

The voices of Minnesota's past return to speak to you. Listen to the Settler on the southwestern prairie, to the Casualty of the Great Hinckley Fire, to the Hibbing Hobo of the Great Depression, to the POW of WWII. The Miner of Mesabi iron ore will tell you what his life was like, as will the Suffragette, the Actress, and the Birdwatcher. These stories are the story of Minnesota, and your story as well.

**Minnesota Anthology: A History in Monologues**

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# Minnesota Anthology

*A History in Monologues*

by award-winning author

**Jeffrey W. Tenney**

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## Table of Contents

<b>Part I: 1850 – 1899 .....</b>	<b>1</b>
The Settler, John Sharpe .....	3
The Settler's Wife, Elizabeth Sharpe.....	5
The Neighbor, Wilhelm Haber .....	7
The Sacrifice, Crow Dog .....	8
The Slave, Dred Scott .....	9
The Slave Owner, John Emerson.....	10
The River Pig, Endre Larsson.....	11
The Asthmatic, Brit Larsson.....	13
The Baron, Isaac Staples.....	15
The Trapper, Andrew McBeath .....	16
The Homesteader, Molly O'Brien .....	18
The Private, Philander Ellis .....	20
The Tent Mate, Samuel Seymour .....	22
The Private's Teacher, Samantha Hill .....	24
The Private's Mother, Margaret Ellis .....	25
The Soddy Child, Mikaela Holm.....	26
The Soddy Mama, Inga Holm.....	27
The Soddy Papa, Ian Holm .....	28
The Bank Cashier, Joseph Lee Heywood .....	29
The Bank Robber, Cole Younger .....	31
The Lover, Tomas Bakker .....	32
The Indian Agent, Jefferson Worthy .....	34

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

The Christian Reformer, Herman Berger .....	35
The Survivor, Simon Cleary .....	36
The Gravedigger, John Collins .....	38
The Casualty, Matilda Oleson .....	40
The Chief, Wascouta.....	42
The Miner, William Swift.....	44
The Miner's Friend, Jeremiah Soder .....	45
The Miner's Wife, Amelia Soder .....	46
The Mine Owner, Ezra Thompson .....	47
The Mill Owner, Cadwallader Washburn.....	48
The Dispossessed, Sten Stanlund.....	49
The Fire Watcher, Iris MacGraith.....	51
The Skeptic, Krister Ericksson .....	52
The Bachelor, Kurt Lundahl .....	53
The Bachelor's Brother, Karl Lundahl .....	54
The Town Drunkard, Sigfrid Grundstrom .....	56
<b>Part II: 1900 - 1949.....</b>	<b>59</b>
The Rider, Adeline Knapp .....	61
The Suffragette, Emily Gilman Noyes .....	63
The Weaver, Megan Malloy .....	65
The Traditionalist, Clarissa Mancini .....	67
The Resort Builder, Garrison Smiley .....	68
The Resort Buyer, James Davis .....	70
The Fishing Guide, Harlan Engles.....	71
The Department Chair, Fred Mueller .....	73

*Minnesota Anthology*

The Colleague, Anthony Szabo .....	75
The Doughboy, Ernest Higgins .....	76
The Doughboy's Brother, Earl Higgins .....	78
The Doughboy's Girl, Marigold Swenson .....	79
The Doughboy's Friend, Arnold Wiley .....	80
The Tugboat Captain, Henry Galwin .....	81
The Lynched, Elias Clayton .....	82
The Police Chief, John Murphy .....	84
The Rapist, Max Mason .....	85
The Bootlegger, Sylvia Picollo .....	86
The Bootlegger's Husband, Oliver Picollo .....	87
The Hobo, Bertrand Bailey .....	88
The Railroad Dick, Robert Zinman .....	90
The Hobo's Mother, Willow Bailey .....	91
The Hobo's Sister, Regina Bailey .....	92
The Dust Bowler, Andrew Darnovsky .....	93
The Hunkerer, Helmut Becker .....	95
The Singer, Sonny Bridgeman .....	97
The Striker, Abe von Neuman .....	98
The Riot Cop, Patrick McGonaughey .....	100
The CCC Worker, Nash Jameson .....	101
The CCC Superintendent, Butch Harrigan .....	103
The Wind Fatality, Micah Schneider .....	104
The War Correspondent, Dan Freeman .....	105
The Quaker, Jacob Manner .....	106
The Marine, Hay Woodward .....	107

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

The POW, Arne Johansson .....	108
The Ant Killer, Erik Hadman .....	110
The Welder, Theresa Harmon.....	111
The Veteran, Sig Ansberg.....	113
The Slinky Student, Michelle Holden.....	114
<b>Part III: 1950 - 1999 .....</b>	<b>115</b>
The Quick-Change Artist, Clarice Olson.....	117
The Witness, Winston Jones .....	119
The Shooter, Oliver Crutcher.....	120
The Rondo Resident, Petunia Jackson .....	121
The Lobotomy Patient, Gillian Banks .....	122
The Biologist, Chester Adams .....	123
The Evolutionist, Gwendolyn Smith .....	124
The Fundamentalist, Abel Greene .....	125
The Evangelist, Clyde Pynchon.....	126
The GI Suburbanite, Randson Charles .....	127
The GI's Neighbor, Herb Hardaway.....	128
The Suburb Refugee, Michael Ridgeway .....	130
The Listener, Adam Winter .....	131
The Marshal's Fan, Sheila Rodgers .....	132
The Stooges Fan, Don Rodgers .....	133
The Separatist, Arlette Johnson .....	134
The Integrationist, Purcell Magnon .....	135
The Draftee, Jonathon Pollack.....	136
The Draftee's Father, Henry Pollack .....	138

