

MARTY & ZIEROTH

Nature and Family

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I. Introduction

I believe that when Canadian literature is critically assessed at present we are omitting excellent writers whose powerful, resonant, and highly crafted work concerns itself with themes vital to a deeper understanding of contemporary existence. I want to focus here on two authors, whose books explore experiences with the natural environment and family life — two subjects currently widely discussed in the media, and hence by the general Canadian population. These writers, Sid Marty (b. 1944) and Dale Zieroth (b. 1946), seem to me apt representatives of the artistic accomplishments and delights that lie largely unnoticed in our literature as currently taught. Both Marty and Zieroth have written extensively and movingly over the years about the landscape and wilderness, and the place of themselves and our species within it. And both have based their responses to the natural world on their insider's experience of years of living and working in the wilderness. Both authors have also written effectively about fatherhood, about the family. The women's movement has justly pointed out the lack in the literary canon of male involvement in parenting. Yet both Marty and Zieroth have tender and striking poems on this topic. Their works are examples of an outstanding talent, able to amaze and inspire and give pleasure to a wide range of Canadian and other readers, should the news of these writers' existence ever reach the current gatekeepers of our literature and pass through.

The theory behind the selection of certain works of literature as worthy of study (and hence subsequently worthy to be taught in our schools and universities and, ideally, incorporated into the daily lives and consciousnesses of our citizens) is that the chosen literature has been judged to be the best writing produced in a given era. Much has happened in the late 20th Century, however, to call into question *who* does this judging, and what biases (hidden or overt) influence the awarding of the label "best" to certain artistic works.

The English art critic John Berger has shown how the social milieu in which a given work of art is produced enormously influences how the work will be received by the first group of responders to that art (critics, patrons, etc.), and hence by the general public who look to these people as experts in evaluating artistic worth. The values that this art endorses or rejects — either in that art's form or content

— are compared to the values held by the power structure of the contemporary society. Berger argues in his *Ways of Seeing*, for instance, that landscape painting first became validated by English society when landholders began to acquire the surplus cash and education to want artistically rendered representations of their property (or of real estate they admired and/or conceivably could later possess). In our own time, we have heard men and women associated with the labour movement, the women's movement, and with the struggles for social justice of native people and people of colour, all suggest that the experts who in Canadian society usually get to award the tag "best" to artistic productions have personal cultural biases that render the term highly suspect. And that the effect of these biases is an artistic canon skewed away from any reasonable representation of Canadian life and thought.

I have my own theories as to why writers as accomplished as Marty and Zieroth should have been shunted aside from serious critical acclaim. At its best, the quality of their writing is at least as fine by any demonstrable measure as that of the canonical Birney, Cohen, Layton, Livesay, Mandel, Page, Purdy, Souster. As presences in the world of Canadian letters, each has achieved as much or more as had Atwood, Lee, Ondaatje when they were first recognized as worthy of ongoing critical attention. To those who argue a Toronto bias permeates critical reception of Canadian imaginative writing, I would point out that both Marty's and Zieroth's books mainly have been issued by major Toronto literary publishers (McClelland & Stewart in Marty's case, House of Anansi [now owned by Stoddart] for Zieroth).

Marty's collections of poems — *Headwaters* (1973) and *Nobody Danced with Miss Rodeo* (1981) — describe and illuminate a life lived in the Rocky Mountains, no less accepted as a symbol of Canada than the southcentral region of Ontario. His autobiographical account of his years as a park warden in the mountain national parks, *Men for the Mountains* (1978), has been uninterruptedly in print since publication, not only in Canada but with U.S. publishers (Vanguard Press, The Mountaineers Press). *Men for the Mountains* has also been published in Germany, Japan, Great Britain, and Scandinavia. Marty enjoys considerable attention in Western Canada as a writer and speaker on environmental subjects and was commissioned by Parks Canada to write the official history of the mountain parks, *A Grand and Fabulous Notion* (1984). He is also an accomplished singer/songwriter, whose recent cassette, *Let the River Run* (1990), offers subtle and stirring lyrics merging the author's deep commitment to wilderness, rural, and domestic life.

Zieroth's collections of poems are *Clearing* (1973), *Mid-River* (1981), *When the Stones Fly Up* (1985), and *The Weight of My Raggedy Skin* (1991). Zieroth's finely-polished poems have depicted his growing up on a Manitoba farm in a German immigrant community, and his subsequent life in the Rocky Mountain village of Invermere, B.C., and then on the B.C. coast. More recently, much

of Zieroth's writing has centered on contemporary family life, especially fatherhood. On any topic, his poems appear consistently in the major Canadian literary magazines, including *Malahat Review*, *Poetry Canada Review*, *Canadian Literature*. He for many years has been the editor of *Event*, itself one of the country's most important literary magazines.

