

HANBELACHIA



by J·JANDA

HANBLEACHIA

J. Janda

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CARDINAL POETRY REVIEW, Fall 1979
NEW CATHOLIC WORLD, Jan./Feb. 1976

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Hanbelachia

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With gratitude to Leonard A. Waters, S.J.
who taught me that words mean things and
my Sioux students who taught me what it
means to be human.

Good Earth, South Dakota

The land to the east
is prairie

miles and miles
of grass and sand

low hills and valleys
as far as you can see

there are no trees

only a windmill
breaks the horizon

or a cow or two grazing
a swell in the land

The Sioux

made love flutes
from cedar wood

victory whistles
from eagle bone

scraping out
pith and marrow

blowing man breath
through
wood and bone

when words could
not cry or sing

or skip water as
smooth flat stone

the peace pipe

passed by hand
from man to man

was smoked
in silence

The Town in March

I
a wind smelling
of grass
and wet earth
was coming
off the prairie
and blowing
through town

you could hear
Mr. Buffalo Robe
playing marches
on his piano
from the open door
of his shack

Mrs. Big Dog
sitting on the
stoop of her trailer
was squinting
in the sun

kids were shouting
about the dead
badger they found

II
he does not play
the piano any more

some men broke his
hand and arm
when he was drunk

some men blinded
John Red Feather too

this is not spoken of
in town

Saint Isaac Jogues Indian Mission

the swallows outsang
the priest at Mass

one of the brothers
knocked down the nests

he said the bird droppings
ruined the new painted stucco

and the noise bothered
him at morning prayer

the Indians said nothing
they were not there

Tiyospaye

Irene Iron Kettle
told me
her beadwork
got enough money
for a used TV

but then the
relatives
came and stayed
for weeks

for them
I buy meat
she said

and is still doing
some of the best
beadwork in town

Tiyospaye, the extended family

Boarding School

it is silent
in the dorm tonight
where
seventy four Indian
boys are sleeping

I hear their
breathing

and from open
windows

crickets

the lowing
of steer

wind rushing
across
the prairie

and from town
muffled sounds

of dogs barking

car doors thudding

falsetto wailing
to the pulse
of a drum
from the powwow
in the town hall

and wonder
about
their dreams

The Orphan

showed me how
he knocked down
a robin's nest
with rocks

where a dog ate
the wounded bird's
head off and

how he cut his lip
throwing stoned in
the air—catching
them in his mouth

he could climb
any tree

make others afraid
to fight

but a glance
could
make him cry

Weekend Boarders in the Canyons

ran down
the cow path
sweating
in hot sun

pulled off
their T shirts
filling them
with

gooseberries
elderberries
chokecherries
wild plum

eating
while red juice
ran down
their chests

climbing
trees to look
in nests

then
running up
a deer path
into the
sun

yelled war cries

Philip Big Thunder

we crossed fields
of buffalo grass
and seeding weeds

we crossed acres
of corn stubble

we followed barbed-
wire fences stuck
with tumbleweed

I saw cattle feed
all I heard were
grouse and longspurs

your boots tramping grass
your boots crushing stubble

the wind—and you stamping
dust off your boots
and a screen door clap shut

Absalom Holy Shirt

said he was
Crazy Horse

while busting

Broncos
women and
cars

till his car

swerved
off the dirt road
hitting
his mail box

which
flew off its post
through
the windshield

opening his head
to
old news

The Olsons

somehow

when the feedman
called say he
didn't like how
the house looked

and the way she said
she didn't
like how Hal used her

I knew I'd find
him in the barn
with a pitchfork
in his back

Jeannie White Elk

would not give
her baby up

but carried him
to Sunday Mass
and parish
bingo parties

she would not tell
who the father was

Sister Fara Boarding School Cook

got out of a car
which rolled three times
and ended upside down
in a ditch

the Sioux were obedient
in her kitchen and

ate her sauerkraut
slaws and kuchen

she'd make me sit down
to see her family photographs
from Germany
hollering over my head
at the girls
to peel the potatoes and
stop burning the meat

she could forgive God
for sending her here

and the Indians too
who brought her bittersweet and
yucca from the canyons

Indian Summer

Solomon Moves Fast
came home
drunk from the dance

and after his
mother
closed the door

to his face

tore up her
cabin
with an ax

doing less harm
than his father
did running off
with another woman

Solomon
repaired the cabin
before
the frost

Unmarked Graves in the Indian Cemetery

dwarf iris grow
wild
in thin grass
spreading
over sunken graves

dandelions and
finches
mark newer plots

a smoke cat
with yellow eyes
sends
the finches to the trees
sees me and
runs
under the grave diggers'
shed