*Minnesota Anthology*

The Astronomer, Gerald Susag.....	140
The Conspiracy Theorist, Lawrence Ratzke.....	142
The Photo Analyst, Sugarman Brown .....	144
The Hockey Player, Gil Barteau .....	145
The Goalie, Jack Southey .....	147
The Liberal, Joey Lubin.....	148
The Democrat, Walter Everitt.....	150
The Conservative, Alvin Dorman .....	151
The Libertarian, Richard Smolenas .....	153
The Pro-Choicer, Abby Thurston .....	154
The Pro-Lifer, Sharon Smithfield .....	155
The Buddhist, Wes Kent.....	157
The Fisherman, Jimmy “Mudcat” Wilson .....	159
The Editor, John Owens.....	161
The Schoolteacher, Marilyn Summers.....	163
The Farmer, Mike Simpson .....	165
The Shaman, White Dog.....	166
The Youth, Early “Big Tree” Taylor .....	168
The Grandmother, Alma Taylor .....	169
The Friend, Charlee Begay .....	170
The Driver, Laramie Johnston .....	172
The Vacationer, Jud “Long Shot” Thompson.....	174
The Inmate, Nicholas “Knife” Edwards .....	176
The Warden, Angelo Martin.....	177
The Victim, Saphina Curry .....	179
The Hunter, Tom Bradshaw.....	180



*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

The Gundealer, Jeremy Fisher .....	181
The Poet, Brad Halvorson.....	182
The Agent, Brenda Flowers .....	184
The Barge Pilot, Sally Compton .....	185
The Mormon, Jacob Stallworth .....	186
The Deckhand, Danny Rothman.....	187
The Judge, Dianne Goehner.....	189
The Suitor, Carson Gladstone.....	190
The Poker Player, Anders A. Anderson.....	192
The Pit Boss, Simon James.....	193
The Games Waitress, LaVyrle James .....	195
The Birdwatcher, Ellen McCormick.....	196
The Painter, Sam McCormick .....	198
The Ethicist, Andrea Marchella .....	199
The Philosopher, Elliot Bingham.....	201
The Philosopher Heretic, Justine Sanderson.....	202
The Actress, Jane Dreckler .....	203
The Performer, Sarah Kennedy .....	204
The Director, Seamus O'Connell.....	205
The Sculptor, Tania Toliver.....	206
The Liar, Frank Millburg .....	207
The Sister, Ester Porter .....	208
The Patient, Emerald Porter.....	209
<b>Part IV: 2000 - .....</b>	<b>211</b>
The Geologist, Edgar Schmidt.....	213

*Minnesota Anthology*

The Dean, Emily Howard Schmidt.....	214
The Professor, Janet Reinke.....	216
The University President, Kenneth Kolkowski .....	217
The Welfare Mom, Kathy Hanson.....	218
The Victorian, Sylvia Morrison .....	220
The Policeman, Joe Palatine .....	221
The Immigrant, Rosa Martinez .....	222
The Tech Cynic, Elise Marsday.....	224
The Prophet, Sanjay Kapoor .....	225
The Street Sweeper, Jameel Dickerson.....	226
The Street Dealer, Slipfoot Sayers.....	227
The Terrorized, Avril Barsness.....	228
The Terrorist, Kahlil Gustaala Nadif .....	230
The Peacemaker, Allison Nadif .....	232
The Unsure, Greg Tauger .....	233
The Doubter, Barstock van Meveren .....	235
The Convinced, Kris Wahlbert .....	237
The Prepared, Jerrold Kleinsausser .....	238
The Unwelcome, Sarah Thunder .....	239

*At the end of long summer days  
the evening sky  
spills its red down impatiently  
over the boundary waters.  
Scents of past lives rise from the deeps  
and a chilling damp chases the day's dry heat.  
That chill is me.  
I am the darkening cloud in the realm of last light.  
I am a scurry and a "plunk" in the reeds.  
These are the moments when I emerge from the  
cold mud and leafy shadows to reclaim a place.  
I am what used to be,  
and my claim on what is now  
lives no longer than that evening sky,  
although in my world time and age mean nothing.  
There are others who come with me  
and each has these moments.  
We come to remember.  
And whoever said the dead don't speak  
should have listened more carefully.  
We are speaking to you all the time.*

## **Part I**

**1850 – 1899**



## **The Settler**

John Sharpe

*New Ulm*

When I saw my son lying out there  
beside the uprooted stump, the horse and  
harness bouncing away toward the wood line,  
and the Dakota man standing hard over him,  
I knew that I had but an instant to prevent the final abuse.  
I fired upon the heathen with no hope for preservation of life,  
only dignity. That I might lay my boy to rest  
whole in form, as God had made him, and no part of him  
carried away on the belt of the Devil's servant.  
How could I have judged my circumstances to be otherwise?  
What could I do but in all haste raise firearm to shoulder?  
To my great relief and everlasting gratitude, my son  
had only collapsed from fatigue, no mark upon his body,  
and once I had him to his bed I hurried after the  
unfortunate soul that had suffered my reckless answer.  
With help from the field horse  
I retrieved the young man to our cabin,  
where we ministered to his painful wounds for five days.  
Whereupon his own god took him, we grieved his loss.  
Amidst the heinous injustices, the rampant callousness,  
of that war against the Indian, remorse took refuge  
in a simple farmer's home. From that day on I carried  
no gun into the fields. The red man let us be,  
and we greeted the end of the war with great joy.  
Then, upon the senseless execution of innocents

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

at Fort Snelling, and the dislocation of many more from their homelands, renewed sorrow.

Man is a weak-willed and self-serving creature. Would God have made man as much in his wisdom as in his image.

