

**Chad Lee Robinson.** *Rope Marks*. Ormskirk, Great Britain: Snapshot Press, 2012, 28 pp., free. *Rope Marks*, one of the 2012 Award Winners of the Snapshot Press eBook Contest, may be downloaded for the reader's personal use only, at <[www.snapshotpress.co.uk/ebooks.htm](http://www.snapshotpress.co.uk/ebooks.htm)>.

by Bob Fritzmeier, Sioux City, Iowa

About three years ago David Allan Evans, the poet laureate of South Dakota, gave a reading at Briar Cliff University in Sioux City. In the Q & A session afterwards he was asked whom he considered the up-and-coming poets. He mentioned Chad Lee Robinson, a former student of his at South Dakota State University. Now I've had the opportunity to put that valuation to the test.

In a recent essay in these pages, poet Scott Mason rightly contends that "an effective haiku engages its reader on an emotional basis."<sup>1</sup> Consider Robinson's

stars at dawn  
the clatter of small change  
on the coffee shop counter

The image of the "coffee shop counter" by itself stirs up a host of memories in me: I can smell the aromas of hot chocolate and fried eggs; I can hear the repartee in a rural town café. I remember, too, the sadnesses shared there and the friendships formed. How could I forget the mysterious stories of quirky farm machinery that were so fascinating to me, a city boy? The sound of "small change" may denote the apparent unimportance of this remote place. Yet when it is contrasted with the cosmic wonder evoked in the opening line, that "clatter" gains in its power and immediacy. Indeed, change has taken place in this reader.

Robinson definitely passes Mason's emotional test for me.

Mason also identifies the thin line that a good poet travels

between too much obviousness and too much obscurity.<sup>2</sup>  
When I read the following I wondered what it meant:

without the crows  
just a weathered barn  
lost in the fog

After mulling the poem over for a few days, I realized that the author once knew this barn, or another barn like it, when it was teeming with life. He associates life on a farm with crows, which make their presence known in so many ways. Now that they are absent the lostness of the old building is greatly deepened by the fog.

Another poem that was initially obscure to me became clearer after I consulted a couple of friends, who informed me that dry conditions can bring on nosebleeds in the equine world as well as in the human one:

dust storms  
a trickle of blood  
from the horse's nose

So, for the most part obscurity was not a problem in this eChapbook. Nor did I find any facile rendering of the author's experiences that would subject him to the charge of excessive obviousness.

I also use what I call the Mystery Index to evaluate a writer's work. This index is comprised of two parts: first, how much does a poem illuminate the experience expressed and, second, what good question or questions does the poem raise?

Let me give an example of what I mean about questions raised. I've been to a rodeo and really enjoyed the irony and clash of symbols that Robinson elicits in

Fourth of July  
a rodeo clown  
carries out the flag

The chief question that is raised by this poem is, What emotion does the flag elicit? For me it brings on a feeling of cautious reverence: reverence because one of my uncles died in the horrible winter of 1944–45 somewhere on a Bulge battlefield in Belgium; cautious reverence because I’m constantly reminded by a still, small voice not to worship the flag. Robinson’s holiday construct re-poses the question: How, in a quiet way, might I enjoy the humor of the moment with my hand over my heart?

Now let me give you examples of what I mean by a poem illuminating experience. Another rodeo poem has a quality of the heart about it, too, but this time it is heart-pounding:

8 seconds . . .  
the bull rider opens  
a hand to the sky

Robinson makes me more acutely aware than ever before of the risk and exhilaration in the seemingly small gesture of a rider throwing one “hand to the sky” while holding on for dear life with the other.

Horses being the most prevalent animal subjects among the poems, it’s no wonder the author drew his title for the book from

rope marks  
on the mustang’s neck  
spring wind

Trying to tame the untamable becomes the ongoing endeavor.

Robinson has a command of what Shakespeare called “a local habitation and a place.” Living as he does in an expansive landscape, Robinson puts it in front of us unadorned—and clarified by his special sense of irony:

the big empty—  
half grass  
half sky

His poetry is a tremendous complement to such gifted mid-western painters as Keith Jacobshagen and Ann Burkholder.

On a scale of 1 to 10, then, I give Robinson a 9 on the Mystery Index. Every time I delve into *Rope Marks* some new question or insight occurs to me. To my mind, this is the true hallmark of a work of worth. To add to his credit are the many awards he has received for poems in this book from such prestigious publications as *The Heron's Nest*.

Robinson's work is further enhanced by teaming up with Snapshot Press. John Barlow's design of brown, textured backgrounds on every page lends an excellent presentation to these works from the northern plains. Dawn Emerson's moving cover artwork adds to the quiet dynamism of the book. For a 60-something reader like me, the large print set in Adobe Caslon Pro adds just that much more pleasure to the experience.

I heartily second Professor Evans's assessment of this poet, and I highly recommend Chad Lee Robinson's latest achievement to all readers who are seeking the unexpected.

#### Notes

1. Scott Mason, "Song of Himself," *Frogpond* 35:2, p. 96.
2. *Ibid.*, 98.



*Bob Fritzmeier is the dad of one son, Edwin, who also lives in Sioux City. He lives with his friend, Patty Wood, and two dogs and two cats. His tan renga have been published in Frogpond. One of his other enjoyments is driving a bus for a living.*