Sonnets to the Dust Bowl

In the Bible, when Job’s friends handed out their opinions of his suffering, they had his health in mind; but none of them, nor their arguments, could satisfy the emptiness in his soul. He’d lost his family, his land, his enterprise, even his health in a tsunami of bad times. Job likely numbered his days as "the worst hard times," the title of Timothy Egan's masterful portrayal of an American time and a place we've commonly become to describe as "the Dust Bowl."

Imagine thick black winds so strong they dent fenders, dunes so high they swallow farm machinery, static electricity so severe people dare not to touch each other, storms so black that men, women, and children get lost between house and barn.

You can go back to the Dust Bowl imaginatively by a shelf of vivid portrayals right there beside Egan's *The Worst Hard Times*: a masterful film by Ken Burns, a museum of photographs by Dorthea Lange and Walker Evans. There's John Steinbeck and there's Sonora Babb's overlooked classic, *Their Names are Unknown*, and Siouxland's own Caroline Henderson’s *Letters from the Dust Bowl*.

But no one I know has done what Benjamin Myers has done with the Dust Bowl in a series of sonnets (of all things) that open up the lives of six characters he chooses as a chorus out on the high plains, all of them living through "the worst hard times."

Strangely, suffering can be beautiful in the hands of someone who sees more than meets the eye, and Myers does. *Black Sunday* is poetry, but when you close the book, you need to remind yourself that the world you were just in was verse--sonnets, in fact. For what Myers has done with these portrayals is bring us, heart and suffering soul, into our own humanness. See if you agree-
"Will Lists His Assets on Another Loan Application"

800 acres of itch, grit, and chirr
crawling with hoppers, burning like a match.
All mine. The foot deep drifts of dirt that were
my neighbor's field, mine too now, since I catch
with my strip lists the dirt he don't do much
to keep. The tractor with the rear wheels stuck
halfway in sand I owe your bank a bunch
on still and won't pay off unless my luck
turns. But it won't. We shot the little herd.
The truck is dead. Your bank has got the car.
The combine's broke. I guess I've got my word,
and next to that my other assets are
dirt sore eyes, overalls with one knee hole,
a body dressed in rags, a ragged soul.

It's a masterful portrayal of Dust Bowl despair done by way of the kind of
assessments we all do, formally and informally. Will Burns' list of assets is
barely fourteen lines long, scribbled out in despair as real what you get when
you sweep the house out with a shovel.

Is there hope here? I think yes, not because the clouds of Black Sunday hold
some blessed silver lining, but because Will Burns ends his paltry list of
assets not with something outside but something eternally within, his soul.
Putting "his ragged soul" there at the end gives it the most attention in a final
line not so much a confession as testimony. What comes before it is
commodity; the last line reveals his eternal self, his destiny.

And it's there, he says. It may be as ragged as his overalls, but his soul has
not blown away.
Will Burns' losses don't tally the way Job's did. After all, Will still has a family. All of which is to say that Benjamin Myers' *Black Sunday* isn't the book of Job. But in this moving collection of poems about a time and place that's not all that far away is full of intimate portrayals of rural people who are most definitely kin.