## **The Settler's Wife**

Elizabeth Sharpe

*New Ulm*

For five nights I lay awake in my bed,  
my son beside me, while my husband lay  
sleeping soundly on the floor beside the heathen.  
I wanted no part in that indecency. No part for my son.  
John Sharpe was a good man but ill-reasoned.  
He brought destruction within arm's reach of  
my family, a sin for which I never forgave him.  
Even after he returned the dead savage to his people,  
a foulness lingered in the cabin air that no cleansing  
could remove. The walls darkened with the stain of  
his misdeed. Our fires tainted our meats. Our breads  
shriveled and molded. Neighbors, many who had lost  
sons and daughters to the savages,  
spurned us. None would come to our aid  
in those hard years that followed the war.  
I saw my son through to adulthood and marriage  
and bid him farewell upon his leaving to Chicago.  
Too soon bent and parched by bitterness,  
I lay myself down in that tall prairie grass and  
gave myself over to the Lord, that I might convince  
Him of my righteousness and disavow  
the transgressions of my incautious husband.

I ask myself: How might a single



*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

thoughtless act destroy a life?  
My heart crumbles again like a clod of dry dirt.

## **The Neighbor**

Wilhelm Haber

*New Ulm*

No matter what most said or believed,  
they stayed away from the Sharpe  
farm because that family was English.  
Had a German such as I succored  
an innocent heathen in time of war,  
all would have been forgotten by month's end.  
Deeper currents ran the affairs of those farmers  
than they would care to know about.  
Hate, fear, resentment...savagery...  
inhabited all hearts.  
War unleashed them. Peace did not quell them;  
they exercised their will in more modest conflicts.  
Throats could be cut at the town meeting  
or at the bank.  
The failed farmer would stuff his  
family and belongings into his wagon  
and disappear into the night. None  
need witness this bloodless murder.

To understand what kind of creature we are,  
step out of the church into the field and  
watch the vultures tussle over the shaggy bones.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Sacrifice**

Crow Dog

*Fort Snelling*

I told them that I did not want their black mask  
to cover my face, that I wanted to see the eyes  
of the white people who had come to watch us die.  
They told me that I must wear the mask, and  
so I saw the white eyes from inside.  
They did not blink or look away.  
They swung in the blackness like the eyes  
of a running deer in moonlight.  
They leapt upward like sparks from a fire when  
my neck snapped.  
I hung from the rope in quiet peace  
as I watched them burn out.  
I had killed none of the whites.  
I had saved one of their families  
from the revenge of my people,  
for that family had been kind to us.  
But their grandfather chief, whose eyes I was  
told were dark with sorrow, decided that I  
should die for all the bad things that were done.

I rode a dog to the river, then a crow carried me  
over and left me under the tree where I rest.

## **The Slave**

Dred Scott

### *Fort Snelling*

The coldest times I ever saw was  
in the Territory up there at Fort Snelling.  
But those was the best times too.  
I wasn't free, not yet, but my heart  
took wing like a loosed pigeon.  
I met Harriet there at the fort and we had us  
two children, fine looking girls both.  
Our master hired us out to this and that family  
and we met plenty of fine folks and  
the work was easy going. Most of my day  
I was with my wife and young ones. I reckon  
that's what made it so hard to sit tight when  
we was down in St. Louis some years later  
with a new master and they split us up.  
That's when I got a lawyer and we made trouble.  
Whoo, did we ever make trouble then.  
Some even say we started the Civil War, we  
cooked up so much trouble.  
If that be so, then I read it as a good thing.

Cold winter ain't nothing when you got a good wife  
working at your side and you can choose which  
time of day to take your dinner.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Slave Owner**

John Emerson

*Fort Snelling*

If I had seen all the trouble coming for the Scotts,  
I could have set them free while we were  
living in the Territory. They seemed so happy  
there, truth be told, that it didn't strike me  
as something that needed doing. But now...  
I must admit to this now...the payments  
I received for hiring them out  
rode comfortably in my pockets.  
I left word with my wife to do it, but she saw things  
differently after I passed on.  
Then, perhaps, it all worked out for the best in the end.  
Dred and Harriet got their freedom before they died;  
the country got itself unshackled, though it  
cost more lives than leaves on a willow tree.  
Blame for that falls on those like me who saw  
evil in slavery but put our own comforts first.  
What kind of greed is that?  
We don't have a word for it.

Modest comfort is all you need.

## **The River Pig**

Endre Larsson

*Scandia*

I wasn't made for the work there.  
My lungs tired as easily as my sister's,  
but as I was a young man  
my father thought I should find cash work  
over on the St. Croix with the loggers.  
My sister needed doctor care in New York,  
everyone said, and that meant we needed money.  
Working for Isaac Staples' company never made  
anyone rich that I ever heard of, except himself and  
the other dandies down in Stillwater.  
After two days as a cutter, no one would partner with me,  
so they put me out on the river to work as a river pig.  
It was cold, wet work, but I could keep my breath as  
the current did most of the pushing.  
They gave me special boots to grip the floating logs  
and I got to where I could jump around on them  
all day without falling in. But I suppose it only takes  
one fall at the wrong time. I felt the spin under my feet  
and my prodding pike slip from my hands,  
then the lightning bolt against my temple and  
cold water swirling around my eyes.  
By the time the wannigan reached me it was too late.  
At least I wasn't lost under the logs for weeks like  
happened to some of the pigs.  
My sister never got her fancy doctoring,

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

but she lived to eighty-four none less.

Some aren't made for hard work, and some aren't made  
for a long life either. I tried to do good for my family.

