

A LANGUAGE OF SPIRIT GROUNDED IN EARTH

Norbert Krapf. *Catholic Boy Blues: A Poet's Journal of Healing*. Greystone, 2014.

Gabrielle Robinson

Norbert Krapf, Indiana's Poet Laureate 2008-10, is indeed a dedicated writer about Indiana, in particular Dubois County in its southern part. "I would always come back to my origins," he writes in *The Ripest Moments, a Southern Indiana Childhood* (2008). "Where I began is where I would return" (254). His poems are odes to the rolling countryside he loves, and to the people who live in harmony with each other and their surroundings. They show a pervasive awareness that the individual life is connected to the past and reaches into the future in a way that surpasses the limits of each person. Thus the poems capture his search for identity and at the same time transcend it. Or as he puts it in his preface to *The Ripest Moments*: "Behind this book and my collections of poetry is a conviction that an awareness of individual and collective origins can enlighten, nourish, guide, and sustain us and those who come after us" (xi).

Krapf rejoices in the familiarity of his surroundings where he knows every path, barn, and hill. He pays tribute to shagbark hickory, black walnut, fox squirrel, the angle of sun on a spider web and his grandfather's hand-made music stand. A large number of poems has the names of trees, flowers, and plants for their titles, Sugar Maple, Pin Oak, Tulip Poplar, Walnut, Dogwood, Chamomile. He celebrates the objects of daily life, reminiscent of the 19th century German tradition of "*Dinggedichte*," thing poems, perhaps most notably represented by Rainer Maria Rilke whose selected early poems Krapf edited and translated.

Krapf's poems are about what he sees and hears, what he touches and tastes, frequently told from the perspective of Krapf as a young boy. Their lesson is for us to open our eyes, to listen, to inhale, feel, and to remember. This sharpness of the senses, Krapf believes, goes beyond our present exist-

Other Krapf books considered: *American Dreams*. Mongrel Empire Press, 2013. *Songs in Sepia and Black and White*. Indiana University Press, Quarry Books, 2012. *The Ripest Moments*. Indiana Historical Society Press, 2008. *Imagine*. With Monika Herzig. CD, 2007. *Looking for God's Country*. Time Being Books, 2005. *Bloodroot*. Indiana University Press, Quarry Books, 2008. *Blue-Eyed Grass*. Time Being Books, 1997. *Finding the Grain*. Max Kade German-American Center, 1996.

tence stretching into past and future. The second stanza of “Where Trees are Tall” lists the untold many things that thus connect us in an extended series of “ands”:

for to move in the hills where
 scent marks the measure
 of what you are and how you
 relate to all that lives
 is to give yourself to the flow
 of the wind and the patter of rain
 and the contour of the land
 and the lines of trees
 and the scud of clouds
 and the angle of sunlight
 and the flight of the birds
 and the cries of the mammals
 and the song of what sings,
 beyond our eyes and ears,
 from what was here before
 and carries us to what
 lies above and beyond
 where we have ever been. (*God's Country* 118)

In his poems and prose Krapf relives the farm and small town experiences of his boyhood. Even though he spent most of his adult life in the vicinity of New York City, teaching English at Long Island University from 1970 to 2004 interspersed with assignments in England and Germany, his heart and creative inspiration remained in Jasper. A Long Island breeze will transport him back to the fresh scent of sun bleached sheets drying on his mother's clothesline or he will be pulled to remember baling hay on a hot summer day, hunting fox squirrels in the woods, listening to baseball on the radio or hiding under the green roof of cornstalks during a family picnic. He likes to hark back to his godfather's farm where he worked with the men baling hay and learned to hunt. He did not want to be a “city slicker,” but an intimate part of this world where he felt that “a force bigger than myself ruled from beyond” (*Bloodroot* 83). Several poems pay tribute to Grandma Schmitt who raised six children on her own after her husband's death, her Christmas table laden with roast pork and goose, with crisp pies and other treats. Then there is his Great-Aunt Tillie who, although born in Indiana, did not speak English, but she did speak “the language of pure spirit grounded in solid earth” (*The Ripest Moments* 200). The two people who get mentioned most often with love and respect are his parents, his cheerful mother whom he remembers humming happily as she went about her

housework, and who, when she was a girl, would climb a tree to read poems there; and his father who taught him the shape of trees and blessed every meal they ate.

