a
sermon to a hypnotized chicken and, therefore, "mocking God" (18).
She is pictured only in her parental role while Kloefkorn speaks
as a child. In his adolescent persona, Kloefkorn sees his mother
as a woman who does not have a happy marriage, and this frightens
him. He sees his female peers only as sexual objects to be con-
quered, and he is quite randy in his gossiping about them. From
his adult viewpoint, Kloefkorn writes of a comfortable, mature
relationship with his friend, his wife. The maturation of
Kloefkorn's relationship with women is evident in the imagery in
"Mowing the Lawn for the Last Time." The scene exemplifies an
ideal relationship between man and woman.

_A Life Like Mine_ is Kloefkorn's latest volume of poetry,
but it will probably not be his last. He hints in the last poem
of the collection, "My Daughter Pregnant," that more may follow:

_I
tell you, some things
are still happening out there, out there some things are yet going on.

(Life 62)
In an interview with David M. Cicotello in *The Midwest Quarterly*, Kloefkorn revealed that the writings of Mark Twain and William Faulkner have especially influenced his writing. Kloefkorn admires these authors "for their understatement, for their incredible ability to be serious and amusing at the same time" (281). Kloefkorn's poetry reflects these qualities as well as other influences from Twain and Faulkner. Both Twain and Faulkner had a talent for capturing the regions they were writing about in their dialogue. Kloefkorn's use of the vernacular may be traced to his admiration of these authors. Kloefkorn does not hesitate to use slang or even cursing if it is natural for his character to do so. Nor does he hesitate to use such regionalisms as "slopping the hogs," "the whole kit and caboodle," and "picking shit with the chickens." Kloefkorn's voice comes from his region, and it is authentic.

Although Kloefkorn's poetry contains more hyperbole than understatement, the memorable line from *Alvin Turner As Farmer*, "There is always the rock" (1), is a good example of Kloefkorn's ability to understate. Because Alvin faces monumental obstacles in farming, it is simplistic to sum up his trials in that single line.

Kloefkorn uses hyperbole when he exaggerates specific qualities of his characters for a comic effect and for emphasis.
When Kloefkorn's narrator is Stocker, exaggeration is sure to follow. He overestimates Marvel Roderick's fecundity when "in chinks and cracks and unattended doors, / children sprung up full-blown, almost, / almost like flowers" (Stocker 9). And there is Elsie Martin whose face is "so knobbed with indecision / You'd swear she has hemorrhoids," (Stocker 5). Kloefkorn stretches Ludi Jr.'s reaction to his disappointment with love and has him "trade places with the bacon" in order to hide from his lady fair (Ludi Jr 25). One of Kloefkorn's most delightful exaggerations is in "Town Team":

Outfielders jog for several days to their positions, pivot like bloated ballerinas
doff their caps,
then jog for several days back to the dugout.

(Uncertain 13)

This type of exaggeration in characterization is evident in both Twain and Faulkner. Twain creates an embellishment of the melancholy maiden Emmeline Grangerford in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn. Likewise, Faulkner's character Jason Compson in The Sound and the Fury is the personification of material greed running out of control. Although all three men, Kloefkorn, Twain, and Faulkner, make social comments through their hyperbole, Kloefkorn and Twain tend to be consistently more humorous than Faulkner.

Several of Kloefkorn's characters may have their roots in characters from Twain and Faulkner. Kloefkorn's Ludi, Jr. embodies a combination of Tom Sawyer's sense of adventure and Huck Finn's
ability to reflect upon his adventures. Loony resembles Faulkner's Benjy in The Sound and the Fury, except that Faulkner is more consistent with Benjy's perceptions than Kloefkorn is with Loony's. Occasionally, Loony's words are much more refined than his affliction would allow him to be, while Benjy's are almost always limited by his retardation. Alvin Turner adheres to the same code of conduct associated with nature as Ike does in Faulkner's "The Bear." Even though Kloefkorn grew up in southcentral Kansas where surely some black people lived, he does not write about black people in his poetry. Or, if he does, he writes of them in such a manner that leaves the reader unable to identify any black characters. Therefore, no comparison may be made between Kloefkorn's black characters and those of Faulkner and Twain.

However, Kloefkorn, Twain, and Faulkner all write about women. Several parallels may be drawn between Faulkner's women and Kloefkorn's, but this comparison barely exists with Twain's women because Twain had difficulty portraying them.

The consensus of the critics is that Twain was unable to create a realistic female character because of his fixation with an abstract ideal woman. In his real life, his dreams were focused on his wife, Livy. In his writing, Twain sees Joan of Arc as the epitome of womanhood. But there are no female counterparts to Huck Finn, Pap Finn, Tom Sawyer, or Pudd'nhead Wilson. Critic Mary Ellen Goad notes: "Twain was simply unable to create a female character, of whatever age, of whatever time and place, who is
other than wooden and unrealistic" (56).

