

**Norbert Krapf's *Southwest by Midwest*
(Dos Madres Press)**

reviewed by Gregory J. Wolos

In his new collection *Southwest by Midwest*, Norbert Krapf, a poet of the Midwest, opens his eyes and spirit to the native art and spirit of America's Southwest. Focusing on the work of Native potter Jody Naranjo, images of whose work both illustrate and lend context to his poems, Krapf demonstrates a nuanced sensitivity to the ethos of the culture he learns to admire. In "Invocation," he asks to be led to an appreciation of Jody's art: "Help my eyes see/ how her pottery/ revolves with a charm that awakens my vision/ with a love as warm/ as a natural religion," hoping that the images of butterflies that so often appear on her pottery will "inspire/ my imagination to fly/ into Jody's creative fire." The opening poem, "Prolog: The Pot Taking Shape," Krapf establishes a connection that transcends geographical and temporal distance: "In this Midwestern morning/ darkness I see a pot taking/ shape in the red hills/ of northern New Mexico." Connectivity on several levels proves thematically central. The potter's physical presence, as she "coils local clay" connects "spirit" and "mystery" to create a work that carries a religious experience which is both a "blessing" and a "consecration," and a "hymn." Not only does her work forge "a connection/ between the pot/ in the making/ and the landscape/ out of which/ it has emerged," the pottery also both emerges from and continues a connection to the generations that have preceded her, yielding, "something of the earth/ carrying her imprint/ and the spirit of those/ who came before her." Jody Naranjo's craft follows a tradition, Krapf writes in "The Girl in the Village," that "her mother showed her how/ to do and as her aunts/ and grandmother and those/ earlier generations have prepared/ her and her children also to do."

Krapf emphasizes the synthesis of the Native artist's craft with nature, the land, and those who live upon it. In "Dine Daughter," we learn that her connections to these are part of her essence: "When she is outside the circle/ of the Four Sacred Mountains/ she carries Dinetah in her big/ heart and corn pollen in her/ small handbag. No matter/ how far she is from her/ homeland the old stories/ of her father and the warm/ wisdom of her mother keep her spirit calm and strong/ and make her confident she/ can do whatever her heart wills." The artist, we read in "On the Rim" is "[p]oised between heavens/ and earth, between past,/ present and future," and the work she produces is rendered, as is illustrated in an eponymous poem, in a "New Old Tongue." Krapf, the Midwestern poet, recognizes in poems about Jody the potter's parents and relatives the significance of the traditions that have shaped her life and work. He longs to be able to



Wilderness House Literary Review 15/3

partake of the spirituality he sees embodied in her work, but knows that he must open his eyes and heart wide in order to be able to make this connection. Even when, in the poem "Eastern Light," he awakes (with his wife) in the room of the potter's parents and is struck by the morning light that inspires the potter's work, he acknowledges and laments with "shame" the cultural gap that separates him from the culture he admires. He is "choked with salty grief/ over the realization/ that we who came/ later from elsewhere/ to this beautiful/ land and landscape/ have not had/ the eyes to see,/ the ears to listen,/ the hearts to feel,/ the wisdom to understand/ what was here/ and still remains." If he and other non-Natives could absorb the benefit of Native culture instead of imposing upon it, they might "become the people/ we must be/ to walk in dignity/ and beauty and balance."

It is the potter and her work that have the power to absorb the outsider with their beauty and spirituality, Krapf suggests in "Some Hands": "Some hands touch us/ by what they make/ and leave for us/ like a red-earth pot/ from New Mexico that / holds the spirits of animals/ and ancestors who speak/ in a low-tone language/ that all understand." But as Krapf contemplates the geographical and cultural separation between the Southwest and Midwest, he finds, in "The Police and the Potter's Healing Hands," that the cultures connect through the ideas of family and art. When Jody the potter visits the poet in Indiana, she lends an empathetic ear to a story of an episode of family difficulty, and "your/ hand that shapes/ clay into a pot/ reaches out to/ mine that writes/ the poem/ and you, a guest artist/ . . . / say you feel/ what we felt,/ . . . / We are joined," Krapf concludes, "as one family/ in one story/ that crosses over/ state boundaries/ ancient battle lines/ as compassion flows/ from the potter's/ to the poet's hand." Ultimately, even a poet from the Midwest can be transformed, as "The Potter's Touch" illustrates: "When she touched my hand/ I took the shape of a pot." It is at the level of art that the potter and poet truly merge, providing motivation and inspiration: "When I opened my mouth,/ Out came feathery poems shaped/ round and full and sensuous/ floating like haiku in the moonlight./ . . . / Never was my song so lyrical before the potter's touch came."