I leave closing the gate
twining the loose piece
of rusting wire around it
so it will not swing

a couple with a box
move beyond the trees

Beyond Saint Isaac Jogues Mission I

if you follow
the cow path
a mile east

you will feel
the swell and fall
of the grassland

and see the
earth is dry

the clumps of
grass and weed
cropped short

except for sage
and thorn brush which
the cattle do not eat

you will come
to a windmill
closed in by a
wooden fence

and although no grass
grows on this hill

inside the fence
is a tangle
of sunflowers
tall grass and
blue flowering weed

The Buffalo Hunters

at full gallop
guiding the paints
with their knees

could ride
alongside a herd
on the run

their arms free
to sink and ash arrow
deep below thick hide

for fresh meat

or sit
alongside
a stream

luring a fish

with the rib
of a mouse
on a string

Mrs. Red Shirt

her government check
could not feed
all of them
after her daughter left

she had to dig for
wild turnips with
the grandchildren

and take them
to the canyons
to pick berries
and willow buds

and even come to
ask for money
from the Mission

and one winter
send a grandson
for help when
the wind knocked
her outhouse over

Exorcism

Mrs. Kills Buffalo
would not have
her husband buried

by the Church
for
they were Yuwipi

but during my
last visit

asked me to bless
the house

because
she said
it's too dark
and
heavy in here

so with words
and water
I laid to rest
feelings

neither of our
minds
could control

Thanksgiving Day at Kopec's House

he was at our station wagon
before the motor stopped

greeting us
with a scarred face
and hands

his son taught me how
to take the skin
off three pheasants
without spoiling
the feather

so they could be
salted down and
hung on the wall

his two daughters
playing accordions
sung for the
neighbors

while a nun
from the boarding school
and his wife danced

and later spread
a bed sheet on
the ping pong table
so everybody could
eat together

and find out how
he got scarred
when the gas stove
in the basement
exploded blowing
out the windows
of his house

