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In honor of
Margo Lagattuta

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PREFACE

"There is no sort of experience that works so constantly and subtly upon man as his regional environment," writes Mary Austin in "Regionalism in American Fiction" (97). This double issue of *Midwestern Miscellany*, which focuses on contemporary Midwestern female poets of place, bears witness to the truth of Austin's words. For some of the poets discussed in these essays, place is a vital source of spiritual sustenance, a "thereness" that centers and grounds them. A case in point is Molly McGlennen's lead essay, which explores the relationships among identity, migration, landscape and presence in Kimberly Blaeser's poetry. Similarly, Janet Ruth Heller looks at the connections between animal and human in the poetry of Judith Minty, while Loren Logsdon emphasizes the way that place becomes a resource for Nancy Genevieve to draw upon in her struggle against the darkness: "the destructive power of time, the cycle of war, and the personal dragons and demons that seek to exert tyranny over us." Nancy Bunge finds Midwesternness in many of Diane Wakoski's poems to reside in the ways that they cherish the commonplace, the quotidian, the everyday rhythms and diction of Midwestern speech, and Mary Obuchowski discusses how Linda Hasselstrom's environmentalist ethic permeates her poetry and prose through images of circle, prairie grass, and weaving. Other scholars emphasize the ambiguities of the Midwestern locale that inspired their author's poems. Daniel Nester provides a reading of Alice Fulton's "Unwanting" that demonstrates how archetypes of Middle America function as images of an artifice that lies at the thematic core of the poem, and Mary K. Stillwell explores the many-faceted complex of concepts that functions as place in the poems of Kathleene West, arguing that West's ambivalence toward the Nebraska farmland where she was born and raised enriches her poetry and demonstrates that place, able to bind as well as provide, has both emotional and physical dimensions.

WORK CITED

Austin, Mary. "Regionalism in American Fiction." *The English Journal* 22.2 College Edition (February 1932): 97-107.

CONTENTS

Preface		4
Seasonal Reverberations: Kimberly Blaeser's Poetry of Place	Molly McGlennen	7
Poems for the Turn of the Century: Judith Minty's <i>Walking with The Bear</i>	Janet Ruth Heller	21
Fighting the Darkness: The Poetry of Nancy Genevieve	Loren Logsdon	31
Diane Wakoski's Michigan	Nancy Bunge	47
Land and Spirit: The Prose and Poetry of Linda Hasselstrom	Mary DeJong Obuchowski	55
Boundlessness Limited by Skin: Americana and Artifice in Alice Fulton's "Unwanting"	Daniel Nester	63
The Ecologies of Place in the Poetry of Kathleene West	Mary K. Stillwell	79

SEASONAL REVERBERATIONS:
KIMBERLY BLAESER'S POETRY OF PLACE

MOLLY MCGLENNEN

In a speech delivered at a conference at the University of Toronto in 1996, Ojibwe poet Kimberly Blaeser said that "Native [American] stories have goals beyond entertainment just as their predecessors in the oral literatures did. They work to make us into communities, form our identity, ensure our survival. Native [American] authors...write revolution."¹ It is no wonder that many of her poems resonate this creative spirit, where the speaker's voice is unified with her community's, where poetry has a meaning beyond the aesthetic. Blaeser's writing (like much Native American poetry) affirms that "no voice arises from one person."² Thus, a fundamental goal of Blaeser's work is to not only generate ways of survival, but to sing the consciousness of the people from their indubitable place on this earth.

Community is inseparable from identity for Native American people; Blaeser's poetry exemplifies creative expression's capability to reveal this connection. Blaeser grew up on the White Earth Reservation in northern Minnesota, and the memories and landscape of her upbringing continually serve as inspiration for her writing. Blaeser's most recent collection of poetry, *Absentee Indians: & Other Poems* (2002), creates a distinct poetic voice that she calls "we-vision," and "a celebration of influence." The speaker considers what it is to call upon and manifest this "celebration of influence" when she no longer physically resides in that influential center. In her preface, she writes,

Another absentee Indian dreams of home. Places and seasons drift timeless, faces fluid and ageless. Tastes these migrations like ripe plums filled with soft pulp, sun warm, sweet. Like round vowels of midnight stories...Another absentee Indian brings home a child.

Stands this ground, the place of history. Claiming home, asks a blessing. Picks up the snatches of language. Repeats them. Practices survival like she is learning the recipes for baking powder biscuits, venison sausage, or dill pickles. Measures by memory the distances to each rice bed, sugar camp, burial ground. The distance to the seventh generation. Names the marker, like she was writing a pathway (xi).

In this segment, one sees the ways Blaeser's words will make their way home, so to speak. She refers to dreams, memory, and language as means to re-collect her roots, but here she also situates her immersion into creative expression firmly in the landscape of home. She reclaims a presence, positioning herself once again within the connections that carve the path; however, she says this takes practice.