Twain's female characters are good, kind, loyal, and not too intelligent. They all are the keepers of their associated males' souls, and they all act as the conscience for these same males. If the female is young, she is the Becky Thatcher type: good, but silly and not to be taken seriously. She needs protection. Twain's other typical female is the older, Aunt Polly type. This woman is usually widowed and tries to be the authoritarian of the family, but no one takes her seriously either. Twain does not deal with women of child-bearing age because he might have to mention sex, and this would spoil the purity of his ideal. One needs to remember that Twain was writing during the Victorian era with its repressive attitudes concerning sex, but surely Twain was aware of woman's sexuality. He grew up in a household of females, and his own family was all female after his only son died. Unfortunately, Twain seems to have purposely ignored this vital aspect of womanhood in his writing.

Roxy, the slave in *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, is one exception to this generalization about Twain's women. Because she is black, she is not another of Twain's ideals, and she is allowed passionate emotions and a real sex life. The protectiveness she displays for her illegitimate son's future is a devotion that none of Twain's other mothers display. But, because she attempts to break society's code by passing her son as white, she is doomed to fail. Harold Smith summarizes: "Therefore, it is understandable that Roxy, in
her long struggle to realize her dream, reaches the state where her great physical powers are exhausted and her proud spirit blasted by the dismal failure of her experiment" (26).

Kloefkorn comes close to writing of an idealized woman in Martha Turner. If it were not for Martha's buying new bedroom curtains, and her insistence on rain water for her shampoos, she may also have been as undeveloped as Twain's idealized women. Kloefkorn's "girl in the next pew" in ludi jr resembles Becky Thatcher except that Kloefkorn does not write about her as extensively as Twain does Becky.

In contrast to Twain's women, Kloefkorn's women do engage in sex. Kloefkorn limits his adolescent women to serving as sexual objects for the gratification of his adolescent males. Therefore, these women are flat, undeveloped characters. No women in Twain's writings compare with Kloefkorn's Anna and Doris. Both are well-developed characters with multi-faceted personalities. Both have healthy attitudes toward sex and active sex lives. Because of Twain's psychological block, his married or nubile female characters are denied this essential part of their lives.

Twain is accused of playing a psychological game with the women in his life. Several critics have noted how Twain loved being scolded and would do or say things just to evoke a reprimand from the important women in his life: his mother, Mrs. Fairbanks, and Livy. After his scolding, he would feign rehabilitation, but he would soon err just to be scolded again (Goad 66). He felt that
women were morally superior to men and should strive to make their men as moral as they (Harris 135). Twain's perception of woman's moral duty and his scolding game are both evident in his fiction: between Tom Sawyer and his Aunt Polly, and again between Huck Finn and the Widow Douglas. Both relationships indicate the scolding-repentence-sin again cycle. Although Huck appears to be more sincere than Tom when he repents, neither boy would hesitate to break the heart of the woman who cared for him.

Kloefkorn never has this problem with his women. In his poetry, he is straightforward with his mother and grandmother. His adolescent narrator may coerce a young woman into his car, but either the young woman is too innocent to realize his intentions or is just as curious to explore her own sexuality as the young man. Who is playing what game is hard to determine. Kloefkorn reveals no childish games between his married couples; his couples usually share an honest and open communication.

In a letter to Helen Keller, Mark Twain confessed: "I don't know much about women. It would be impossible for a person to know less about women than I do" (Parkinson 32). His confession is suspect considering his life-long association with women; therefore, one may assume that he chose to ignore reality for his romantic dream of the ideal woman.

Unlike Twain, Faulkner was able to create realistic, credible female characters of all ages. However, he did not always portray these women sympathetically. He felt women should fulfill
themselves through their traditional roles of wife and mother (Brooks xi). Few of his women are pictured in this respect, however, because writing about the ideal leaves no conflict to develop. Faulkner found his stories in those who strayed from tradition or refused traditional roles.

Like Twain, Faulkner wrote of a romantized female in his earlier works; his ideal is slight, willowy, and virginal. Faulkner relates this ideal to "maiden silver poplars" in The Marble Faun. However, Faulkner is never as completely taken in with this romantized female as Twain is by his ideal. Faulkner soon begins to write of young women who use their budding sexuality to manipulate men. Horace Benbow's stepdaughter, Little Belle, and Temple Drake, both in Sanctuary, are such women.

Perhaps it is to Kloefkorn's credit that none of his nubile women consciously misuse their sexuality. Although Loony is aroused by watching a woman undress in front of her window, apparently she is not conscious of her observer. Kloefkorn's teenage women are usually aware of their sexuality, but they are not malicious. Toots Slocum, the cheerleader with the tight sweater in Uncertain the Final Run to Winter, is not evil and is not bent on destroying men's lives, as Temple Drake does with impunity.