Yet almost no critical articles have appeared on either Marty or Zieroth. For instance, a survey of the *Canadian Periodical Index* for 1989 shows nothing written about Marty or Zieroth. By comparison, five articles about Atwood and three about Ondaatje were indexed that year. Neither Marty nor Zieroth has individual entries in the latest edition of Hurtig's *Canadian Encyclopedia*. Neither appears in such widely-adopted teaching anthologies as Daymond and Monkman's *Literature in Canada* (Gage, 1978) or Weaver and Toyé's *Oxford Anthology of Canadian Literature* (1981) or Bennett and Brown's *An Anthology of Canadian Literature in English* (Oxford, 1983). Marty does not appear in Lee's *New Canadian Poets 1970-85* (even though the latter was issued by Marty's Canadian publisher).

Space does not permit me to discuss what I think is the *cause* of the critical neglect of these authors. But brief descriptions follow of some of what I find admirable in Marty's and Zieroth's work. I hope by this means to demonstrate that these writers — among others — are indeed treasures of Canadian literature, and greatly deserve (and handsomely repay) the sort of attention currently focused on those other first-rate authors now recognized as significant by our literary world.

//. *Sid Marty*

Marty's *Men For the Mountains* opens with a supernatural event used to effectively dramatize one important theme of this non-fiction opus : that the history of the warden service is an important means by which to assess current attitudes toward the wilderness on the part of governments, parks employees, and the public. Here, then, is magic used not in an attempt to offer an escape from reality, but rather to dramatically enhance our understanding of it. *Men For the Mountains* begins and closes with an eerie encounter between the narrator and the ghosts of three of the parks' near-legendary former wardens.

Marty's mastery of descriptive detail — employed by him to make tangible both the natural world and these ghostly episodes — is revealed in his portrayal of the mountain cabin where the book starts. He presents the reader with references to the full array of senses. He makes sure we are aware of temperature: "I pulled the sleeping bag closer around my neck. It was the right place to be on a cold night." And also sound :

I heard the reassuring cling of the bell on Cathy, my white mare. Through my two windows I could see the silver outline of mountains leaning over the cabin. A log crackled in the heater ; my world was in order.

The arrival of the ghosts is heralded by descriptions familiar to readers of suspense yarns or watchers of horror films. The wind blows the door "open with a bang." When the voice of one of the spirits first speaks, we are shown Marty's fright: "My hair stood up and I spun around to stare into the dimly-lit room." This is a standard strategy from horror movies. The sight of someone who is afraid is always more terrifying to an audience than the sight of what frightens that person. Our imaginations respond most strongly to other people's fear; what we imagine is more horrifying than anything Hollywood can come up with. And, in Marty's account, the ghosts make the traditional request that strong light not be shone on them. They are creatures of the dark, or of half-lit places. One of them cautions Marty when they first appear: "'Just leave that contraption alone. No sense in wasting fuel,' he added, stopping me in the act of reaching for the Coleman lantern." And, like the ghosts in many a fairy tale, Marty's spectral wardens feel the constraints of time. A ghost must return to the underworld before dawn. When the wardens become distracted for a moment over some comic business of offering Marty a drink of their awful liquor: "The wind moaned in answer outside, and the three stirred uneasily. 'Better get on with it, George,' Neish said."

At the close of the book, when Marty meets the ghosts for the second and last time, once more various physical senses besides sight are provided to make the unreal seem actual. As Marty opens the warden cabin door in the darkness, he smells "the odour of buckskin and wet wool." He feels "the heat on my face melting the ice out of my moustache" and when he drinks from a bottle of rum he responds to "the sweet, slow burn of the spirits after hard work in the bite of a mountan night."