The small town of Jasper where Krapf was born and raised is well suited to teach a boy lessons of community connectedness and of history. Many of its families are of German origin, like Krapf himself, and the older ones still speak German, a 19th century German rich with their shared past. Although he didn't learn German properly until college, young Krapf understood much of it and was used to its guttural tones. He could communicate easily with his great aunt Tillie who spoke only German and he heard his father use unfamiliar phrases that were directly translated from the German.

When I visited Jasper in the course of my research on the German settlers of northern Indiana, I met some of these old German-Americans. I talked with them in German, enchanted by a language of old phrases and sounds I had never heard when I was growing up in the Germany of the nineteen fifties. And even today Jasper still puts out a German newspaper, *Die Zeitung*, and holds regular meetings at the *Schnitzelbank* Restaurant where they sing the *Schnitzelbank* song which is all but forgotten in Germany today.

In line with his respect for all those who came before him, Krapf doesn't forget the people who populated the land before his German ancestors made it their own. Several poems pay tribute to the Indians who hunted and lived where now there are farms. Others focus on his wife Katherine, a native of French Louisiana. At one point looking back on his life at the age of 70, Krapf says that when young "he always knew he would not marry anyone from his hometown" (*American Dreams* 53). Katherine and Norbert have two adopted children from Colombia, Elizabeth and Daniel. Thus Krapf, so grounded in the tiny cosmos of Dubois County, Indiana, in his most intimate relationships is a citizen of the world.

It is not, however, a simply idyllic world Krapf conjures up. He also knows about darkness, his father's two nervous breakdowns, his still born baby sister, the men who died young leaving wives with children to raise on their own, the bombed cities of World War II. As he puts it in "Coming into the Valley,"

Behind the light that filters down from
the treetops to where I now repose
gathers a darkness that often pressed
on my shoulders and lay on my heart (*Bloodroot* 173).

Nevertheless over all spans a faith in "God's country," keeping you safe.

as long as you remember
 where you came from
 and never forget that to those
 who came before you

where your family lives will
 always remain God's country. (108)

At the same time Krapf is all too aware that this cherished environment is threatened to be annihilated by the “progress” of the modern world. Again and again Krapf charts this development with a keen sense of loss. In “Barnyard Hoops,” the spot where once he played basketball “off a backboard nailed to the side of a barn,” is gone now. Instead he finds “a shopping mall and a big black parking lot.” The last lines of the poem escalate this destruction into an almost religious desecration: since now no more can you hear

That leather swish
 Inside a cord net like the sound
 Of an angel landing in heaven.” (*God's Country* 36)

One of the most general and thematic renderings of this theme comes in “A Pretty Small Town,” where the sparkling white clapboard houses of Main Street have been replaced by neon fast food joints at the edge of an interstate. Over the noise of semis and the rush of tires Krapf can still conjure up in his mind “the creak of chains holding up swings on long front porches” where friends laughed together and “sparrows sang in the canopy of sugar maples.” (*God's Country* 110)

In another poem of loss Krapf has a rare outburst of open anger when he discovers that new owners tore down his ancestral house and burnt the ancient rafters. On one of his visits back to southern Indiana, Krapf seeks out the place where his great-great grandfather bought land in southern Indiana in 1853 and, with the help of neighbors, built his own brick home. In “Two Bricks and a Board,” which is all he could rescue, Krapf hammers his point home in staccato lines. And where he usually shows acceptance and tolerance for all around him, here he condemns and even damns those capable of such thoughtless destruction:

Damned are a people
 who forget
 as they move
 relentlessly forward

into the progress
of the present
without preserving
at least a trace
of the lives
that built and shaped
the heritage
which shelters
and sustains them. (*Bloodroot* 28)

Over the years in faraway Long Island Krapf became increasingly fascinated with his family's past and eventually retraced his ancestors' steps back to Franconia in northern Bavaria, the place from where they emigrated in the 1840's. They were part of the first great wave of German immigrants who, by arriving so early and often with a little money, were able to establish themselves before the next and larger wave arrived. Krapf eventually became fluent in German so that he could understand the family stories and the folk tales of Franconia. This material becomes a rich resource for his poems. He published a book of Franconian tales and edited another of pioneer journals and letters he called *Finding the Grain* (1996). There he says that "these immigrant writings have given me a source of strength and tied me to the depths." (212)

