



# Border States

Jane Hoogestraat

Winner of the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry

Selected by Luis J. Rodriguez



*“The people, the soil, the tumultuous skies are unforgettable, as are these poems, and that’s the most important aspect of language in verse--the way it makes you feel and think, a binary connection.” –Luis J. Rodriguez*

Interview by Marie Mayhugh

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*Q: Many of your poems mention music, such as “Listening to Fauré,” and when reading this poem I noticed that it seemed as if perhaps listening to music carries you through rhythm while you write. Have you considered how music influences you as a poet? Several of your poems reflect on music and its connection to people and their region. Do you feel that music has the power to break down borders and bridge time and culture?*

*A: Yes, I often have classical music playing in the background when I write, and often have a musical phrase in mind, even in poems without a direct allusion to a specific musical work. I’m particularly interested in classical music from the late 19th Century to the present, everyone from Faure and Satie to Steve Reich. I also think that good music provides access to the psyche—to a non-linguistic world of affect—that does give it a certain power to both break down borders and to reflect larger cultural patterns.*

*Q: At first, for me the title Border States, conjures the border between the Midwest and South, particularly with the third poem “Learning to Live in the Upland South,” which contains the words “mild winter in the middle south.” To me, these words represent Missouri and how it is known for its Midwestern geography but Southern personality. Other poems consider both words border and states to mean other things, such as the differences between Americans from state to state, additionally the borders between our past and our present psychological state. How do you see the words border and state and their different connotative meanings in this book? Did pondering on the varied meanings influence you on a title?*

*A: I especially like the wording you use here about Missouri “being known for its Midwestern geography but Southern personality” and I had that mix very much in mind when I chose the title *Border States*. I also had in mind that Missouri was part of the Missouri Compromise, admitted to the union*

as a slave state but with the stipulation that any additional states north of Missouri’s Southern border would be admitted as free states. And I’m very interested in how the settlement history of places (and states) continues to have an indelible influence on present culture, often in ways that the people who live in a given place are only dimly aware of. Finally, I suppose I’m a little fascinated by the “in-between” or the liminal, whether in geography or in the psyche, maybe in both.

*Q: There is so much history in both Kansas and Missouri that many people overlook in favor of the states’ Civil War battles and their Border Wars. Do you feel that this tendency oversimplifies the diverse backgrounds and cultures of both states’ citizens? Consider the poem “Gifts That Strangers Bring,” and the second line, “accents I had never heard,” then the last line “Every face and name that light recalled,” evokes all the various ancestors who brought their own language here and have made this area their home. Did you think of ancestors when you wrote this poem, in particular, any who may have migrated here from another country?*

*A: I’ll answer that first from the Missouri side of things. When I first moved to Springfield (southern Missouri) twenty-five years ago, I learned that the Civil War was fought within Missouri with citizens (and families) often bitterly divided between Union and Confederate sympathies. I also learned that Springfield was settled by two groups of migration—that we were the end of Appalachian settlement, and that the railroad also brought people here from New York and Connecticut. In addition, in the early part of the 20th Century, Springfield had a thriving African-American community. I tried to learn as much as I could about the history and culture of Springfield before I started writing poems about the region.*

*I have a number of poems where I was thinking of ancestors—I’m the third generation born in this country of German immigrants who settled in South and North Dakota in the middle and late 19th Century. I wasn’t thinking about*

ancestors in the poem “Gifts that Strangers Bring” (more on that in a minute), but I can see now that the poem does contain a hint that could be read as being about immigration. (Many years after I finished “The Gifts That Strangers Bring,” I did find the song that I reference there. It’s “You Can’t Go Back to Kansas” by the folk singer John Stewart from his album *The Last Campaign*. Stewart had worked on Bobby Kennedy’s campaign for the presidency in 1968, and Kennedy had resonated well in the heartland, especially in Kansas and South Dakota.)

*Q: The first section of Border States contains many poems that focus mainly on Midwestern life, mostly the surrounding region of Missouri, Kansas, and Iowa, but further along the poems sort of branch out about different places. After closely reading Border States, I considered that it was more than another poetry book, but an oeuvre where each poem, which reflects different geographic regions, narrates a larger story, or a bigger picture that considers our expansive homeland, its melting pot if you will, and how our states are connected through their past, its music, and how we mature individually. Had you planned this when you sectioned Border States into four different sections?*

A: First, your question reassures me about the structure I selected for the book, which I worried over quite obsessively over a period of two or three years. I wasn’t consciously thinking at all in terms of “our expansive homeland,” but I like the idea of that perhaps being a thread in the book. More than half of the poems are set on the northern high plains, primarily in South and North Dakota, and those fall heavily in the third and fourth sections. The first section consists primarily of Missouri poems, with three Texas poems snuck in; and the second section contains a long North Dakota poem and a long Missouri poem. The third section also contains three Chicago poems (I went to graduate school there) and a couple of travel poems.

*Q: Midwesterners often hear people from elsewhere complain that the area, particularly Kansas, lacks scenery because there are neither mountain ranges nor beaches. Does it take a native to understand and find the beauty and sequence between the bucolic, woodland backdrop, and the small urban areas? Note the beautiful language in “River Roads,” and how do you approach writing about scenery?*

A: Somewhere the writer Kathleen Norris notes that you have to be very careful writing about western South Dakota because so few people in the world will ever see it. I think that probably applies to many of the landscapes in the middle part of the country. At the same time, I’m a very visual writer, very dependent on image to carry the narrative or lyric moment of a poem.

*Q: Travel is an important subject in your poems. Do you find yourself taking a pen and paper with you wherever you travel and write freshly on the spot when inspiration strikes you? Also, many of your poems suggest that you observe individuals, particularly the lifestyles of provincial people, do you occasionally sit and write about your subjects while you observe them?*

A: I am right on the verge of having too many poems about travel and driving, partly because I spend a lot of time on the northern high plains and it takes hours in the car to get there, and then more hours to get from place to place once I’m there. I think about poems a lot while I’m driving, and sometimes carry a digital recorder; but I’m not much of an on the spot inspiration writer. It takes a lot of time for reflection (or a lot of hours in the car) before I’m ready to write a poem.

I do have some poems about “provincial people,” or those who are dispossessed or struggling in some way. (I’m thinking particularly of “Hyacinth Boy” and “Not the People of God’s Finest Hour,” but also of “Driving through Kentucky.”) Those were tricky poems to write because the experience I’m describing is not my own and I wanted to avoid sounding condescending or class-biased when writing about people who have odds stacked against them in systemic ways that will be very hard to overcome. It’s not that I go to places and sit and write descriptions of people, but it is the case that I try to pay attention not just to landscape, but to the people in the landscape.

*Q: The poem “Off I-29 in South Dakota” describes a young girl at a truck stop, who is isolated, but writing. In the first line of the fourth stanza the speaker of the poem says “I trust those earliest of memories, measure of a child paying attention...” The girl seems to reflect on her own past or perhaps something that she had witnessed as a child. Is there any personal reflection on your part within this poem?*

A: Yes, I have a very distinct memory of sitting with my family at a truck stop in the middle of a South Dakota winter, having breakfast, I think. I couldn’t have been very old, but I remember watching a young woman who was sitting by herself in a booth, drinking tea and writing. I also remember my father commenting that she didn’t look as though she were dressed for the weather. I had wanted to write about that memory, perhaps about how childhood memory works, for a long time. The sestina form of the poem, with its built-in repetition of words occurred to me as a form because I think memory may work like that—an attempt to piece events together by repeatedly returning to those events and reflecting on their significance.