The effect of this careful effort to make the appearance of the former wardens in the book as real as possible is twofold, in my view. First, the episodes demonstrate the power of strong writing—personally, no matter how many times I have reread these passages I still get a prickling up the back of my neck when the narrator first comes face-to-face with the ghosts. Secondly, after the unsettling introduction of the former wardens in the first chapter, a reader of *Men For the Mountains* never forgets that Marty's personal adventures in the warden service takes place in an historical context. By extension, a reader realizes that wherever she or he places herself or himself on the spectrum of attitudes toward the wilderness — from believing the wilderness should be preserved untouched by humanity, to regarding the wilderness as a potential source of wealth to be developed — there are historical precedents and events that consciously or unconsciously shape our views. This historical perspective applies as well to Marty's job. The work of a warden, like every contemporary job, has a history. Each aspect of a social task — hours of work, conditions, tools, wage structure — is the product of the men and women who came before us at the trade or similar trades. Any work autobiography that omits this awareness suffers from what the spectre of warden George Busby com-

plains to the narrator about during the ghosts' first appearance : "Seems to me this here book of yours has 'eye' trouble. I done this and I done that — what about the rest of us? We figger we should be in there too somewheres." And in fact, through these and other scenes Marty deftly weaves into his account of a contemporary warden's working life a very great deal of historical material, always as a means to explain and evaluate the present.

Marty's command of multi-sensual description also causes his portrayal of his *job* to seem more real to a reader. For example, at the start of Chapter 6 ("Mustahyah") Marty does not just tell the reader that one particular day in the Tonquin Valley he and his wife wake to discover fresh snow and bear tracks around the warden cabin. Instead, the narrator takes time to describe the varied effects of the snowfall, including "a veil of thin icicles that hung from the eaves above the windows." He even depicts the sight and sound of one specific bird: "Outside, a raven, perched on top of a gaunt, dead tree, greeted me with the musical throb of song those buzzards are capable of in their happier moments."

Here, the descriptive technique serves to focus a reader's attention on the natural environment in which Marty's work is carried out. We never become so overwhelmed by the narrative about what happens to Marty, or other humans, that we lose awareness of the significance of the other characters in the story: the wildlife, plants, and terrain — all of which are affected by changes in weather and season as well as by the activities of people. We thus gain perspective on Marty's job. His story is important, but these detailed descriptions of what the plants, animals and landscape are doing or look like continually emphasize that human beings are only one component in the natural order.

Of course, it is unlikely that when Marty sat down to write his work autobiography he recalled how on a certain morning in the Tonquin Valley there was a specific raven on a dead tree that gave a call. At the end of the book, Marty tells the ghostly wardens that what he has learned by composing *Men For the Mountains* is that : "To tell the whole truth you have to write fiction." At the start of Chapter 6, the author's intent is to describe bird life as one part of the mountain landscape altered by the fresh snowfall, the arrival of winter. So Marty describes what *could* have been present in that scene, based on his personal experiences of such moments. Depictions like this may not be literally true, but the effect of these sensuously-rich descriptions gives a reader the *essential* truth of what Marty intends to portray.

Marty's sure hand at selecting and rearranging material becomes evident, too, in comparing how incidents that appear in *Men For the Mountains* are also examined in his poems. In *Headwaters*, Marty's first book of poems (published five years before his work autobiography), "Shawn" covers some of the same events developed in Chapter 2 of *Men For The Mountains* ("Euclid Never Threw the Diamond"). The setting of the poem and the most exciting event in the chapter

are identical: in the words of the poem, "packing the trail crew's food and tents / down from Twin Falls in the rain" during a nighttime mountain lightning storm. The poem, though, restricts its focus to the narrator's attitude toward Shawn, the "old horse / furiously willing yourself to die." He praises the horse for "saving my skin" on the terrifying

black, two foot wide trail
switchbacking down the sidehills,
the two mares biting your flanks
to push us to death or home

Given that the poem is much shorter than the prose version, naturally a lot of detail has to be omitted in the poem. Some *central* aspects of the incident are missing in the poem, however; warden Bernie Engstrom disappears entirely, so the ride down the mountain in the night is described as involving only the speaker in the poem and horses. The sheer horror of the narrator's predicament is also not developed as fully as in the prose version :

A bolt of lightning tore through the night in a brilliant flare that made the horses crowd together. At the shattering roar of the thunder, which followed immediately, they lunged back hard on the halters, pulling my arm back in one fierce twist of pain. The bolt was close enough to make my head spin, with the same jolt one gets from jumping off a four-foot-high fence and landing stiff-legged on the soles of the feet. An ozone and brimstone smell drifted up from the strike that had hit below us, which shattered the rocks like a shellburst. ... I didn't want any more illumination after that brief glimpse of a mountain dropping away from under my left stirrup. The light had gleamed down the wet-streaked walls of rock to the water below in a terrible, beckoning vertigo that made my feet tighten convulsively in the stirrups.

Also absent from the poem is Marty's near tumble over the mountain's edge when he slips off a wet log at the edge of the trail.

