ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book has benefited greatly from the careful reading, critical skill and encouragement of many. I'd like to acknowledge the help of Elaine Fowler Palencia, Pat Simpson, Frank Modica, Mary McCormack Deka, Frank Chadwick, Charlotte Pence, Lania Knight, Robert Manaster, Matt Murrey, Julie Price, Elizabeth Majerus, Gail Walden and Carol Sanford. A. Van Jordan was of immense help in a manuscript workshop he led at the Vermont College of Fine Arts in 2015. I am grateful to upstreet for a scholarship that enabled me to attend. None of these poems could have been written without the love and kindness of my wife, Lois, our children Ann, George and Emily, and our grandchildren Caroline, Elinor and Dakarai.

I am grateful to the following publications, where a number of these poems first appeared, some in different versions or with different titles. Clapboard House for “Rustling Brick” and “Canning Peaches”; Temenos for “Boys”; Prick of the Spindle for “A Young Man Sees His First Picasso,” and “All Nighter on the Snow Plow”; Gulf Stream for “Picking Blueberries”; Lingerpost for “Cellist”; upstreet for “Prairie Work Day”; Off the Coast for “September 1941”; C4: The Chamber Four Lit Magazine for “Climate Change: Beyond the Tipping Point” and “Prayer Flags”; Heron Tree for “The Catch-All”; Arcadia for “What Is Your Writing Process”; Delmarva Review for “Morning Paper”; Bluestem for “Prairie at Night,” “Harvesting Winter Squash,” and “Imprint”; Mud Season Review for “To Finkel’s Ghost”; McNeese Review for “Crossing the End Moraine at Mattoon” and “Lightening the Wagons”; Contemporary Rural Social Work for “Distant Music”; Harry Truman All the Way, Pudding House Chapbook Series 2008, for “Harry Truman All the Way,” “Learning to Breathe,” “Taps,” “Table Saw,” and “Poem in Wartime.”

Cover and book design and layout by Judith Kerman with titles in Hypatia Pro and text in Californian FB; cover art by Kurt Frevel. Photo of author by Kent Curtis Miller.
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I. PRAIRIE REHAB
Prairie Work Day

This eighty acres has enough creek for one beaver family to scrape by, pasture for three or four bison, were they allowed in town.

Redwings do well here. Whitetail, who live anywhere. There’s a hawk. Four states away a monster storm takes aim at a third of the country,

while we volunteer in chest-high messiness that grabs the wind and quiets it. We run our fingers up the rough stems of graminoids
to gather seed: Indian Grass, Turkey Foot, Canadian Wild Rye we’ll scatter in March on the poor soil they seem to like, abandoned

dumps and vacant city lots, or those awkward jogs you find along rural roads, where true north and the grid don’t fit.
Naming Rights

Jeffrey Dorway, he was, or Dorine or Dorian, illiterate freed mulatto slave, said to be fluent in French, English and five native languages. When he made his X on wind-whipped paper as interpreter and witness at Indian parleys, Sac and Fox moved on a little farther west with a few dollars and tools and new guarantees. When he made his X, secretaries wrote down whatever they heard, Dormine, Dorrien, it shifted like the river in its banks. When he made his X selling bottomland he’d squatted and owned (sweet soil, sycamore and oak, deer and mink), Jeffrey Dorway (we’ll call him that) dissolved into these scattered references in fragile books, and Jeffrey’s Point became Haymon’s Ferry, the old name like a faint erasure under the new.
Crossing the Big Blue, 1849

Needing pasture for the long journey they waited for spring rains; now the oxen swim hard, their calm, brown heads just above water,

a great current swinging the wagon downstream in a smooth arc as if compass-drawn. Once across, men and animals come out dripping,

but with stores dry in the caulked double bottom: Half a ton of flour milled on the sly on the Sabbath, beans, bacon, tobacco, sugar, coffee.

These are Missouri people, know what they see with their own eyes—Indians hunting deer in the timber, “wandering, idle and ill-clad.”

who stop to help drag the wagon up, then wave the party on, thinking, Just a trickle, just passing through.
Lightening the Wagons

Everything taken at the outset was deemed indispensable. The definition of indispensability was rapidly revised.

Merrill J. Mattis, The Great Platte River Road

They jettisoned cookstoves at the first stream crossing, mattresses after the first mile of mud, set kerosene ablaze on a half-ton of bacon so the Indians wouldn’t steal it. When mules and oxen suffered in draggy sand, they threw away anvils, mining augers, gold-washers, handsaws, planes, scythes and chisels, spades and plows. Like dogs shitting on the run they left kegs of salt and iron nails, sacks of rice, tobacco, rocking chairs, washstands and corner what-nots strewn along the trail to Fort Kearney and beyond. Someone dumped a complete disassembled sawmill. Someone dumped a pump organ, someone else made a fire of it, first hot beans in a week. Cast-off chains flaked and rusted, ropes unravelled, fell apart; a china teacup survived intact. On to Ash Hollow, Chimney Rock, Fort Laramie, their own dead in shallow graves with a penciled note stuck in a forked stick. Every few days they’d pass an Indian corpse in a basket, on four poles or high in a lone cottonwood . . . open to sun and wind, surrendering to spirit or nothing. By the time they reached the snowy passes, they’d begun to understand: It’s all dispensable, even themselves.
Loda Cemetery Prairie

They were the first to break sod, these upright farmers, forever settling, their names graven on canted stones.

Corn as far as you can see, spaced for the combine, room between graves for the sexton’s mower.

To one side, a tangled mat of remnant thimbleweed, false indigo, spiderwort, lead plant and shooting star

in glorious bloom above a scattering of paupers’ bones.
Prairie at Night

We know what we’ve done to it,
birds hunted to extirpation,
fence-to-fence monoculture,

but we still find it beautiful: Headlights
sweeping the ditch banks,
low, dark moraines out to the horizon,

featureless except for the ordering
of farm lights miles apart
like the running lights of boats,

and in the middle distance
the domestic glow of lamps
behind living room curtains,

a halogen light on a tall pole
encircling the empty place
between house and barn.
Distant Music (foaled 3 February 1997) is an American-bred, British-trained Thoroughbred racehorse and sire. Bred and owned by Khalid Abdullah he was trained throughout his racing career in England by Barry Hills. As a two-year-old in 1999 he was unbeaten in three races including the Champagne Stakes and the Dewhurst Stakes and was the top-rated British-trained juvenile of the season. He began 2000 as the favourite for the 2000 Guineas but after losing his unbeaten record in the Greenham Stakes he was