As Krapf's collection progresses, the poet and potter seem to merge, as indicated in "Poems and Pots," which asserts "Poems and pots/ are containers" which "people want to lift. . . to their lips/ and sip from the spirit within." The poem continues with examples of the way the potter and poet are similar in their creative endeavors: "She takes snakes of clay/ and winds them together/ the way a poet coils lines." Krapf concludes, "Inside the pot she leaves/ her spirit breath as the poet/ does within his poem." Having established this connection, Krapf, in the third section of his collection, "New Mexico Light," offers examples of the poet creating life out of the elements of Native culture. It is the Midwestern poet who captures the essence of Crazy Horse as a significant spiritual symbol in his poem "Crazy Horse Rides": "He is one with his horse/ at one with himself/ and all generations./ He is inside, outside time/ that is pure illusion/ on a road that runs/ in all directions." In "Desert Beauty" the transformed poet's eye is open to the peace and spirituality of the Southwestern desert: "We walk slowly but gladly along the arroyo stopping/ to observe and appreciate / and praise the tiny desert/ flowers whose names we/ do not always know/

Wilderness House Literary Review 15/3

.../ Separately, and then together we sang." Whereas in the volumes earliest poems, the Midwestern poet describes the symbolically and spiritually saturated work of the Native potter from the outside, in "Morning Mountain Prayer" he shows himself able to capture the essence of the Southwest in his own language and art form: "Morning mountain air/ calls me to sit outside/ . . ./ and warm light slants/ onto this yellow paper/ across which the black/ ink of a German pen/ walks leaving word tracks/ that knew all along/ that in the end/ near the bottom/ of this page/ they would become / my thanksgiving prayer/ in morning mountain air." Similarly, in "Horses Munching Grass, Blue Field, Evening," Krapf's art of poetry merges with the art of painting as he captures other scenes of the Southwest: "The sound of brown and black horses/ munching green grass in a blue field/ below mountains with a thin strip/ of white clouds skimming the top/ of the mountains and white-blossoming/ weeds in the foreground/ is a painting/ framed in my mind which I will carry away/ with me/ when I drive down from the mountains/ where a part of me remains as eye and ear."

It is the idea of art and its transcending power that seems to be the centralizing theme of Southwest by Midwest. Krapf, in simple, clear, and striking imagery captures the breadth and depth of the Native potter's work, juxtaposing his words with images Jody Naranjo's pottery. In poems that take the form of prayers, hymns, lullabies, invocations, and consecrations, Krapf praises, illustrates, and connects artistic endeavors such as poetry, pottery, and painting. But just as important as the personal experiences he hopes to convey through his poetry is the act of transcendence he hopes his readers will partake of as a consequence of reading his work, a thought he expresses in the concluding stanza of "Light Follows Me": "May I one day transform/ into light that shines on others/ from above and also within/ when they read my poems." This ambition to enlighten his readers is central in the volume's concluding poem, "EPILOG: At the Center of the Circle": "Waking, I see a perfectly shaped pot,/ spinning and revolving on its axis. This is the sacred pot/ of the universe/ . . ./ As this pot spins, it plays/ the music of the spheres./ Listen. Look. The man and woman/ are two halves of the One. It has/ taken eons for them to come/ together and merge as one whole." Krapf's final assertion, addressed to the reader, connects art, creator, and audience in a timeless, boundless transcendence: "You too are inside the circle/ of the universe. You, reader,/ can join them at the center./ You too make love and music/ that can save us all. You too/ live and breathe at the center."