

THE FIELD *Joanna Gunderson*
Red Dust (\$10.95)



A composite of broken pieces, this "novel" reads like the narrative history of a small town dissolving in a pool of silence. Or maybe it is an unfinished memoir, made up of voices and visions, but adhering to no central consciousness. Uncertainty—who is the narrator?, where are we?, who are Dick and Lotte?—is the most vivid character in the book. Such uncertainty can have a powerful voice, however, and when it's working best it lingers in the white space as much as it does in the words themselves. While at first glance *The Field* looks like a book of poetry, with so many of its lines sliding only halfway across the page and so much white space around them, it is probably best described as prose fragments playing against an empty surround.

Battling against their own banality, the images assembled here attain a sort of grace through their brevity and repetition. Some clusters read like remembered conversation: "the Putnams have a way of / is it banking or advertising / Philadelphia or Boston / marrying well / on the roof of the bathhouse with the bus driver." Others more like confession, as bad memories recur along with the names of mountain peaks and family histories. At times a coherent narrative voice comes through—that of a woman, about 90 years old, married at 16, a "Sunday painter." But the possibility that this too is just one of the many recorded voices always topples any strict interpretation.

Gunderson, also a poet and playwright, has formed a quiet meditation out of the chaos of fragmented remembrance. The language is spare, rarely conspicuous or overtly poetic, and the lack of tension in the book's strategy make the text seem to float, as if half-erased. But the book's openness, its ability to remain unspecified, also gives the reader the freedom to form her own characters and story out of the suggested history and to enliven this text with her own meditations on "the undersides of leaves, bushes, always silver"; on "my erstwhile husband / oh, stewing!"; or on what used to be and what blew away. ♦ (Carolyn Kuebler)