

9SHORTGRASS.DOC

Across the state line into New Mexico, the lands change from rowed cultivation to wild, open prairie. The vastness revives the old days of dirt-floored saddle houses, dawn-lighted corrals filled with fighting horses, and partly-furnished bunkhouses to cause a deep shudder that jerks the neck muscles.

On this August trip to Santa Fe, the country wears her Sunday clothes. She languishes in a lush green coverage. Perhaps the few greybeards left far back off the road on a ranch, or a granny in a rocker frozen to space in a Roswell nursing home, share Her secrets – the secrets that foretell such mysteries as the next rain or the first frost. Language from the earth and from the clouds and from the creatures in the air and on the ground makes fuller definition. Better, granny and grandfather lore passed to grandchildren offers another lead.

At 65 miles an hour, three hundred to five hundred miles for a day's run, the link from his land only helps to understand that off the right of way in the spaces, there's a second timeframe.

If he is of the land, (and he is), he knows man's August ninth does not coincide with Nature's calendar. Had he pressed his ear against her earth, he might sense a

tremor signaling that the growing season ended yesterday for the next 12 months; or in reverse, this growing boom has just begun.

He knows nothing over the radio in the dashboard or in the newspaper on the seat is going to tell him what's ahead. He may even sense that all his charts and gauges and scales are man devices.

However, at the moment, he clocks a mile a minute, 36 miles from Roswell, 400 miles from Santa Fe. His thoughts range to: "Wonder if the wool house man in Roswell knows how much cow feed will cost this fall, or is there ever a bale of alfalfa baled in the valley cheap enough to convert to cow dollars?"

Off the road across a cow trail, a black dung beetle makes a massive effort to roll a marble-sized ball of cow manure to her hole. She recites; "Roll-a-by, roll-a-by, get it stored while the grass is green and the fecal soft."

On a highline pole a black-hearted raven pokes his head under one wing, and then retrieves and croaks: "So what, you despicable dung-eating bug. I'll reline my nest now. Just before frost, I'll swoop down and eat your guts, feelers, and all. My craw loaded, I'll fly to a warm place."

And underneath the pole, a prairie snake grows new skin beneath an itchy old one ready to shed. She laments how she loved raven eggs from nests in trees. Hates highline poles. How dung beetles are an acquired taste.

On this man roars, oblivious to the whine of tread against the track. He wonders if he has passed the old sign advertising Deboullet sheep going back before the coyotes drove the woollies out. He wonders who owns those blue pasture gates on both sides of the road, how far it is to those dim mountains ahead.

The man measurements climb in altitude. Picket fences mark the snow line reaches here – deep snows, big drifts. Tall, dark green cedars and huge red rocks dot and line the roadsides. Once this was a bitter school for his Uncle Goat Whiskers and his partner, an hombre named Poage from Rankin, Texas.

The sparse grasses are green, ready for Texans to come back again and ranch this tricky land. But he knows that within miles are housing developments and much bigger tricks to play on man. Further, big stone-pillared houses appear on mountains hundreds, maybe thousands of feet away from precious water. Massive edifices in command of a view with disregard for the price of water or power.

The first sign of dudes is a sign reading "SAVE LIVES-NEUTER AND SPAY YOUR PETS!" Comes back that he lives in an alien world. His grandson reported last night that special step ladders are for sale for dawgs to climb up on couches. The new couches at the ranch rock too much for a pooch hound to set his ladder, plus visitors' dawgs have to wait to come in the house after he is asleep.

Stopped and pulled to one side in a pass before Santa Fe becomes visible, he kicks red stone gravel around off a little rise. Whiskers' answer to his question of how much money they lost was to mind his own damn business.

He guesses Mr. Poage escaped with his roping horse to trailer back to Rankin. He knows from what Young Whiskers said, they later on recovered the deposit on the REA meter at the headquarters.

But he knows his time has passed for sure when a blue Volkswagen car comes through the mountain pass with homemade sideboards making a pickup bed in the trunk.