The first poem of the collection, the title piece "Absentee Indians," situates the speaker in a "then and now" locale, in a sequence of perspectives. The first stanza of the poem depicts how the speaker, an "insider," originally thought of those relatives who would come back to the reservation after long periods of absence. The speaker remarks on how foreign they seemed, but also how detached and superficial their visits appeared to her at the time. She likens it to coming back for a fix, a fix of "the real":

Used to think they were white
They'd come
visiting Grandma's.
Big cars,
neat little
quiet
scrubbed-looking kids
in matching tennies.
Come from somewhere else for sure,
Sundays
or maybe just seeming like it,
and acting like a holiday too.
Absentee Indians.
Back for a memory
a fix if they could find it
get them through
till next pow-wow
sugarbush

funeral
next lonely.
Old Man Blues we call it,
emptiness bubbling up like a blister
ready to pop.
Ain't no cure for it
but home (3).

The skinny poetic form indicates near emptiness or absence of completion in each line, and the use of punctuation, periods and commas, at the end of these short lines adds to the snapshot-like, staccato beat that punches down the page. It very much mirrors the way memory works: bits and pieces, noncomplete, occupied with both emotional and physical details. Moreover, the first line, which sets the poem in the motion of retrospection, is without a subject; an "I" or a "We" is inferred, but not stated. This suggests a few things. First, it implies a nonspecific voice, meaning it could be the speaker alone or it could be what all, most, or some of the community think and feel. Second, it implies that this perspective, this "I's" way of thinking, is no longer existent because it is literally not stated. Each of these implications, however, can be read as intentional as each is sustained throughout the poem. Finally, the speaker in this first stanza insinuates the slippery nature of identity when she says, "Absentee Indians. / Back for a memory / a fix if they could find it / get them through" (3), sarcastically suggesting the construction of "Indianess" itself is as if one simply needs to engage occasionally in things Indian to be Indian, teasing the sense that identity is a lived cultural location. The last lines announce that the cure to this "craving"—for these absentees—isn't anywhere else but in the community itself, "home." The idea of "Indianess" and identity in general is turned on its head by the end of the first stanza. Memories create an insider-outsider division as people move back and forth across these lines.

It is the motion of migration. It has always been this way for Native people. Traditionally, Ojibwe bands move seasonally between different camps (sugarbush, ricing etc.), and now, temporarily since urbanization, Ojibwe (like most Native people) often travel between the reservation and the city and back again. This is nothing new. Blaeser explains that migration has and continues to occur on many levels:

Historically, we have both the subsistence activities of Native peoples that often followed a seasonal pattern of movement as well as the physical transition of communities or nations of people from one part of North America to another Add to these patterns another kind of back and forth, the departure and return of contemporary Indian people from reservation areas....To these literal kinds of migrations, we add the symbolic, the imaginative, the spiritual, and the literary. We might even add "identity migrations" (Personal Correspondence).

Blaeser's poem mirrors this multi-sensed movement. The second stanza of "Absentee Indians" switches perspectives from insider into outsider—the speaker as the one returning home, the one migrating as those before her:

Now it's me returning
going visiting
making the rez rounds
like all the other absentee Indians.
A week to see my whole family.
Twenty-five minutes apiece each.
Picnic at Coffee Pot landing
fishing at Uddies
berry picking, sausage making,
one of every good thing squeezed in.
Hardly time enough
this trip
but making plans
next trip.
Litanies of family names,
river talk, hollows,
reciting hunting camps,
pine-pitch memories
what used to be.
Hoarding remainders
things never meant to be counted
like prayer breaths.
Searching some magic antidote
boiling pine boughs
some sequence of recall
twelve steps
to ward off homesickness (3-4).

Now, as the speaker is the absentee, the details of "home" are more specific, more savored. As if she must get *her* fix now, the speaker ticks off a to-do list, feeding herself the only cure "to ward off homesickness." The metaphor of addiction continues to this point; she mentions "hoarding," "magic antidote," and "twelve steps," all of which imply a sort of self-help mentality; however, as the speaker mentions future trips, "litanies" and "prayer breaths," the reader begins to see the gravity of these migrations—the movement *is* what makes her who she is. Identity, for Native people, for this speaker, is complicated not by the "insiders," but by the processes of colonization which initiated reservation systems, urbanization, and blood quantum politics. The final stanza of the poem unravels this entanglement by the speaker's ability to stand in both perspectives and see clearly the paths of migration that, in a lot of ways, sustain her community.

Blaeser ends the poem by collapsing the insider-outsider perspective that has framed the poem to this point:

"Twice a year I come
to see the folks," he said.
A city Indian
some relative from California.
"Summers I bring the kids.
Want them to learn about their heritage."
We used to laugh
when he said heritage
like every book on Indians
instead of people or tribe or life.
Ain't hardly laughing now (4).