On the other hand, the danger to the narrator when he has to cut the mare June's halter rope, wrapped around her back legs, is not mentioned in the prose version — although the poem refers to "me with a jackknife sliding / among flying hooves." And at the end of the poem, Shawn rears up when he and the narrator finally arrive at the trail crew's camp. Apparently startled by "the lantern's flame," the horse cuts his mouth on the bit as he attempts to flee from the light. The speaker in the poem says the crew "grieves" at the horses's reaction after such a valiant effort carrying their belongings down the dangerous trail through the storm and darkness. None of this — the attempt of the horse to pull back into the dark, injuring itself, and the crew's sympathetic response to the horse's pain — is found in the prose version.

Overall, the effect of Marty's choice of detail is to create both a tensely dramatic episode in his prose account, and a powerful poem that centres attention on the horse's life. Two other examples of an overlapping of material in *Men For the*

Mountains and *Headwaters* are the search for the drowned man in Chapter 3 ("The Trap"), also portrayed in the poem "Drowning," and the forest fire-fighting episodes in Chapter 4 ("Something's Burning") that are depicted as well in the poem "The Chaba Fire." As with the poem "Shawn" and the descriptions in Chapter 2, however, each version of these occurrences highlights different facets. Neither the prose nor the poem tells the *entire* story, nor gives the only possible interpretation of the *significance* of these events to the narrator. I believe it is a worthy feat to consider in two different genres the same material, and to have each treatment be fresh and novel. Everything Marty writes shows his keen and accurate eye for detail, detail that often only an insider to the experiences he presents could know. But Marty as well is in full command of what he wants to do with the raw data of events and locales — he can impressively ring the changes in two different genres, each fascinating to read.

Besides depicting the danger and beauty of outdoor life and work, Marty utilizes humour not only in *Men For the Mountains*, but also in his two books of poems. In "Too Hot to Sleep" in *Headwaters*, for instance, he relates how the narrator and "my friend Birnie" doze off, perhaps while doing trail repair work, on "a hot June morning / above Wapta Lake, the Kicking Horse Pass." A bear shows up and proceeds to investigate the sleeping Birnie. The animal "sniffed at Birnie's collar / at his ear, which he licked tentatively / causing Birnie to moan softly." After a conversation between the bear and the nervous narrator, the bear sniffs "at Birnie's armpit," snorts,

and turned away, clattered down the creek
popping his teeth, his hackles up Went out
of sight around the shoulder of Mount
Hector

as Birnie woke up rubbing his eyes
"Too hot to sleep" he said. Yeah.

In this poem among others, Marty uses some idiosyncratic punctuation, as many contemporary poets do, to keep the reader from simply reading the piece as prose. Here, statements uttered by the bear, or that take place in the mind of the narrator, are not set off by quotation marks. This serves to distinguish what gets said orally from what is a mental conversation between the bear and the narrator.

"We were just going bear," I said quietly
edging backwards
Don't move too quickly will you, said Bear
when you move, or better still don't move at
all

Similarly, the poet's omission of the comma between "going" and "bear" in the first line of this quotation serves a poetic purpose. Here, the absence of the comma

helps emphasize the rapid, frightened speech of the narrator when suddenly confronted by the bear.

In Marty's second collection, *Nobody Danced With Miss Rodeo*, the final section of the book gathers together many of his poems on family and fatherhood. Earlier in this volume, the narrator of the poem "In the Arms of the Family" speaks of other dangers of his mountain occupation besides potentially-threatening bears: "The tools of the territory include / climbing ropes and helicopters / guns and dynamite." The narrator admits that "danger was my fix," and yet acknowledges that it is his family, "my woman and son," who can restore him to the "human moment":

But he who was lost
will wake up found, and right

In the arms of the family
that binds him again, to his life

The poems of the closing section, "The Knife of Love," explore a number of dimensions of such life "in the arms of the family." "The Colours" is a moving look at varieties of premature death — a young climber drowned in a mountain creek, whose body the narrator helps pull out of the water, and the loss of the narrator's and his wife's baby through miscarriage. The poem juxtaposes colors associated with the drowned climber ("On the gravel bar / his shirt was scarlet / his limbs dead white") and the colors associated with the lost fetus: the "blue wells" of the wife's eyes, her "faded" garden roses, "and the bright clothes / unused in her nursery." Relief comes with "the healing snow" of winter: "She and I / we'd had quite enough / of the flowers."