## **The Asthmatic**

Brit Larsson

*Scandia*

Of my first forty years I spent half in bed.  
Then a doctor stopped by our farm one day  
and the doctor told us that the bed might be  
the cause of my problem.  
My lungs opened after that.  
How often I cursed that bed. But the  
blame I must put on the greedy Isaac Staples,  
and upon all those of his kind.  
Those who had not a care for the  
desperate boys they put into the woods  
to cut trees, or to float them downriver to the mills.  
Not one came to Endre's funeral or sent a note.  
They had not a care either for the destruction  
they left behind. The land was too poor for farming,  
so the slash lay out there drying for years  
until some fire came along and killed  
farmers and animals alike for miles around.  
If I had been born a man I would have studied law  
and been elected governor and run all those fat rascals  
out of the state. But most of them left anyway, soon as  
they had used up all our finest trees. They moved on  
to Oregon or some such place and perpetrated the  
same shameful, murdering deeds unto others.

I know why people pray. It is in hope that



*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

at last God will dispense justice.  
Why He doesn't do it sooner perplexes me.

**The Baron**  
Isaac Staples

*Stillwater*

When I came out to Minnesota in fifty-three I had  
little money of my own. The money belonged to investors.  
Getting myself into position, on the inside,  
was how I won the battle.  
By the end of my run, logging was the least  
of my concerns. Most of what I made was in banking.  
And my farm always did well.  
How else do you measure a man?  
Not by success in one venture, but by success in  
whatever he puts his mind or hands to,  
and success over the long haul.  
I died a wealthy man, with a name that will be remembered,  
but I must say that there is another way to measure a man,  
and that is by his treatment of others.  
I cared for every man who ever cut a tree for me,  
invested in my bank, harvested my crops.  
I saw them in church on Sunday and never missed a funeral.  
I got the money because I took the risks.  
The Lord I thank for my good sense. The opportunities I made  
for myself, as by measured steps I built the man it took  
to accomplish these things.

Life gives to those who step forward at the call and  
take eagerly into their hands the tools of mastery.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

**The Trapper**  
Andrew McBeath

*East Grand Forks*

In my early years I made my living trapping  
beaver and mink along the Red River.  
Now and then I would get out into the woods,  
where I could take wolf hides and visit my  
mother's people for a time. My mother who was  
Sioux and capable; my father a lost Scot, who  
came into the territory with the first Selkirk Colony.  
So I grew up in that country, and no man knew  
that river as well as I did—south of Lake Winnipeg  
and north of the Ottertail, and that was the whole of her.  
About the time the steamboats came and the trapping  
dried up, the Homestead Act landed me,  
a farmer at the age of fifty-seven, or thereabouts.  
Cost me ne'er a dollar. I grew wheat, and being  
good with my hands I repaired wagon wheels for coin.  
As a cub I saw a battle at Seven Oaks  
between the fur companies. Later I saw civilization  
roll in thousands of family folk, and I saw  
Minnesota grow to a state and Canada a country.  
I saw the first rail train steam into Fargo.  
Ha, I watched my ass freeze over a hundred times  
every winter.  
As an old-timer I witnessed the Jesse James gang get shot up  
down in Northfield. I'd have got off a shot at them myself  
but I traveled unarmed in those days.

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A man can do a lot of living in a small space,  
or see nothing at all if he travels the world.  
Keep your eyes open.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Homesteader**

Molly O'Brien

*East Grand Forks*

Had it not been for Mr. McBeath  
I believe our town would have given up on life  
like a failed crop and gone quickly back to earth.  
We were homesteaders mostly,  
with a few shopkeepers and suppliers.  
We had no idea what a winter on  
the northern plains would be like.  
That first winter my husband and I  
had only the one-room cabin, with three small children,  
and his sister and sister's husband moved in  
until they could build for themselves.  
The wind cut across the land  
like a skinning knife, stripping away the layers of  
snow and carrying them east, only to have them  
brought back again with the next wind.  
We would have starved by Christmas  
had McBeath not left two deer and a sack of flour  
outside the door.  
Our youngest, Mary Colleen, would have died of  
fever but for McBeath's knowing the  
Indian ways of bringing it down.  
Some of the homesteaders who came later made jokes  
of his careless farming and his look.  
You did just fine for yourself, Mr. McBeath.  
And better for the rest of us.

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What is the saying, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you"? That is the stone of wisdom and the rich soil of good relations.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

**The Private**  
Philander Ellis

*Minneiska*

In the first fight, at Bull Run, I took a ball in my leg.  
The wound was not serious, but bad enough that  
I could not follow the retreat of my comrades  
and I was taken prisoner.  
A battlefield is a frightful place, though in some  
ways better than prison, where a man has no say  
over the smallest and simplest things in his life.  
I was joyful at my release, and although I made  
promises to the rebs that I would return home  
and make no more fight against them,  
I hurried east to rejoin my regiment,  
the First Minnesota Volunteers.  
That was not an act of bravery on my part.  
Like I said, it comes down to simple things,  
and I was just not much for farming and  
saw no future there for myself.  
I was a good soldier, with excellent companions  
in my regiment, and I followed  
what I thought the happier course.  
As luck would have it, I took another ball at Gettysburg,  
this one square to the head and I died instantly.  
I fell among many of my friends. We died for a good  
cause and gave what little we had to give.  
They say we checked the rebs by our charge  
and saved the day.

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Glory to the First.

Given a second chance, perhaps I would return home  
rather than fight again. But I would not be a happy man.



