



DOUG BEASLEY

## The Penis That Killed Jeffrey City

DAVID ROMTVEDT

**T**he most important thing in life, my father taught me, is to make good money. He was a child of poverty, and I think what he really meant was that the most important thing in life is to fit in. Having a stable middle-class income would have allowed him to do that. But I was young and didn't think much about fitting in. In fact, I spent most of my childhood reading. It also never occurred to me that I might not be able to make a living. And so I became a poet.

I spent ten years working in the Poetry in the Schools program in Washington State, Alaska, Montana, Nevada, and Wyo-

ming. I went from school to school helping kids write poems. Once, in Miles City, Montana, I was trying to get across to a group of sixth-graders the power of our senses — as well as the dislocation and excitement we feel when we do something out of the ordinary. So I asked them to lick a tree.

One of the bigger, tougher boys looked hard at me and said, "Are you famous?"

"What?"

"I want to know if you're famous."

We'd had a lesson earlier in the week on oxymorons,

those paired opposites, like “burning ice,” “jumbo shrimp,” and “compassionate conservative.” I thought I’d make a joke and let myself off the hook at the same time, so I said, “‘Famous poet’ is an oxymoron.”

“Oxymoron, my ass,” the boy said. “No bullshit. Are you famous or not? ‘Cause if you’re not, I got no time to be out licking trees.”

*You’re not like us* is what he meant. *And if you’re not famous — i.e., rich — then we don’t have to be like you.*

His comment jolted me. After ten years as an itinerant poet, I began to think about both money and fitting in. In addition to doing residencies in schools, I’d been working for my father-in-law as a ranch hand. I loved that work, both for the sweating, heaving labor and for the connection it gave me to Wyoming and to my wife’s family. My father-in-law wanted to pay me for my work, but I refused, saying I couldn’t take money from family. For me, accepting money would have severed the connections the work created.

Still, I had to eat, and so, in addition to my other work, I traveled around Wyoming on behalf of the state humanities council, giving talks to adult audiences about contemporary literature. At these talks, people often asked me about “cowboy poetry.” I’d never heard any cowboy poems until I’d come to Wyoming, and when I did hear them I thought they were simply bad poetry — the idealized, sentimental stuff of Hallmark cards or Christmas specials. I didn’t say this, though. I knew that people liked these poems, and I feared that my criticism of them would be taken as snobbishness.

As I heard more cowboy poetry, though, I came to admire if not its language then its ethic. Cowboy poems often addressed ordinary life in small towns or on ranches in the arid, interior West. They spoke of self-reliance and autonomy, the dignity of physical work, caring for your neighbors (whether or not they were your friends), respecting the past, protecting the land, and being part of a community. I admired these values even though the poems left me cold.

I mentioned my feelings to a friend, but he wasn’t buying it. “You’re an elitist,” he said. “No matter how hard you try to deny it, you’re looking down your nose at people.” Cowboy poems give people pleasure, he said, because they affirm that ranch life is as worthy as any other life. That’s a big deal at a time when fewer and fewer people can make a living ranching and nobody in the state or federal government cares if every ranch goes under and beef ends up being manufactured in a lab out of soy paste and shark fins and shipped directly to Wal-Mart superstores. Then my friend pointed out that cowboy poems are often funny, because ranch life is hard, and people want something that makes them laugh. “Fuck the great poems,” he said. “Ask yourself what counts in life and who’ll stand by you when push comes to shove, and then see if you can separate poetry from an ethic.”

By the time my friend was finished talking, I was pissed off. I’m a working-class guy (it’s tempting to cite my credentials), and every day I feel as if someone from the polite, upper-class writing establishment is going to tap me on the shoulder and say, “Keep moving. You don’t belong here. You’re an imposter.

You’re not one of us.” By calling me an elitist, my friend was putting me in a group that I’d never been able to join and simultaneously denying me entry into a group to which I wanted to belong.

One day in Rock Springs, a small town in southwest Wyoming, I was giving one of those state-sponsored talks on literature, and I read a poem by Gary Snyder titled “Hay for the Horses.” In this poem, two men — one young and one old — are unloading a truckload of hay and stacking it in a barn. It’s hot and dry. The men are sweating. Hay gets down their shirt collars and into their boots. They take a break, and the older man says, “I first bucked hay when I was seventeen. / I thought, that day I started, / I sure would hate to do this all my life. / And dammit, that’s just what / I’ve gone and done.”

I love this poem. It’s about ranch work; it’s easygoing; it has an older man imparting wisdom to a younger one; it imagines a better, simpler past; it’s funny; and it isn’t hard to understand. It feels like a moment from real life, earned and lived. I asked the audience, “Is this a cowboy poem?”

“No” was the unanimous response.

“Why not?”

There was a lot of thinking and talking amongst themselves. Finally someone said, “It doesn’t rhyme.”

This turned out to be a nearly absolute rule: a cowboy poem has to rhyme. The few that don’t are the exceptions that prove the rule. In the early twentieth century, American poets mostly threw rhyme out. It was a time of social upheaval: the First World War, the worldwide flu epidemic, anti-immigrant hysteria. To poets, rhymed poetry reflected genteel Victorian artifice and class barriers. They got rid of rhyme in part to throw off elitism, to bring art and daily life together. But for the group in Rock Springs, rhyme was what made a poem both legitimate and down-home. By using rhyme, cowboy poets and their audiences said no to the bad news of the twentieth century and said yes to a better time in the past.

A man who hadn’t spoken before raised his hand. “It’s not just rhyme,” he said. “The Snyder poem doesn’t go beyond the pain of work. I grant you that ranch work is demanding, dirty, and ordinary, but it’s more than that. It’s gotta be more than that, because it’s what we’ve given our lives to. You see, you can’t give your life to something unless there’s some meaning to the giving.”

I knew what he meant: castrating calves, shearing sheep, fixing fences, bucking hay — these gritty, demanding daily chores can, paradoxically, be transcendent.

“Do you think doing ranch work makes us better human beings?” I asked.

The man shrugged.

I went on: “If certain kinds of work make us better people, what about the people who don’t do that work?” The moment I said that, I realized I had often imagined myself to be better than others because I chose to do the low-paying (but important) work I did. No wonder I felt like an outsider.

*(end of excerpt)*