Marty's sense of humour extends to family life. In "There Just Ain't No Respect," the narrator describes a disagreement between himself and his wife over the responsibility to move a vacuum cleaner left in a hallway. In the night the narrator gets up to stretch a leg, broken on the job, and his wife "sleepily" requests that he "check the kids' blankets." On the way to do so, he stumbles over the vacuum cleaner and cuts his toe, so that

I'm tracking blood on the cold floor
but I don't cry out, being
a hardened husband
Just
cover the babies
my teeth clenched
and limp back to bed

Marty employs humour for poignant effect, too. In "Revelation," quoted here in its entirety, he presents what for me is the funniest, most succinct glimpse possible of the uselessness of males in connection with some facets of childrearing :

I held our new baby against
my bare chest and his four-day-
old mouth explored my tingling
skin

Until he found a nipple
my milkless, small and
hairy nipple

He batted on

It was a major disappointment
for both of us

In other poems in "The Knife of Love," however, Marty returns more directly to aspects of the theme outlined in "In the Arms of the Family" — family as a humanizing, saving grace in the narrator's life. In "Turning to Meet the World," the speaker in the poem speaks of how he has "dodged the world" through his life in nature up to the present: "I've made a world of my own / in the palm of a mountain." Now, he sees another potential existence for himself inside the family, one that seems to provide all the challenges of his former life and more:

If this is the last mountain
I ever climb what of it?

There are other ranges, shining
blue and bright in a boy's eye

"The Knife of Love" and *Nobody Danced With Miss Rodeo* itself end with "The Fording" where the narrator embraces the possibilities of both family life and the natural world he loves. He watches his wife and son on horseback sitting in the middle of a creek in the mountains, talking

of the things that beautiful women and small boys
talk of, there where the wind blows the first buds of
the cinquefoil, and trout skip forward from the
billowing mud under a horse's foot to glitter in the
clear again

I would be like those quick gleams
to be always shining for their eyes and hearts.

Out of his wish to be connected with this vision of his family, the narrator lights a fire where he stands in a nearby clearing. In response, with "a whoop, with a shout" his family rides through the beauty of the wilderness ("over a plain of trembling orange flowers") toward him. The speaker, in an active gesture of acceptance of who he calls "my living lights, the fire of my days," feels himself "cry aloud at their fatal beauty." At the close of the poem he is "running forward

to meet them, and surrender." I know of few other contemporary male poets besides Marty who have spoken with such clarity of the life choices that tug at a North American man, nor who have so completely spelled out their acceptance of family joy and responsibility, of the dimensions of fatherhood.

///. Dale Zieroth

Love of family and of the wild places of the world, however, are also probed in the poetry of Dale Zieroth. Like Marty, Zieroth takes an unflinching look at the tensions implicit in all life decisions, and especially those connected with marriage and parenting, employment, and the natural environment.

Zieroth's poetic evaluation of the family includes, unlike Marty's, a grappling with his family of origin. In "Father," published in Zieroth's first collection, *Clearing*, the poem begins with a moment of intense anger. The father physically shakes the narrator-as-child as if the child were an object ("a sheaf of wheat") or as though one animal is killing another ("the way a dog shakes / a snake"). This sense of overpowering, violent force establishes in a reader a feeling of the awesome power of the father as seen by the young narrator. This feeling is reinforced as "for seven more years" the speaker in the poem watches his father "with his great hands rising and falling / with every laugh, smashing down on his knees." In the poem, too, the speaker *observes*, but the father *acts*. The father's actions are part of a rough, violent world, where the farmer-father is observed trimming his fingernails with a knife, "castrating pigs and / skinning deer," and working outdoors for long hours through sun and bitter cold.

In the last stanza, however, we see the father, now grown old, in a different light. He is less active, and less competent. We learn he has given Christmas presents "for the first time," but they are "unwrapped." The father is living on a pension, with the hardness gone from him now that he is no longer involved with heavy physical labour. The "great hands" that once could shake the child or crash down on his knees or work so hard, are now "white, soft, / unused hands." Yet the poet indicates that the anger the reader is shown in the first stanza has changed its form, not disappeared. The narrator says the father is "no longer afraid to call his children fools / for finding different answers, different lives." The father as previously described, however, does not seem to be the sort of man who is "afraid" to point out the shortcomings he sees in his children. Hence there is a mystery to the poem that adds depth to this otherwise straightforward, though gripping, account of an aging parent. In the final stanza the narrator describes the father "sleeping in the middle / of the afternoon with his mouth open as if there / is no further need for secrets." Perhaps one of these secrets is that the instances of violent behaviour by the father masked an insecurity of some sort when the father was faced with children, or with others of a different temperament or set of beliefs than himself. Or perhaps

the father in his active years had some sort of doubts about his life (suggested by the reference to the father's talk with his companions about "the / old times" and their "dead friends"). Whatever the exact nature of these hidden aspects to the father, the portrait depicted is a distressing one of a harsh, primitive power not tamed or civilized but defeated by toil and age.