*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Tent Mate**

Samuel Seymour

*Minneiska*

I charged down that hill at Gettysburg  
with no thought other than to check the rebs.  
General Hancock said we were his last hope.  
He knew he was sending us to our deaths  
but he had a battle to win and a country to save.  
Some in the First feared to go. One or two I saw bow out  
of the fight. But the rest felt as I did: we would give  
our lives if God would take them to preserve our cause.  
Most of us were killed or wounded on that field.  
Few were as lucky as me to hold to the last and to see  
the johnnies abandon their assault.  
We buried our comrades on that day, including my  
tent mate Philo Ellis, and we fought again the next.  
And although so very few in number, we joined  
ranks with our brothers in blue  
and chased the rebs clear back to Virginia.  
I said that I thought only of the battle. But in  
a moment of doubt when the field went hazy  
and all seemed frozen in time,  
I thought of my farm back in Minneiska.  
I saw before me the fields of home, not that field of battle.  
That stopped my retreat.  
I fought on to recapture my home.

In moments of life and death,

*Minnesota Anthology*

we may be seized by a force stronger  
than ourselves and held up against the assault.  
Is that the hand of blind Hope, or the hand of Purpose?

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Private's Teacher**

Samantha Hill

*Minneiska*

I taught them all to be gracious.  
We began each day with the recitation:  
"We are different; we are friends.  
We work together to achieve our ends."  
I was throwing pebbles at a  
charging monster.

Civility is so weak.  
Can it be saved at all?

## **The Private's Mother**

Margaret Ellis

### *Minneiska*

When I think of my son Philander,  
I think also of the young man who  
fired the lead ball into my son's head.  
All that young man knew was that he  
shot at a Yankee, at a uniform, as he  
had been told to do by older men,  
by men who govern and stand in high  
places and speak with authority. Men  
who should have known better than  
to put our youth onto those fields to  
kill one another.

When those men stand before their Maker  
and He asks them to give their reasons,  
what answer can they give to  
balance the weight of wasted youth  
and the long legacy of pain?  
They saw themselves as great men.  
We on our farms, in our kitchens,  
we believed they were great men.  
Who paid the higher price  
for their folly?

Is there any greater cause than a  
mother's love for her child?  
Fight for that next time.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Soddy Child**

Mikaela Holm

*Wheaton*

We got out there too late, my father said.  
The dirt was good but we had no water.  
Others got the good sites by water.  
So we had to dig a well.  
They brought out a drilling machine  
from town and went about their business  
while we cut sod bricks for the house.  
Father also had to pay for the lumber  
for the roof, and for windows.  
By the time all was done we were in debt,  
even though we got the land for nothing.  
We had plans for a big frame house  
but ended up living in the soddy for  
five years before my father died, then for five  
more while brother Gjurd worked the fields.  
Once I was old enough to be of help, we did  
fine and at last built that house: two stories,  
six rooms, and a porch.  
I died in that house eighty years later.

Ten years of a leaky roof and a dirt floor  
bought us a lifetime of clean sheets.

## **The Soddy Mama**

Inga Holm

*Wheaton*

I made a good home.  
So good the snakes moved in,  
followed by spiders and ants and  
a hundred other kinds of bugs.  
A soddy kept biting cold and  
blistering heat alike at bay, more so even  
than the frame house later,  
but heaven have mercy there was never  
such a place for the crawling scourge.  
You could uproot a handful of prairie grass  
and count a thousand little hellions  
bent on destruction.  
My broom was a weapon not a tool.  
My cookfire was an execution pit.  
The children got candy in town when  
their count of victims reached five hundred.  
When my husband passed  
I became head of household,  
as much a prize as it was an endowment.

Minnesota was an angry old witch in the beginning.  
But she softened with each new year and at last  
became our loving grandmother.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Soddy Papa**

Ian Holm

*Wheaton*

A blizzard took me when I  
wandered too far after a buffalo  
and lost myself.  
But that great land took care of  
my wife and children, she did.  
Gosh, how could I have done better?  
And my Inga so strong and clever.  
I only half knew her.

Put your family on good ground.  
Same as planting your crop.

## **The Bank Cashier**

Joseph Lee Heywood

*Northfield*

I knew the combination.  
I told the robbers that the safe had a timer,  
but the truth was I knew the numbers.  
I don't really understand myself  
why I couldn't say them. There was  
someone else inside my head who took them  
from me and refused to give them back,  
that's how I remember it.  
That other man inside me reminded  
how things had gone in the war,  
how often I had been accused of  
cowardice and malingering.  
He wasn't going to let anything like that  
happen again, even if we died for it.  
For a moment I thought we would live,  
when the gunmen made for the door and  
their horses and their fellows outside.  
But one turned back. He was the one with  
the coldest eyes and the darkest face.  
My mouth opened but the numbers  
would not come out.  
He shot me in the head.



*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

You can't ever start over fresh, unmarked,  
no matter how many times you try.  
Every wound you get never heals finally.

## **The Bank Robber**

Cole Younger

### *Stillwater*

I bore no hard feelings toward the people of Minnesota.  
They planted seven or eight bullets in my body and  
planted what was left of it in the Stillwater Prison,  
so I guess you could fairly say they didn't  
think much of me.

The one who brought misery to the gang was Jesse.  
He made the whole thing work, being its fire and  
its blood, but he likewise tore it apart.

His grand idea it was to ride up to Northfield  
and take the Yankee money right out of  
their front pockets. Not a bad idea, if he  
had been wise enough to know when to quit.

Time he got out of that bank I was carrying more  
pounds of lead in my body than the bank carried in coin.  
Was Jesse got me shot up, and I trying to cover his back.  
Was Jesse got me caught, too, when he rode off  
and left me with the other wounded.

In the final tally he was the worst  
sonofabitch I ever knew.

Never met a less admirable sort than Jesse James  
in twenty-five years of prison life.

