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Commentary: Basketball

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BASKETBALL

A huge summer afternoon with no sign of rain. . . . Elm trees in the farmyard bend and creak in the wind. The leaves are dry and gray. In the driveway a boy shoots a basketball at a goal above the garage door. Wind makes shooting difficult and time after time he chases the loose ball. He shoots, rebounds, turns, and shoots ... on into the afternoon. In the silence between the gusts of wind the only sounds are the thump of the ball on the ground and the rattle of the bare steel rim of the goal. The gate bangs in the wind, the dog in the yard yawns, stretches and goes back to sleep. A film of dust covers the water in the trough. Great clouds of dust rise from open fields that stretch a thousand miles beyond the horizon.

COMMENTARY

I began writing "Basketball" many years ago when I was in college, but none of the many versions I wrote was satisfactory. Still, it seemed to me that there was a poem in this scene of a boy shooting baskets in a farmyard, so I held on to the image. In the early 1970s, after reading a lot of wonderful work by Robert Bly, Russell Edson, David Ignatow and others, and many translations, I began writing prose poems. Among the first prose poems I wrote was a version of "Basketball."

I found prose to be more malleable than verse, and it allowed for more subtle manipulation of tone and mood. I believed then (and I still believe) that the essence of poetry does not lie in the form of a poem, in the rhyme or meter or beauty of language, or even in meaning, as it is commonly understood. It is rather in the mysterious moment of understanding and empathy one has when reading a good poem, the sudden, almost visceral recognition of a certain truth. I wanted to use language that was clear and unobtrusive, language that allowed the reader the experience without insisting on its "poetic" quality. The prose poem seemed to me to be the right form for my part of the twentieth century.

The prose version of "Basketball" had the effect I wanted: the openness, the flatness, the lack of pretense in language that were right for the scene. Looking at the poem now, I think there is still a bit too much

melodrama. The last sentence especially seems overdone, but I wanted to emphasize the extreme feelings of emptiness and endlessness one often has on the Great Plains.

"Basketball," from *An Almost Human Gesture*, The Eighties Press and Ally Press, 1987.