Zieroth's skills as a craftsman, working and reworking his poems slowly until he obtains precisely the effects he wants, are evident in this poem as in others. For example, to convey how the father's hard work slowly but inexorably wears him out, the poet in the last line of the second stanza uses mostly single-stress words. The strong, monotonous rhythm thus created helps emphasize the forces steadily hammering at the father :

the work that bent his back a little more
each day down toward the ground.

And the apparently-random line breaks Zieroth uses in "Father" ("chokecherry / wine"; "their / youth"; "the same / knife") serve to introduce a tentative, halting effect to the poem's flow. It is as if the narrator is still attempting to come to an understanding about his father, and he relates the events he wishes to describe in a hesitant, uncertain manner. This uncertainty is also underlined in the choice of diction of the poem's concluding stanza. The father's present attitudes are described with qualifiers: "seems," "as if," and again "as if" :

Still, he seems content
to be this old, to be sleeping in the middle
of the afternoon with his mouth open as if there
is no further need for secrets, as if he is
no longer afraid to call his children fools
for finding different answer, different lives.

The female side of Zieroth's family of origin is probed in some detail in the poet's third collection, *When the Stones Fly Up*. In "His Mother Laments," the female speaker in the poem — probably the poet's mother — tells of her life after marriage, of leaving her own family behind to come to the new husband's "farm / . . . riddled with his mother, his / knowledge." She speaks of her four children "forming a circle / from out of a circle" and then eventually leaving:

and they drift past me,
breaking all the dream I ever had
and even now I am still
dreaming them, how they were
first touched by the midwife's hand, his mother
pushing gently down, then
putting a light in the window

The speaker mentions that the last child was, instead, a hospital birth. She feels this experience "made him different, / made him think he can speak for me / (for us, for any of us)." In a nod toward the impossibility of anyone ever knowing fully about the people who are our family of origin, Zieroth concludes the poem by having the speaker question "where in me is he now."

And yet these ancestors are part of who we are, and so the search to understand them is part of understanding ourselves. In *When the Stones Fly Up*, Zieroth continues his exploration of the feminine side of his family tree in poems such as "Grandmother's Spring," a consideration of that midwife-grandmother mentioned in "His Mother Laments." "Grandmother's Spring" presents the "sleepy grandchildren" hearing the grandmother summoned in the night when neighbors' wives had complications in birthing. The grandmother is a success at this work: "Babies were her best crop." Yet the world the children enter is that of the fathers: the children "are part of / their father's dream" when they are alive, and even in the act of being born the babies are "shoved and pulled from the darkness and into / their father's bright light." As we have seen from earlier poems like "Father," the patriarchal world of this farming community is one of rigid attempts to control the natural world. Here, in the "father's dream" the wildness in nature is seemingly pacified, regulated :

green fields bending back to take his work,
none of the wild oats that stick scattered
heads above the wheat and never follow
rows

Also in the dream are "no bloated cows / no young-eating sows / no problems with bulls jumping fences."

Despite the fathers' attempts to impose a human restructuring of nature, though, the natural world seems to belong to the young and the feminine. It is the children who savor the sights of spring: "the first crow," "new grass," "the fields . . . putting on their black robes again," new kittens that appear "out of the barn." Natural growth, rebirth of every sort is identified with the grandmother: "as she falls, day by day, / her greenness pushes up."

These polarities haunt Zieroth's view of the family. In the background is a male struggle to wrest a living for the family from a natural order identified with feminine strengths of a different sort than rigid control. Domestic life also encompasses tension between conflicting attitudes, emotions, needs, wants. Love of spouse and children is a more intense variant of love of farming, of the land that simultaneously feeds and breaks us. "Beautiful Woman" in *Clearing* sets forth with absolute clarity the love, hate, and resolution that are the characteristics of most intimate and meaningful relationships in the poet's world.

In the poem's first stanza the sensual, sexual joys of love are celebrated. The world of the bedroom is fecund and magical: "Fish / swim past the edges of our

bed, oceans / in their mouths." The speaker in the poem talks of "this fever to be mad in each other's / warm white skin." There is something primal in this state of being:

We go down
like children, we go down into a great moaning
with silence forgotten and floating through the
ceiling
like balloons. . . .
See again the sun and bed wet with warm rain.
Wave after wave it comes, wave
after wave stones
break open at our touch, small bones break free and drift
out of you into me.