Be careful who you run with. Some would rather  
see you dead than free of them.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Lover**

Tomas Bakker

*Faribault*

Floral was her name.  
That was what she called herself.  
I loved her.  
I lived eighty-six years  
and I traveled from Norway to New York  
then to Minnesota, and I loved only  
one human being in all my days.  
To call her to mind was to envision the  
midnight glow of a distant fire;  
to observe that cheerful promenade  
along Main Street was to wander in close  
to that fire; to hear her speak, to dare near  
enough to hear her speak,  
was to step happily *into* that fire.  
To touch her was to rise in the fire's heat  
into the realm of cooling moonlight and stars.  
I did not expect to keep such a wonder  
to myself, and I did not begrudge others  
who found in her what I found.  
I only begrudged those who misused her,  
and those who called her "prostitute."

*Minnesota Anthology*

A man gives his love to a woman as he  
surrenders his soul, if he is wise, to the Eternal.  
He owns none of it.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Indian Agent** Jefferson Worthy

### *Lower Sioux Agency*

The federal government wanted self-reliant,  
pacific, Christian Indians.  
To accomplish this, they sent people like me  
west to teach the Indian how to live on  
isolated farms and grow crops  
the way white people grew crops.  
But they gave the Indian the poorest land,  
far from the railroads and the markets.  
And the Indian already knew how to grow crops,  
in ways better suited to those lands.  
I saw all this in my first month at the  
Lower Sioux Agency. I don't know why the  
government failed to see it for another forty years.  
If they had given him good land, the Indian  
would have succeeded on his own.

The newborn babe knows by instinct the  
source of its nourishment. Wise men would  
rethink that strategy in favor of a more clever idea.

## **The Christian Reformer**

Herman Berger

*Lower Sioux Agency*

We could not make farmers out of Indians  
because we could not make Christians out of savages.  
The Indian wanted a good rifle and a wool blanket.  
His wife wanted cotton clothes and metal pots.  
Neither wanted the word of God.  
Neither wanted a lifetime of blessings from  
a simple devotion, nor the care of  
Jesus Christ through eternity.  
Notions of eternal damnation bothered them not.  
The spirit did not linger within them as it  
had no rock upon which to perch—only  
momentary desires and gratified lust.  
I gave up after three years in the west,  
and I was never the same man, having  
uncovered the base of the human soul.

Reach ever upward, heavenward,  
never earthward.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Survivor**

Simon Cleary

### *Sandstone*

The Big Fire was not the first fire we had seen.  
The one a few miles east of the railway  
should have been warning enough.  
That one didn't kill anybody, but it could have.  
I suppose we were too drunk with the wine  
of prosperity to look ahead for  
what might be coming our way.  
The summer of '94 didn't bring much rain;  
the heaps of dead cuttings out there,  
where once our beautiful green forests stood,  
were waiting for the spark.  
Five minutes after seeing the smoke  
rising some way off, I lost my house.  
I jumped into a well and suffered the heat and  
choking air right up to the gates of Hell before a cooling  
wind passed over and gave my life back to me.  
All was black when I climbed out of that well.  
Only the burning stumps stood higher than my knees.  
I said to myself, "The Lord has smote us down so hard  
we will never rise again." And I believe we had it coming,  
although I don't know why but for our reckless pride.  
Black ash is what we got for that, inside as well as out.

*Minnesota Anthology*

We tally our loses in our own ways, to differing degrees.  
A lost farm might be a new start. It might be the kiss of  
the Reaper's blade.



*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Gravedigger**

John Collins

### *Stillwater*

I came up on the train from Stillwater to help  
search out dead bodies back in the woods.  
When we got up there, we didn't find any woods.  
We followed blackened creeks and roadways,  
thinking that was where people would head  
to escape the flames.  
We didn't find anyone who escaped.  
They were all dead. Most as black as the ash and dirt.  
I found one in the creek, back burnt to a crisp,  
but fresh underneath where the water  
had kept the fire off.  
Some were burnt sitting upright, one in a prayerful  
position, hands folded in front. I thought it another  
tree stump at first sight.  
We found what looked like five children  
and one adult huddled  
within the smoldering walls of a log cabin.  
How do you bury something like that?  
We had little time and no way other than to  
carve out shallow trenches and scrape the remains  
into them. It was like burying dirt with more dirt.  
As far as we could see, in all directions, nothing but  
smoking black dirt. Later I learned that the whole  
town of Hinckley was the same, and several other towns.  
I was never a believer, but that day I came to believe

*Minnesota Anthology*

in something. Whatever it was, I never wanted to cross its path again.

The Bible got one thing right: we are made of ash and dirt.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Casualty**

Matilda Oleson

*Hinckley*

I heard them when I woke.  
As many as 700 dead.  
More than 300,000 acres destroyed,  
and ten towns, and the rail lines, and hundreds  
of houses and cabins.  
I felt the bandages covering my burns and I  
saw that I lay in a big tent with what must have been  
doctors and nurses all about,  
strange white specters speaking in whispers.  
Muttering big numbers. Millions of trees.  
The burn thirty miles long, twenty miles wide.  
But only one number meant anything to me.  
*Six.*  
Five children. And my husband.  
I remembered staggering down to the river where  
I found a blanket and using the blanket to cover  
myself and a stranger while the fire swept closer.  
I remembered gasping for air but finding it too hot  
to take in and too weak to freshen me.  
Dead bodies floated in the water. I threw the blanket  
away and ran, down the road, toward the tracks,  
where I found a train pulling quickly away, full of  
screaming and crying people.  
That was the last of what I remembered.  
Except six. All of them.

*Minnesota Anthology*

I turned away from the talk of numbers and  
hurried back up the road to a sunny spring day  
in the clearing, my children hollering and playing  
hide-and-go-seek in the woods, and I stayed there  
with them, and I am there with them now.

