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James Hearst, by Paul Engle

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James Hearst

By PAUL ENGLE

I walk around with a map of Black Hawk County, Iowa, in my hands. That old chief, Black Hawk, full of dignity and daring, loving his land more than his life, after his capture went to Washington, D.C., and said to the President of the United States: "You are a man. I am a man."

He never lived in the County of his name. But Jim Hearst is there, a tough and gentle man, tongue like a tomahawk splitting your skull with his wit, then easing it with a blast of bourbon. On a clear day you can see him plow the long fields and the lyrical English language along the banks of the unblue Cedar River.

This farmer knows the lines of a Black Angus steer, the lines of a Hampshire hog, the lines of his own nourishing poem. With his broken back, the tensile strength of his will, he backs the brutal beauty of men and women walking together in the flaming August noon, in the frozen December day, in the dark light of eternity.

He hates self-pity as he hates hate. He wipes sweat from his face with a quick hand. He caresses the yielding snow with a shaking hand. He knows that men, women, children are horrible and holy. All his years he lived a double life: in the world of the living poem, in the world of the living pain. He savors jokes with joy, tasting them on his tongue as if they were hickory-smoked over a slow fire.

Heart of a bull, hand of a hawk, ear of a dog, eye of a cat, Jim Hearst, you old Indian, you old bastard, burned in the bold air above you in Black Hawk County are the proudest words we can speak: Here is a man. Let the earth be lucky.

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