Faulkner, too, has his older women characters; however, Faulkner's older women are respected and hold positions of power. Miss Jenny in Sartoris is clearly the head of the family. Although she has never given birth, she plays mother to her nephew and his
sons, but she appears to be more concerned with their health and whereabouts than with loving them as a mother would. Miss Habersham in *Intruder in the Dust* has no children either, but she listens with a mother's instincts when a child reveals his theory concerning a condemned man's innocence. Miss Habersham uses her position in the town to lend credibility to the child's evidence, and she is not afraid to get her hands dirty to save an innocent man. Dilsey, the black servant of the Compsons in *The Sound and the Fury*, epitomizes the older woman character. Not only is she mother of her own large family, but she is also the mother figure for the Compson children. She is indefatigable in her efforts to achieve harmony in the Compson household and is responsible for all their physical needs as well. Nevertheless, Faulkner keeps Dilsey human. She is old, ugly, and often pictured in clothes that make her look like a clown.

Kloefkorn has one main older woman character, his grandmother, who is usually portrayed in maternal roles. Kloefkorn does not idealize his grandmother: she cheats at Parcheesi and cries over broken china. She is "wide" and "stubborn," but she holds a place of honor and respect in Kloefkorn's poetry.

Kloefkorn also writes of other older women, many of whom have not led fulfilling lives. Miss Valerie Teal dies alone in her room, repeating Chaucer, and Fannie Young retreats under her dining-room table when the paper boy comes to collect. Rosetta Thornton sits on her front porch rocking a "barren dress." Each
of these women has not fulfilled her traditional role as a woman; therefore, she reaps only loneliness, insanity, or bitterness. Kloefkorn, like Faulkner, believes in the traditional role of women.

Faulkner comes to terms with the vital sexuality of women through two characters, Caddy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* and Lena Grove in *Light in August*. Faulkner associates Caddy with the fecundity of spring and with the sweet, seductive perfume of honeysuckle blossoms. As Caddy matures sexually, her passions lead her into an affair with a young man who leaves her pregnant. Caddy tries to make the best possible life for her child and herself, but she is thwarted by society and her family. She has to abandon her daughter to be raised by her family, but she never neglects to send financial support. Because of her freedom with her sexuality, she is not the feminine ideal; Lena Grove is closer to Faulkner's ideal. When Lena discovers her pregnancy, she sets out to find the father of her child in order to establish the ideal family unit. She is not discouraged by her poverty nor by society's disapproval. In fact, it is her unfailing determination that convinces people to help her along her journey. Again, Faulkner refuses to romanticize Lena and portrays her as a simple-minded, bovine woman. But her success in establishing a family indicates Faulkner's approval of her.

Kloefkorn's ideal woman appears to be Martha Turner. Her life is fulfilled in her traditional roles of wife and mother. But
Kloefkorn, like Faulkner, keeps his ideal human. Martha spends precious money for bedroom curtains and insists on rain water for her shampoos. While these are not necessarily flaws, Martha does exhibit a lively spirit which makes her agreeable. Kloefkorn's two other married women, Anna and Doris, are dissatisfied with their lives. They both question their sanity and threaten to commit suicide. Kloefkorn does not provide an outlet for these women, and since neither is fulfilled within her traditional roles, each is doomed to dissatisfaction with her life.

Faulkner's nontraditional female characters are much more extreme than Kloefkorn's. Joanna Burden in *Light in August* uses her newly discovered sexuality to possess Joe Christmas. His only escape is to murder Joanna. Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* openly rejects one son and dotes upon another. Her disillusionment with the reality of her life leads her to an affair with a clergyman. She is not able to accept her traditional role because of an obsession with an ideal.

Kloefkorn's poetry has benefited from his admiration of Faulkner and Twain. He has learned from them the art of using the regional and elevating it to the universal. Kloefkorn maintains the vernacular, yet he incorporates the major themes of literature, as do Twain and Faulkner. Although several male characterizations may be traced from Twain and Faulkner to Kloefkorn, there is more correlation between the female characters of Faulkner and Kloefkorn. Each man experiences a maturation in his relationship with women.
that is traceable in his writings.

...
Conclusion

William Kloefkorn and his poetry have matured since his initial publication. He begins with the ideal: a man who makes his livelihood from the land and his woman who is almost the perfect wife and mother. Then, disillusionment and bitterness are apparent as Kloefkorn exposes small town hypocrisy and a fallible religion. Finally, he returns to his ideal: the land, his childhood, and his family in order to regain his faith in life.