But in the second stanza the opposite polarity appears, anger. The loved one has her list of grievances:

You tell me
what it means to wait and work afternoons
with dishes and floors. You tell me
my friends who pace and strut ignore you, or notice
only your sex. How you hate them !

The loved one's rage, however, hurts only the narrator. And he responds in kind : "you will hear me cursing, you will hear me / roaring." In one of the most blistering couplets on spousal hate anywhere in literature, Zieroth's narrator denounces his partner for all time: "The mirror / will fall, history will vomit at your name."

Yet the poem's third stanza provides a synthesis between these two states of exalted passion and deep rage. This synthesis is real life, the speaker in the poem argues: "In the kitchen / the dishes wait." Ultimately, the couple's life together will not depend on extremes of feeling, but on acknowledging these and yet reaching an accommodation :

Tonight
we will go deep into our powerful
bodies again. Or we will do nothing
and survive just the same.

In this synthesis "both the music and the bruises have gone," and the poem ends with an image of the two-edged nature of ordinary daily life: light that "stains the bed / like wine." The clarity, the enlightenment, that the synthesis provides affects the core of the marriage ("the bed"). Like wine, such a synthesis is acknowledged to contain the potential for both a pleasurable high and destructive behaviors. Inebriation is by definition a state of being out of control, with the resultant possibilities for both ecstasy and harm. The light the couple finds to live by marks their

lives together with knowledge of such extremes, the way a wine stain can serve as a memento of intensely good times and/or hurtful ones, too.

As with marriage, the arrival of children is an occasion for the poet to wrestle with poles of emotional response, followed by acceptance of a synthesis. In "Birth," from the poet's second collection, *Mid-River*, the speaker speaks of the "resentment and then the guilt" the baby generates in the couple. All has happened as more experienced parents ("they") predict:

my wife would not love the child instantly
and both of us would run
I would be hemmed in like a
fighter going down for the last time
I would long for
a single night's sleep
the undisturbed dawn a day away from
the stink of things that much time
without the guilt
knowing exactly how long
I'd been away from home how much
she needed me

In the second stanza, the narrator responds to a more positive part of the prediction: "they said it gets better." The new father responds to "a smile" from the baby, and realizes that he has an important place in his daughter's life. Such a realization frees him to move beyond the darker aspects of parenting:

After her bottle and her blanket after
her mother there is me
big old man no longer afraid to tell a stranger
the tiny words of love love and the need to
be charged again by something human like
the morning when her arms go up to me

The third stanza describes the resolution of these extremes when the child is "almost a year." Looking back, the narrator recalls the struggle to accept parenthood, and the wife's primary role in this: "I did not know / there were babies everywhere and mothers who can / hold us all together." Overall, he concludes, he has grown through the experience of working to resolve his divergent feelings; having a family, he says, "makes me big." And the poem ends with praise for how the arrival of the child has renewed the speaker's sense of what is rewarding about human existence. He talks of how he was present at the instant of her birth, a birth that he realizes now was the beginning of something welcome in his life: "look god she is / alive like her father who stands up inside his eyes and is / delivered to the good world again."

The joys and negative aspects of *childrearing* are explored by Zieth in separate poems, rather than by striving for a synthesis in one. "The Eyes of the Body Are

Not the Eyes of the Mind," from *Mid-River*, is about the pleasure found in showing a child the world. The child asks to be lifted up to see out the window. It is a moment of happiness for the speaker :

my arms
fold and lift and hold and now I know
what they have been made for, why they
lead out from beside the heart.

The speaker is responding to the way the child is totally absorbed by the world that is so new to her. The ordinary rural sights of horses and ravens the father lifts her up to view "make you stop as if I have shown you a / miracle." Perhaps fueled by the success of this activity, the narrator at the close of the poem appears to regard the responsibility of parenting, the attempt to introduce the child not only to the wonders of existence but also to its dangers, as within his and his wife's abilities :

You'll do all right and all we ever do is
point things out, show you what it's like
above the crowds, all we can ever do is
hold you, little spy face, keep the world safe
another dozen years.

But showing things to the child is a much less successful venture in "Fear of Failure," from the same collection. In this poem the child is five, and the father in the poem is trying to teach her to ski for the first time. The event is frustrating for both father and child :

she whacks me on the knee
ski pole on cold bone
and I grab her and she cries
and I'm mad now cause I've done that wrong
and my record for being the kind of father I want to be
is still too few days.

