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Frank Bergon, *The Toughest Kid We Knew: The Old New West, A Personal History*. U of Nevada P, 2020. 208 pp. Hardcover, \$24.95.

I grew up in Lost Angeles and went to college in Berkeley back in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Dozens of times I drove back and forth on old US 99 or Interstate 5, a couple of hundred miles each way through California's Central Valley. More precisely, I drove through the southern half, the San Joaquin Valley; the northern half is called the Sacramento Valley. Together the two are almost five hundred miles long and fifty miles across, Bakersfield in the south, Lake Shasta to the north, the Sierra Nevada Mountains to the east, and Coast Ranges to the west. The land always seemed dull, flat, and empty to me, cattle here and there, crops (I didn't know what they were, didn't think to find out), farms, and dusty little towns with names like Chowchilla, Buttonwillow, Firebaugh, Coalinga, and Los Banos (literally "the baths" but we called it "the toilets"). America's breadbasket, drive through territory, California's equivalent of "flyover country," something to get past on the way to more cosmopolitan places.

I wish I had Frank Bergon to set me straight back then. Bergon taught at the University of Washington and, until recently, Vassar. He is the author

of four novels set in the region, as well as poetry translations and essay collections. His most recent, *The Toughest Kid We Knew: The Old New West, A Personal History*, is a bit of a hybrid: short essays, criticism, memoir, these genres sometimes blending into each other. It is a fine, vivid book.

The Central Valley has produced its share of writers—Maxine Hong Kingston, Leonard Gardner, Joan Didion, and most famously John Steinbeck, who set much of *The Grapes of Wrath* in the Valley. Place matters to them all, but none quite so much as Bergon, who might legitimately be called the poet laureate of the Central Valley. His powerful evocations reveal how distinctive and interesting it truly was during the middle decades of the twentieth century. “My father and aunt went to a valley school whose pupils represented a mixed heritage of Japanese, Italian, German, Mexican, Chinese, Basque, Béarnais, African, Assyrian, Swedish, Portuguese, Russian, and Armenian. . . .” Bergon’s grandfather, Prosper, though born in America, lived and worked primarily in communities made up of immigrants from the Pyrenees, who continued speaking their local dialects. Visiting his ancestral village as an old man, he felt fully at home, though he’d never been to Europe before. The Valley’s polyglot mix had not vanished entirely over the coming generations but had melded into a shared rural and small-town culture.

While *The Toughest Kid We Knew* is not merely a work of literary criticism, two writers in particular clarify Bergon’s vision of the Valley. On the one hand, in “Reading Joan Didion” Bergon points out that the celebrated California writer, a daughter of white settlers going back to the nineteenth century, barely took note of families like the Bergons, let alone the children of the Dust Bowl—“Okies” and “Arkies”—and their descendants. Didion had little interest in such people, leaving blank “the details of social history and the realities of American social class” (164). A generation earlier John Steinbeck was far more attuned to rural working-class folk, though he depicted them as admirable yet overwhelmed by social forces they neither understood nor controlled. They were, in a word, proletarians. Steinbeck’s writerly tradition included journalist Carey McWilliams, whose famous phrase, “factories in the fields” —corporate agribusiness—influenced subsequent authors, such as the historian Patricia Limerick. For all their strengths, they often missed the richness and texture of middling lives.

What comes through in Bergon's Central Valley is tremendous diversity of background, experience, and ideas. Sometimes there is fatalism, as with Bergon's elementary school friend Richard Palacioz. Palacioz spent the first half of his adult life in the military, the second half working construction, but now, as old friends meet fifty years later, Palacioz is hobbled by a heart attack and a stroke, leaving him blind and dependent on a walker. "I never blamed anybody for it," Palacioz says of his condition, which sends Bergon thinking about the codes of manhood and toughness they both grew up with, about the taboos against complaining. "You can't blame yourself for Agent Orange, can you?" Bergon asked his friend who'd been exposed to the Vietnam-era herbicide that brought down many American veterans of that war. Maybe the heart attack, Palacioz replies, but the stroke came from smoking and drinking too much (153).