Stay with those you love.  
Let the business of the world go on without you.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Chief**

Wascouta

*Mille Lacs*

Fleas and whiskey and sickness.  
On the reservation, the whites brought us food,  
but never enough, except that it was enough  
to keep my people prisoners there, as they  
slowly forgot the ways of hunting food for themselves,  
and cared only for drinking the firewater until  
they stayed too long and fell under the sickness.  
In that place of no power, not even the shaman  
could defeat the bad spirits in the fleas and  
whiskey and sickness. The drummers and singers  
no longer gathered under the setting sun.  
Children wandered away and their mothers  
would not see or would not go to look for them.  
Those last few of us who remained strong  
abandoned that place. We made our camp along  
the creek of clean water, to which the friendly  
spirits sent deer and rabbits as many as the fish.  
For two moons we lived strong and free again.  
We grew clean and shining. We drummed and sang.  
Then the fire came and we were  
all dead before the day's end.  
We thought to run, but to where?  
No, we drummed and sang.  
It was a fine day.

*Minnesota Anthology*

You find your place of power and  
you make your camp there.  
Live as you were meant to live  
while you wait for your day to die.

Jeffrey W. Tenney

## **The Miner**

William Swift

*Soudan*

I was blessed with a strong body and a weak mind.  
Good thing. The other way around and I couldn't  
have made my way in that world.  
I worked the timber for twenty years north of Duluth,  
and when that ran out I moved to mining.  
When the world needed wood, I gave them wood.  
When the world needed iron,  
I went deep and got them iron.  
A fellow came around to the tavern now and then  
and he talked to us about a thing called  
the *Communist Manifesto*. I listened politely enough,  
although I didn't understand all of it.  
In the main what he was trying to tell me was that  
I was unhappy. Unhappy because I sold myself  
to the company. Sold away all my chances  
for something better, I think he meant.  
I gave it some thought, but if I was unhappy, I  
I felt plenty happy about it.  
I loved that mine and that work,  
even the little rundown shack I called home.  
Wouldn't have changed a thing.  
I did twenty more years in that mine and died in my bed.

Yes sir, the rich got more than I did, but  
that included troubles too.

## **The Miner's Friend**

Jeremiah Soder

*Soudan*

I worked twenty-two years in that mine  
alongside William Swift.  
I don't recall the man ever missed a shift.  
We were friends, but we had our disagreements.  
I felt the weight of that ore in my body  
growing with every day, its red dust  
compacting in my brain.  
I had a family—wife and three children—and  
living in those dirty, drafty shacks was no good for us.  
The kids were always sick. I was too, but I had to  
get out of that bed every morning and drag myself  
to that mine elevator.  
My wife was dead at thirty-nine.  
My children left home as soon as they  
could make a living somewhere else.  
A lot of things that communist said made sense to me.  
I was ready for a revolution.  
But I couldn't do it by myself.  
Anyone talked like that lost his job the next day.  
I got tired of waiting for better and shot myself.

I failed my family, though I loved them.  
It couldn't have been worse if we had  
done things differently.



*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Miner's Wife**

Amelia Soder

*Soudan*

Born as I was in a hunter's cabin,  
far from townspeople,  
far from any church,  
without schooling, short of food,  
thrashed daily with a pine stick,  
I had no chance for happiness in my life.  
My husband Jeremiah was kind to me.  
He brought food to my table and gave me  
three children to love.  
He did not fail us.

I measured happiness from where  
I started, not by where I ended.

## **The Mine Owner**

Ezra Thompson

*Duluth*

I heard talk about unions and revolutions  
and all kinds of nonsense for years.  
None of the talkers ever read  
the *Communist Manifesto*. I read it.  
Know what it said? It said that the workers  
were going to kill all the owners and take  
all the capital and take over the government  
and run things for themselves.  
I know that sounded good to some of the derelicts  
in the mines, those we should have chased off sooner,  
but the hard workers knew better. They  
wouldn't trust the others to run things for a day.  
They damn sure wouldn't trust the government.  
Once they figured out that the socialists wanted to  
take away private property from everyone and  
even raise their kids for them, well,  
there would have been a revolution all right.

Let each man do what he does best.  
Some know how to set up and run things;  
some have the muscle to push those things along.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Mill Owner**

Cadwallader Washburn

*Minneapolis*

I believed that the scientific study of any operation,  
and the application of sound human reasoning,  
could greatly improve the efficiency of that operation.  
Improvement in the product as well would  
come as no surprise to me.

With the middlings purifier  
and the gradual reduction process,  
my team of scientists and practical thinkers  
changed flour-milling from small-scale provision of  
an inferior product to industrial provision of  
the best product in the world.

Minneapolis became the heart of the state,  
and that heart beat clean white flour out along  
the railways to the nation and beyond.

They said spring wheat could not make for  
a good loaf of bread.

(How I loved that challenge.)

Careful study and experiment proved quite the opposite.

Not everything we tried succeeded—of course not.

Just like with the grain, you keep sifting out the chaff  
until you have the perfect answer in your hand.

Use your brain. And if that isn't enough,  
hire the brains of others to help you.

## **The Dispossessed**

Sten Stanlund

*Mankato*

I started out in a grist mill  
on the Cannon River in 1836.  
By 1848 I owned that mill.  
All we had to work with was spring wheat,  
so we just did our best and people bought it,  
but there was no denying it made a poor loaf,  
even with the middlings taken out.  
We made money, for what we milled was  
all the people could get.  
When the Washburn Company came out with  
their improved flour, they might as well  
have dried up the river. That was good  
flour they made. I hand that to them.  
And there was nothing for me to do but  
pack my tent and move on to something else,  
which proved to be trading with the Dakota,  
and it was a poor living after all.  
When you are whipped in a fight, you best  
admit it and not carry on how unfair it was.  
All fights are unfair. I didn't have  
the money Washburn had, so I was shorted on  
that end, but fair isn't what life is about.  
Life is about: What are you going to throw at  
me today? And trying to brace up to meet it.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

You do your best to be fair to the next if you think that's the better way, but don't expect to get it back.