The search for roots also leads Krapf to the darkest part of his German-American heritage which he tries to tackle in *Blue-Eyed Grass* (1997). While seeking out the origins of the Krapf family in Franconia, he came to Nuremberg, famous as Dürer's hometown and infamous for Hitler's Nazi rallies. The site of these rallies has been transformed into a museum. There, on a list giving the names of Bavarian Jews who were deported and who perished in concentration camps, he found a Klara Krapf. Tracing her life, Krapf discovered that she had lived close to his own family,

the Klara Krapf
I was destined never
To meet but who haunts
My waking and sleeping. (101)

Klara's siblings all escaped to the United States, but Klara stayed behind. Krapf surmises that she was looking after her ageing parents. She was deported and died in the concentration camp of Theresienstadt, or Terezin. Krapf dedicates Part Three of *Blue-Eyed Grass* "Stones for the Dead" to Klara and all the victims of the concentration camps. Although in the end she turned out not to be a relative of the Catholic Krapfs of his line, she was

part of his heritage, “no blood relative, but kin nonetheless.”

Thus Norbert Krapf of Jasper, Indiana, born in 1943, cannot escape German guilt even from across the Atlantic. The hyphen in German-American already had become problematic in 1917 when the U.S. entered World War I. At that time many German-Americans anglicized their names as did entire villages and towns. Others who could not bear the thought of shooting at their brothers even committed suicide rather than becoming soldiers. In Indianapolis the *Deutsche Haus*, site of the Turners and many German-American festivities, hastily etched out the German words replacing them with Athenaeum, by which the building is still known today.

World War II and the Holocaust made this guilt all the more powerful for Germans and German-Americans alike, especially for the generation born at the end of the war. As I know from my own experience, sooner or later the long shadow of the Nazi past catches up with us. Then we are driven to surmount the stifling post-war German silence about the Nazi era and the Holocaust, sometimes called the second guilt of the Germans. In *Blue-Eyed Grass* we witness that this happens even to a man born in remote Dubois County. And like many of us, Krapf now speaks out by telling Klara’s story. In fact, as he says somewhere, the poems just poured out of him in a perhaps therapeutic release of the terror he had to confront.

Because I have nothing
else to give you, Klara...
I give you
this song. (*Blue-Eyed Grass* 121)

However, it is his most recent book, *Catholic Boy Blues: A Poet’s Journal of Healing* that reveals a darkness which nearly threatened to engulf its author. The subject is the abuse Krapf and many other boys in the 1950’s suffered at the hands of Jasper’s revered priest who even had a statue dedicated to him. Similar to the holocaust poems, as soon as he had decided to tackle a subject he had tried to bury for most of his life, words poured out of him almost uncontrollably and poem after poem spoke of his anger and despair. Krapf says in his introduction that, contrary to his usual way of arranging poems for an edition, in *Catholic Boy Blues* he lists them for the most part in the sequence in which they were conceived. In this way the book charts “the rocky road toward forgiveness and healing” (xix).

Already the cover picture alerts the reader to the harrowing story about to be revealed. It is a snapshot of Krapf the boy taken by the abusing priest. His hands raised almost as if to pray or perhaps to ward something off, the boy looks at the camera in anger and despair. As one of the poems says,

No boy should ever have to reveal
such a depth of darkness in his eyes (123)

Catholic Boy Blues has something of the force of a drama combined with that of a medieval mystery play. The collection of poems is cast in four voices locked in dialogue and argument. The voice of the tormented boy who feels alone, betrayed, and desperate is juxtaposed with the voice of the grown man who is at last driven to return home and confront the boy's hurt. The Boy asks the Man:

But did you ever wonder
what it was like for me
to be left all alone by myself
sitting in my filthy little corner
on my pretty little stool
as the holy man would drool? (86)

The Man can only respond with gratitude to the boy, who he says is father to the man he became. He thanks him for all the good things the boy has taught him. Here Krapf is yet able, in the midst of all this pain, to recapture the childhood joys of being out in his beloved country, tasting the fruits of black walnut and shagbark hickory, hunting squirrels and cotton-tails.

At the end of the book, we even hear the angry and defiant voice of the priest.