Self-reliance and rugged individualism show up repeatedly, sometimes in admirable ways, sometimes less so. Young Rose Bini, the daughter of Italian immigrants, born on the Fourth of July, opened a tavern outside Madera. She and her husband Natale Marchetti made a modest success of it through hard work and Rose's cooking talent. As a young man Bergon listened to a now middle-aged Rose hold forth from behind the bar on Western values—dignity, character, honesty. Always keep your word. Help others out, but not too much or they'll do nothing for themselves. When one customer suggested that a man never should bit a woman, Rose replied, "sometimes they need to be slapped around" (139). Franklin Roosevelt, she said, begot Social Security, welfare, and laziness. Immigrants like her parents as well as Armenians, Croatians, French, Portuguese, Swedes, Russians, Basques, and their children were proper American dreamers, but Mexicans she excluded from this charmed circle. When the Catholic Church went all-in for the United Farm Workers in the 1960s and 1970s, Rose decamped for a born-again sect. Life was hard and people got what they earned, a theme echoed by her friend, the Governor of California, Ronald Reagan. Despite her unsentimental, hard-nosed practicality, after Rose's husband died, she fell hard for a slick insurance salesman who came into the bar one day. A few years later he died in her home of a gunshot, self-inflicted according to the coroner. Half the town wasn't so sure.

Bergon's goal is to see Valley people whole, to detail daily experience, and he does it through memory, using his own upbringing to capture the rhythms of community life. Above all there is *Indarra*, a word that comes to Bergon through his Basque grandmother. It means persistence, endurance, strength, toughness. *Indarra* describes not only the Basque people of the Valley but the farmers and ranchers in general, who wrested decent lives from the dry fertile soil. Work is vivid to Bergon, hard physical labor that leaves your muscles sore, sometimes well-rewarded, sometimes less so, family labor with children beginning their chores by age five.

Real virtues here, and yet: "When I was ten, I stood behind my mother inside the house and heard her telling Grandpa through the screen door that his eighty-four-year-old mother had just died in L.A. He stood on the porch in bright sunlight on the other side of the screen, nodded, turned, and walked away, leaving me to think, for better or worse, this is how a man responds to grief" (30).

Grief, and anger too. The last person we meet in *The Toughest Kid We Knew*, the subject of an eponymous chapter, is Billy Carter. Sheer doggedness, the historian James Gregory notes in his book *American Exodus*, was central to Okie culture; "there could be no dignity, manhood, or self-respect without it" (171). This was true of both working and fighting. Billy was the unquestioned local champion, a gifted street scrapper who bested boys and men much bigger and older than himself. He was quick and skilled and smart, but more, he had rage: "The well of anger that nourished his outbursts was narrow and deep and didn't spill over into other parts of his life, but to maintain his equilibrium he apparently had to vent his fury by taking the opportunity every now and then to bash someone" (179). The rage came from his family, alcoholic parents, and overbearing brother. But it wasn't just personal, it was social too. Anger flowed through Okie children, "rage rising from the internalized social stigma shared with their Dust Bowl parents of being told: you're not good enough, you're still second pickings. . . . Denigrated by those with money and status, poor Okie kids had their pride and fists . . ." (186). Billy was charming, charismatic, successful in business after high school, and deeply self-destructive. Of course, nothing lasts forever. Not long into his twenties, one of his lovers' husbands

murdered him, and that incident formed the basis of Bergon's excellent novel, *Jesse's Ghost*.

Perhaps I've focused too much on some of the harsher aspects of Valley life. Bergon is a fine writer, and he shows us far more than just pain and rage. Here too are supportive extended families whose warmth radiates from the page, kids bursting into adulthood, joyous community celebrations, ethnic food you can almost taste, farm work that leaves your muscles sore just to read about it. There is something nurturing about the Valley, rich but something sad too. Bergon didn't stay. Of course, nothing stays forever. Even the snow-topped Sierras, just thirty miles east are mostly invisible in the twenty-first century's haze and smoke.

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