Ace Bailey

after his wife ran out

came to the reservation
with a carnival

swearing never to marry
again unless he found
the world's ugliest woman

he found her at the fair
and settled in Good Earth

surviving marriage

a bite in the neck
from a rabid skunk
while sleeping out-
side on the ground

and his trailer
burning down

he's living in
a house now
with his full-
blood wife

and working
on and off
at the Mission

Moran's Common-law Wife

pregnant in summer
barefoot in winter

that's how to keep
a wife — he laughed

slapping her
backside and

telling her
to set a place
for me to eat

before she finished
her sandwich and beans

he got up
winking to her
to show me
the bull

mentioning
he had to plow
for winter wheat

when I finished
my coffee
she showed me
to my car

and in the rear
view mirror

I saw her wiping
her eyes
with her sleeve

Jeremiah Good Horse

whiskey could help
him forget

the times
she laughed with
other men
to his face

and when
he heard other voices
in his bed

though it could
not help him
forget

the time
he had to push
his hunting knife
in another man's
chest

knowing
that one blow
from that drunken lover's
fist
to his head

would crush
the little life
he had left

since a bullet
knocked part of his skull
away
during the Second World
War

Memorial Day at the Indian Cemetery

yearly they honor
their dead
with plastic flowers
and food

veterans' graves

marked with
granite headstones
lodge pole pines
and flags

are given a
twenty one gun
salute

or deep in
their minds
are stories
of bravery

that
to have
died
in battle

is to be
a man

when can one do
when even
the holymen agree

Beyond Saint Isaac Jogues Mission II

if you sit
on the fence
at the windmill

and there is
a wind

you hear the hum
of the fan

the clank and creak
of the pump

the water spilling
from the pipe
outside the fence
into the round trough

if there is
no wind
and the mill
is silent

you can listen
for prairie birds

and if you look
into the trough

you see yourself
in clear water

and deeper

big mossy stones
to hold the trough down
when it is dry

Nicodemus Bad Medicine

wanted
the dead
child
Baptized

so it could
be buried
with his
Christian
wife

after a
shaman
failed

Saul Judgson

nobody
could talk
to him

while he
was building
his life

on a farm
a wife and
three sons

but when each
failed him

he closed himself
in the garage and
listened to his car

Morgan's Herefords

because we
could not talk

I followed the
dirt road west

stopped to lean
on a fence post

to listen to
them breathe

one twanged the
barbed-wire
with her tail

another with
a wet nose
streaked with dirt
and chaff

gray clouds were
turning smoke red

smoldering spread
to all the clouds

a drop of water
touched my shoulder

the last I saw
was a dim rainbow
span the herd

then blur
in the rain

Sister Jerome

with the determination
of Sisyphus

she'd see the
students' dining room
swept after each meal

between classes

and mopped
on Saturdays

and on Sundays
walk the borders
through the canyons

she'd get up
every morning
at five to pray

but could not fall asleep
till long after midnight

even when no
students came

to tell what
it was like
to be Indian

The Minor Prophet

Geno Hawk Eye
a first grader

was walking
next to me

through the
cemetery

when he pulled
a red satin ribbon
off a wreath

and tied it
around his head
Apache style

on his headband
gold letters spelled out
his new name

NEPHEW — upside down

Mrs. Stephanie White Star

was slender as
a willow branch

and died very young
driving Many Horses' Mustang
off a canyon ridge

to rest
in a gully
of wild plum

soon after we found
her in the wreck

trees were showing
jagged teeth

aspen leaves
were shaking

Sioux Country

the old man's cat weaves
in and out his legs

rubbing his trousers
with her head and back

stretched out on his lap
her tail does not rest

even in sleep at the window

the old man's woman
made of roots of trees

sits telling stories
to giggling children

her eyes aware
they are listening

as little as the prairie
canyons and stones

or grass growing through
sockets of sun bleached bone

Reservation Teachers

are white
and do not stay
for more
than three years

you can still
find Yuwipi bundles
in the canyons

the Black Hills
are still sacred to
the Sioux

Beyond Saint Isaac Jogues Mission III

if you look east
from the windmill

there is only
land and sky

between you and
the horizon

if you look west
and the sun is down

you see the outline
of the Mission and town

dark against the sky
but seeded with light

with a full moon
it is like morning

Wanbli Ska's Vision

he saw a woman's spirit
breathing
in a man's shell

and a man's spirit
breathing
in a woman's shell

and arrows aimed
at each of them

by those who had
not
seen his vision

wanbli ska, white eagle

Creation Myth

the Great Spirit
gave

the bear thick fur
to keep warm

the eagle wings
to fly

the turtle a shell
to hide in

the ant medicine
to work

to naked man
He gave words

to imitate them

Dakota Winter

when hoof marks are
frozen
around the trough

wind blinds your
eyes
and snows up your
sleeve

as you drag
bales
off the flatbed
fork
them apart for
feed

horses come
to nudge you

their breath steams

their muzzles feel
soft as mink
in winter traps

Father Grueter Indian Missionary

I remember him smiling
while eating cottage cheese

and in long underwear with
a purple stole hearing my
Confession from his bed

once after the Indian kids
had guessed his magic tricks
he took out his false teeth
saying — bet you can't do this

his half hour Christmas sermon
at Ring Thunder
began with the Annunciation
and ending with
Christ rising from the dead

the following December
I found him winded
sitting in the stairwell
remarking through quick
breaths—
all the branches of the trees
are encased in ice

that afternoon he died

Mrs. Beauchemin

drunk again

stumbled up for
Holy Communion
and after Mass
leaned on me

saying
you saved me
Father

don't talk
about Jesus

Silas Snow Bird

lost almost
everything for
drinking

the kids
took up with
an aunt

the wife
with a younger man
in town

but an old Chevy
on blocks
keeps him warm

a dog too

though it isn't
Silas
who feeds him

Extreme Unction

so tightly did
Paul Red Eagle
hold to
Eutyclus Blue Road's dying
body
on the bed
that winter night

I could not use
the Holy Oils

only stand apart
and watch and

dimly remember how
Elijah and Elisha
brought life

and learn

Paul Red Eagle
sensed what the
Incarnation
was all about

Joseph White Road

feared
for his daughter
with child

so he looked for
the father
and asked him in

though
the trailer was
crowded
with other sons and
daughters
one still at the
breast

he had found
his
wife this way

Sign of the Cross

an old
heyoka
told me

where
your road
crosses
my road

this is a
holy place

it is good
to rest here

but
you must
follow
your road

I must
follow
my road

this we
must live
who
dream
of Thunder

heyoka, a clown by sacred calling

Hanbelachia

a shaft of sunlight was
burning
through branches
and flickering leaves
on a wild dove nested

I followed the curve

of the beak
to the
wakeful eye

then down
the neck

to the slope
of the tail

and farther

past the windbreak

over the pine
hills
of the canyons

across the prairie table
to the horizon

up through the moving clouds
and beyond

Hanbelachia, Crying for a Vision

The Prairie

does not end
where the Indian town
begins

it sifts through
shut doors
settling on
tables and chairs

it gets in clothes
under fingernails

few mention it
except
others like me

who shower often
to wash
it off the skin

beginning to realize
it is something deeper

J. Janda is a widely published poet who has received several awards for his work. HANBELACHIA results from his teaching experience on an Indian reservation. Another collection of poetry, NOBODY STOP BY TO SEE (Paulist Press 1977) deals with the inner city where he has also taught. His one act play, "Hey What Are You Kids Wearin' Them Leaves For?" was dramatized on CBS in 1971.