What do you know
why I did
what I did to you... (172)
Ain't yours to say
I'm all dirty, boy (196)

But the boy/man is not taken in and now at last has the strength to sing the blues against the priest:

Any kid can
see what's
right and wrong.
Ain't no way
this boy listen
to crap like that.

This mouth
 now know
 how to talk. (197)

Above them all rises the voice of Mr. Blues who understands everything and knows that you heal by singing your pain. His is an ultimately affirmative voice, as he tells both boy and man, "From where I stand, I can see the bad, but you also been blessed... You can say that No, but you got to live the Yes." And indeed the poems show that process toward acceptance and healing in both boy and man.

This, clearly, was Krapf's most difficult and heart wrenching book to write and make public. He persisted not only for its therapeutic effect on himself, but to speak out for all the victims of child abuse who suffer similar agonies. This, he knows, is his responsibility as a poet. And Mr. Blues echoes that sentiment and thanks him for singing his blues.

A man like you got to sound the alert
 so other boys now turned into men...
 can look inside of themselves. When
 they are ready to take a stand...
 you be there to understand
 how hard it is to tell a hurtful truth,
 so hard to tell the dirty, awful truth
 of what happened to you as a youth. (84)

Mr. Blues even includes the priest in a possible healing when he says that the blues "might even make a sorry priest whole." (69)

There are interesting parallels between the Holocaust poems in *Blue-Eyed Grass* and these later ones. In both instances Krapf endured a struggle of decades to find his way to an adequate expression. He persisted because in both he saw it as his responsibility as a poet to confront those overwhelming and painful subjects. He could not keep writing about the pride in his German roots and the joys of his Indiana childhood without commemorating the fate of German Jews during the Nazi rule and its Holocaust. Eventually he manages to resolve this in *Blue-Eyed Grass*, similar to what he does in *Catholic Boy Blues*, by finding the different voices within himself. At the end of an article entitled "The Complications in Making an American Book of Poems about Germany" in which he describes his path to the Holocaust poems, Krapf discusses his four collections of poems which deal respectively with his ancestors and German roots, with his Indiana childhood, and with the Holocaust. "I hear the voices in all four of these books speaking to one another...in an attempt to create, as though from various sides of one

complex self, the chorus of a German-American whole.” This is also what he is doing in *Catholic Boy Blues*, but here the divergent voices within him are united in one book and in the blues. The only difference, one might say, is that in *Blue-Eyed Grass* the voice of the horror adds a dark perspective to the other parts, while in *Catholic Boy Blues* the author has to work through the horror to arrive back at the healing remembrance of his German-American childhood in Southern Indiana.

The blues form of many of the poems, with its repetitions, attests to Krapf’s lifelong love of the blues and what it can do to heal pain and set you free. In a poem entitled “My Bob Dylan Dreams” he writes:

I won’t say we two
 Were blues brothers,
 But we swam together
 Easily in those waters. (*Songs in Sepia and Black and White*, 115.)

He also put out a CD with Monika Herzig, *Imagine-Indiana in Music and Words*. Altogether Krapf believes in artistic collaboration. Several of his books are done together with photographers, with David Piernini in *Blood-root*, with the Franconian photographer Andreas Riedel in *Looking for God’s Country*. Krapf himself links this to the German tradition of *Bild Gedicht*, picture poem, when in “The Landscape of the Masters” section of *Blue-Eyed Grass* he speaks of Dürer, Riemenschneider, Breughel, and Cranach.

Finally, we should not forget Norbert Krapf’s connection to Notre Dame from where he graduated with a PhD in English and American Literature in 1970. He says that the late Ernest Sandeen was one of his favorite professors from whom he learnt his love of Whitman. Over the years Krapf also stayed in touch with English professor John Matthias, *The Notre Dame Review’s* current Editor-at-Large.

Even though it was painful at times, I relished my immersion in Krapf’s world and envied him a little his innate sense of belonging, even though I feel out of touch with such rootedness. I am a fellow German-American, although from the European side of the Atlantic and without his grounding and sense of home. It is fascinating to follow a poet of place like Krapf and see how the intimately local and personal fans out to embrace all places and people. As Krapf writes in his introduction to The Brandenburg Gate section of *Looking for God’s Country*: “Let us learn how to walk with one another, with those who came before, with those who will follow after. Let poems and songs help break down the walls separating our places and our people.” (83)