Women have played an important part in Kloefkorn's life and in his poetry. By tracing Kloefkorn's changing attitudes toward women, one also traces his maturation as a man and as an artist. Sally Page, a Faulknerian scholar, expresses a similar idea:

Like woman, the land does suggest to man the ideals by which he must live, but the land also embodies man's inescapable human limitations....when man accepts the limitations of the human situation and submits himself to the natural processes of life, he can survive meaningfully. Nature's beauty, its eternalness, and its never-ending cycle of renewal and woman's capacities for fecundity, sustenance, and endurance are the signs that human life will "prevail."

(Page 187-88)

Before man submits himself to the natural cycle of life, he may project a romanticized ideal. Faulkner did in The Marble Faun, and Kloefkorn does in Alvin Turner As Farmer. Martha is barely credible as a woman. She is almost totally selfless and is fulfilled within her traditional role. Even though Kloefkorn writes about the land, he is but a neophyte compared to his female
characters. Martha knows and accepts the inescapable cycles of life and death, but when faced with Martha's death, Alvin regresses to a monosyllabic creature, totally incapable of coping with his loss.

During the next several years, Kloefkorn's poetry is full of unsympathetic and distasteful portrayals of women. Kloefkorn hides behind Stocker to point out that women are empty-headed, vicious gossips; barely disguised prostitutes; family-corrupting mothers; and bitter, old hags. Kloefkorn's adolescent persona, Ludi, Jr., never sees young women as his peers, but always as sexual objects for his erotic fantasies. Even Kloefkorn's poem that is dedicated to his wife projects a cool relationship that is perpetuated only to relieve his loneliness. Kloefkorn's Maddog Miller races from one end of the country to the other, to see how many women he can conquer before he exhausts himself. Kloefkorn reaches his extreme with the poetry in Not Such A Bad Place To Be. He seems sure that life is meaningless and sees no hope for the future. He denies his own mortality and blames every woman in the collection for the inevitability of death. His old woman becomes an agent of death, trying to take him with her to the grave. One man's imminent marriage signals the death of his freedom and can mean only a living hell. Kloefkorn seems to hope that by not becoming involved in life, maybe life, and therefore death too, will pass him by.

One poem in Leaving Town indicates the source of Kloefkorn's
problem. When Maddog Miller encounters the girl with the withered arm, he cannot explain why, but he professes to need her. This may be Kloefkorn confronting his muse. She has a withered arm, which is perhaps symbolic of Kloefkorn's impotent view of life and of the attitudes in his poetry at this time:

I lift the arm, cool and dry and light as an eggshell. And though it is smaller even than I thought possible, clinging and queer to the touch, I am serious when I say I need her.

(Leaving 15)

The smallness of her arm seems to reflect the smallness of Kloefkorn's philosophy, and he realizes that it is "queer to the touch," not natural, for him to feel as he is feeling about life.

However, the eggshell image suggests new birth and hope for Kloefkorn. The last line indicates that Kloefkorn knows what is wrong with his perspective: he needs to embrace the female within himself, his anima, in order to "survive meaningfully."

In his later works, Kloefkorn works through the process of accepting his anima. In Platte Valley Homestead, Anna helps Jacob understand nature's cycles through the ebb and flow of the Platte River. She shows him the essential in life:

supper in a bright warm kitchen, the river in a circle flowing, clear water over fine clean sand, small world but O good God above!
Earth Mother here below!
immense! Immense!
(Platte 51)

Kloefkorn's acceptance of his anima is reflected in Honeymoon as Doris helps Howard discover the female within himself. Doris allows Howard to experience a fantasy birth and urges him to reject his hard-driving male truck for the openness of a female canoe. She understands as he weeps over his yearning to be closer to nature. Doris guides Howard into acceptance of himself as an androgynous being to the point where it is he who comforts Doris in the face of the inevitable death of her father.

The result of Kloefkorn's discovery is a new relationship with women, especially his wife. Through his poetry, he cherishes their moments together and speaks tenderly of their love. His regret is that it took him so long to reach this point in his maturation: "I have wasted so much of my life / not telling you that, avoiding this" (Collecting 83). He continues to write of this relationship in his latest volume, A Life Like Mine, where an old, unbroken cup filled with warming coffee becomes a symbol of their love's endurance. Now, Sally Page's words may be connected specifically to Kloefkorn, as he "accepts the limitations of the human situation and submits himself to the natural processes of life. He can survive meaningfully" (188).

Because of Kloefkorn's maturation, his latest poetry reflects an insightful, thoughtful viewpoint. He is able to see women as fellow people instead of objects. In an interview,
Kloefkorn disclosed that now he is able to "like" women, and he confessed that this was not always the case. He feels strongly that a woman should be fulfilled, but not at the expense of her femaleness (Interview 1985). As Kloefkorn is such a prolific writer, it would be challenging for him to continue to experiment with his insights about the modern woman. Maybe he could occasionally adopt a female point of view in his poetry. Perhaps he may even be able to offer the modern Midwestern woman additional insights to the trials and frustrations that are a part of her life on the prairie.
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