## **The Fire Watcher**

Iris MacGraith

*Walnut Grove*

My eyes began to fix on the cookfire,  
sometimes for hours in the evening  
when my chores went undone.  
I forgot to bathe at my usual time,  
forgot to change and wash my clothes.  
That fall I found myself out on the prairie  
a mile from the house, standing there,  
singing a lullaby to the heads of big bluestem.  
In the winter the family watched me closely,  
but I only wandered nearer the fire and  
seldom left it, comforted as I was  
by the heat and the soft wool blanket laid across my lap.  
The cold finally left us and I enjoyed  
the sprouting of the wildflowers  
and the soft, fragrant dampness of the soil.  
I saw the rattlesnake that summer,  
but no longer knew it for what it was.  
My death was protracted and painful  
while I knew nothing of the likely  
consequence of the struggle.  
Clarity and purpose returned at once  
upon my arrival here.

There are many ways to say goodbye to the world.  
It is a concern of little moment.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Skeptic**

Krister Ericksson

*Kensington*

When my neighbor, Ohman, found the Runestone  
on his property, life for all of us in Kensington  
got complicated.

We had to learn of such things as:

“the weathering rate of stone,”

“linguistic inconsistencies,”

“hoax perpetration techniques,” and so on.

We had to learn how to dress and behave for  
city people, who came to visit and to stay in our  
homes as they performed their “analyses” and  
composed their “field reports.”

All such debate over whether the blond European  
race, five hundred years before, had wandered  
that far into the woods seemed absurd to me.

More likely, some ancient Indian  
paddled his canoe over to Sweden to have words  
with the King there, decided to stay a while  
because he liked the food, picked up  
a little of the language, then paddled back  
and chiseled the stone—employing the bad grammar that  
later confused the linguists—to boast his accomplishment.  
No doubt his Indian friends ignored it thoroughly.

So much fascination with the foolish;  
so much ignorance of the profound.

## **The Bachelor**

Kurt Lundahl

### *Sleepy Eye*

We had an agreement that we called "The Plan."  
It was more than a plan, though; we ran our  
lives by it for nearly thirty years.  
My brother and I were twins, living as bachelors  
on the family farm about two miles south of Sleepy Eye.  
My part was to handle the chickens and  
the milk cows and to take their produce into  
town each day for sale.  
My brother Karl kept the garden and did some  
hunting and trapping in the cold months.  
I brought home the cash; he, the food.  
We both kept our health to the end, despite  
the townfolk's worries that our loneliness  
would kill us at a young age.  
I suspect Karl was lonesome, although he  
never complained. As for myself, well,  
truth be told, on Fridays I never made it  
into town, but stopped over to Widow Pepper's  
place back off the road and under the willow stand.  
I worked out all my loneliness there for six to seven hours.  
I will tell you that five hours would not have been enough.  
Best apple pie I ever ate, too.

Living was a stretch of hard work, but the Lord  
gave us enough hours for it and a bite of honey.



*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Bachelor's Brother**

Karl Lundahl

### *Sleepy Eye*

If I have one regret about my life,  
it's that I didn't take better care of my brother Kurt.  
Poor soul. Every day hauling the produce into town  
to raise money we probably didn't need.  
Then to bed early, just to do it all again next day.  
He should have had himself a woman, like I did.  
A wife might not have worked out so well for us—  
we needed each other to keep up the farm—but  
a now-and-then woman, like I had, would have  
brought him some pastime, and more than likely  
a taste of much better cooking.  
Not even when we were lying side by side on  
our deathbeds did I tell him how I used to slip away  
on Tuesdays, when he was off into town.  
Those times he found me gone he would naturally  
think I was out in the woods checking traps or  
some such thing.  
One time he did spy the dribbling of apple pie  
on my shirt front.  
Then the time all those willow leaves stuck to  
the mud on my boots, and the both of us knowing  
only one stand of willows in the county.  
But Kurt wasn't the asking sort and I never had  
to lie to him, except by my silence.  
He would have felt left out, I know.

*Minnesota Anthology*

We always said, "Living is a hard piece of work."  
But Kurt and I turned bare ground into a temple, we did.

*Jeffrey W. Tenney*

## **The Town Drunkard**

Sigfrid Grundstrom

*Faribault*

The prairie fire took away my homestead.  
I moved to town to clerk for the hotel, then  
passed quickly to drink and lost my steady work.  
I helped around the stables  
when I was up to it,  
which bought me more drink,  
which rendered me less up to it.  
All that while I waited for my Swedish bride  
who would find me as empty of hope  
and as undesirable as a pitcher of dust  
on a hot day.  
I failed to meet her train  
and disappeared while she looked for me.  
Over those few days the town fell  
in love with her beauty and charm, and  
when at last I presented myself, the  
town saw me anew, gave me work  
as a deputy sheriff, and indeed I became  
a new man.  
I married an angel. I was elected sheriff  
the following year, mayor five years later.  
O, happy day!

*Minnesota Anthology*

There are some here who burned with  
their homesteads. They are not  
comfortable in my presence.

The voices of Minnesota's past return to speak to you. Listen to the Settler on the southwestern prairie, to the Casualty of the Great Hinckley Fire, to the Hibbing Hobo of the Great Depression, to the POW of WWII. The Miner of Mesabi iron ore will tell you what his life was like, as will the Suffragette, the Actress, and the Birdwatcher. These stories are the story of Minnesota, and your story as well.

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