Even the father's attempts to rationally sort out what has happened fail here:

later I try to
explain but I must hold too tightly cause she
spins away and it's finished for her anyway, she
decides to take up skating while I
go over the words again : Look
Nobody's Good Right Away
At Anything

The speaker's comment is of course ironic, in that his advice applies as much to his own efforts at fathering as to his child's at skiing. But the poem's overall tone reflects the speaker's depression at his failure :

I lack the drive
I slide down past the handholds of home
and I manage and scarcely care today
where the melting snow goes or takes me or ends.

Besides responding to the family, and fatherhood, Zieroth has written equally honestly about his interactions with nature, including working in the outdoors. Nature to Zieroth can be a force that men try to bend to their purposes — as in farming, for example. But even when nature is appreciated for its own beauty, or for how it provides a sense of historical or geologic time, the power of natural forces always includes a potential threat.

Yet where people try to make a living from nature, respect for this power often is ignored. In "Father" Zieroth writes of a farmer eventually worn down by the ceaseless effort to control the natural world. The tourism industry, too, represents a clash between humanity's drive to adapt the natural world to our uses and the wilderness' own processes. In "Coyote Pup Meets the Crazy People in Kootenay National Park," also from *Mid-River*, four employees of the Park watch an injured coyote pup die in the back of a warden's vehicle. Though never stated in the poem, it is likely the pup was hit by a car and found by the side of the road (since otherwise it is not clear how the warden would have picked up the injured animal). Tourists have come to the Park to appreciate nature, and ironically their presence leads to the destruction of at least part of what they presumably value. Similarly, the men employed by the Park are expected to simultaneously protect the natural world while easing (and hence increasing) tourists' destructive access to it. The Park employees observing the dying pup seem genuinely sorry at his death, "we / wanted him to run like the wind for the bush." But they are caught up in the contradictions of their own work world. After the death, on their coffee break they talk shop, "talking / park in the jargon of the civil servant man." Although the ostensible subject of their conversation, their consideration, is nature (the Park), the wilderness is spoken of in industrial (i.e., human) terms : "the talk goes wildlife and telex and / choppers it goes numbers and man-years and / stats." The narrator calls this "nuts" and calls himself and the other employees "crazy people" because of this gap between the reality of the wilderness and their attempts to quantify and control as a means of carrying out their impossible task of preserving both wildness and the comfort of tourists :

And someone tries to tell me
what this park really needs
what this park is really like, but I know already
it's like a dead coyote pup
lying out in the back of a warden's truck
waiting for the plastic bag we're
going to stuff him in and then we're going to
shove him in the freezer along with

the lamb that got it from the logging truck
along with a half dozen favourite birds
wiped out by cars, specimens now

The narrator expresses his moral revulsion to what people are doing to the wilderness :

it was the wrong way to die in the back of
a warden's truck looking at steel
watched by humans handled and pitied and
down on your side in the muck
a pup seven months out of the den.

The narrator sees what is beautiful in the world as bound up with the natural ; he speaks of "the cold sweet air that comes from the breath / of the animals." But as a person needing to survive economically, to provide for those dependent on him, he has accepted a job as one of "the crazy people." Coffee break is over and "we hurry to our places / the crazy people and me, we gotta get back to our / paper work."

For both Zieroth and Marty, an active, work-based relation to the wilderness, to the natural world, is often paired or merged with the family. I believe this is because both writers view their responses to these aspects of existence as a major part of a struggle to be at home. In order to be at home on this planet, these writers imply, we need to understand its natural processes. And this is not an understanding we will get by merely *looking* at nature, as though examining some object foreign to our being. The natural world is not static : everything wild contributes to change in nature. But humans alone have the ability to devastate or diminish the natural environment. We must learn to live, and hence work, in nature in a way that respects the natural processes. For unless we can feel at home in our work in this world, we will never feel at home off the job. The family, too, involves work, of a different kind : nurturing a relationship between a man and a woman, child-rearing, the i ,001 domestic tasks. How to feel at ease, at home, amidst the choices these challenges steadily present us with, is a preoccupation of both writers.

I believe the writing of both Sid Marty and Dale Zieroth reflects these authors' efforts to be at ease in the actual here and now. And I am convinced that, whether granted official recognition as culturally significant or not, what Marty and Zieroth have to say about their struggles has much to teach about a better way to be a human being.