

WHO TOUCHES THIS: SELECTED POEMS 1951-1979, by
Robert Hazel
The Countryman Press, Taftsville, Vermont. 131 pages,
\$6.95 (paper)

Robert Hazel's first two books of poetry, *Poems 1951-1961*, and *American Elegies*, never received the attention they deserved. Both books are now long out of print, so it is heartening to see this new volume, which brings together the best of those books with several new poems.

The title of this book is taken from *Leaves of Grass*, "...this is no book/ Who touches this touches a man." The title is appropriate for two reasons. First, Hazel's poetry follows, and extends, the purely American tradition in poetry of Whitman and Hart Crane; second, a reader comes away from this collection with not just a sense of having read a remarkable book of poems, but of having touched, and been touched by, a passionate human being.

Hazel praises Life, and himself, in long-lined, rhythmic chants:

My life is a cathedral
My life bends in chronic adoration
My life is stained green by copper flashing
My life is supported by flying limestones
My life crosses itself, and stares...(Sunday)

I curse nothing, not even the wasps that
sting me
I look, I listen, I love
I rattle with unstrung nerves freely with
dying weeds
My arbor is swollen with grapes that will
slowly ripen
Each evening I walk out to see their gradual
blue

I sit on my mountain under a full sky
I am empty of hate, free of illusions...
(Carolina)

The American tradition is rooted in the land. *Who Touches This* is concerned, vitally, with geography. A glance at the Contents page reveals the importance of place to Hazel's work: NYC, Indiana, Washington, South, Death in Oregon, Under a Florida Palm, Carolina, Shenandoah, Wind from New England. In virtually every poem a place, or a sense of place, is identified. Implicit in that sense of place is a sense of loss, as in these lines from the book's title poem:

I meet my boyhood on a gravel road
and see how beautiful I was then
honey Robert me...

and from the long, and most thematically representative poem, Sunday, these lines:

Knowledge is no book against loss
Touch is no hand against loss
Vision is no eye against loss
Love is no sacrament against...

Loss is my skill
Let every man be perfect at something...

The occasion of loss, most often, is death. It lies beneath every landscape. Again from the poem Carolina:

Real deaths stare back at me, not just the
imaginary
deaths of gods that breed religion and
philosophy
I hear the loud teeth of a dog, ripping
first the brown hair then the thin blue hide
of a groundhog,
now the chill gnaw of gristle, loud in the
human hall...