The speaker, who once laughed along with others at the visiting relatives, now finds connection with the "city Indian" because she sees these very sentiments in her own self. The last stanza breathes life—into what earlier in the poem is articulated as absence—by finding that there is still an association and a mutuality for this relative and for herself in their heritage. Implied in the idea of "absentee Indian," of course, is a person not present in his or her "district" or "residence," not exercising his or her right to engage in the community; however, as in the term "absentee ballot," the idea of "absentee Indian" also implies the ability to participate from afar because one has connections to the "residence." The absence becomes a presence in this case.

Blaeser utilizes this paradox to make a statement about contemporary Native identity. It is certainly a matter of perspective; but more importantly, it is a matter of engagement with one's community, even if that means participating in the waves of migration from city to home, home to city—as many Native people do. Blaeser also implies with her last line that people all do what they can in order to survive, in order to retain and sustain pieces of themselves and connections to their community. It is through this engagement, this migration, that the poem makes it known how Native people participate in community and the land despite distance and disconnects.

Fittingly so, Blaeser's collection, *Absentee Indians*, contains a section entitled "Studies in Migrations" in which Blaeser expresses just *how* the idea of absence and presence, as detailed above, moves within and beyond the poetry. The signature poem of the section, a prose-poem, "Studies in Migration," is situated between pieces entitled "Of Landscape and Narrative" and "Tracks and Traces," each overtly drawing connections to writing, migration, and landscape. "Studies in Migration," five stanzas long, begins its first stanza en route back to the familiar: "Pulled into Joe Olson's landing. Patterns of the past leaping before / us like the frogs caught here for fishing" (30). This is a place known and worn, "welling up" and "seeping into" the speaker's consciousness. The second stanza depicts the annual return of many things: "Each year someone comes home. Pat moved in next to her dad . . . Pelicans have been filtering in for seven summers" (30). The third and middle stanza opens up the patterns and recognizes what maintains them:

Each space held for years in stories. Waiting. Now reclaimed. *Your name was never empty.* We could have told them. *We kept it full of memories.* Our land the color of age (30).

What gives the landscape presence is not its physicality, but the stories and memories it contains and the brilliance in its longevity. The community that the speaker depicts in the prior stanzas is able to "reclaim" these "spaces." In the fourth and fifth final stanzas, the speaker makes a distinction between how one records these migrations, these paths:

Clouded titles fill courthouse files. But spring sap spills out just the same. Boiled in family kettles. Cast iron blackened over decades of fires. Some walk these woods seeking surveyors' marks. Some fingers trace old spout scars.

And flight the birds could tell us is a pattern. Going. And coming back (30).

Migration in the landscape that the speaker depicts is intrinsic. No surveyor marks or paper documents can record this space as much as the history held in cast iron kettles, birds' flight patterns indicating the crease of seasons, or the memorized and mapless landscape of the speaker's community. Blaeser asserts that these comings and goings are lived patterns, and they are also what people reclaim in the memory and stories of the past. In this way, these migrations traverse both an interior and exterior landscape, and for the speaker and her community, detailed memories and people and places are what allow for reclamation and inclusion. Blaeser asserts, "The reverberations of the years of seasonal or ritual repetition stay with us" (Personal Correspondence).

In her essay "Interior and Exterior Landscapes: The Pueblo Migration Stories," Leslie Marmon Silko says that "the narratives [of the Laguna Pueblo migration stories], linked with prominent features of the landscape . . . delineate the complexities of the relationship that human beings must maintain with the surrounding natural world if they hope to survive this place" (15). Knowing one's surroundings is important to Native communities in that it creates the links among and between its members and the land. But it is not only as simple as this. The *regionality*, all that makes up the interior and exterior landscapes of the poet, is innate to her creative expression. In Jeannette Armstrong's essay, "Land Speaking," she says that language and land inform her poetry, that the landscape arises in her writing, and language shapes that connection. But what does this mean in terms of the writing itself? Blaeser's poetry offers answers. Akin to how Simon Ortiz articulates "song" as both expression and perception (both a matter of what one experiences and the way one experiences) in his essay "Song, Poetry, and Language: Expression and Perception," *regionality*—a term I have invented to describe the complex connection between landscape and experience, language, and creative expression—is exhibited in a unique way in Blaeser's work. In fact, in her poem "Of Landscape and Narrative" in *Absentee Indians*, the epigraph reads: "A story draws on relationships in the exterior landscape and projects them onto the interior landscape" (27). This quotation from Barry Lopez—a writer who has spent most of his career studying the relationships between human culture and

nature—signifies an important point in Blaeser's exploration of identity, migration, absence and presence. Her poetry enacts the processes of calling upon the landscape, exterior and interior, in order to understand her human condition. Moreover, Blaeser's sense of *regionality*, because it is based often on memory, creates for her a presence in the very community she is physically away from.

For a White Earth Ojibwe woman, Blaeser's *regionality* most certainly includes the distinctly vivid four seasons of northern Minnesota. It also includes the multitude of lakes, shorelines, and woods as well as her community's activity within this landscape. This, in turn, means swimming, fishing, berry picking, and snowshoeing among a plentitude of other things. To be sure, these are lived-experiences for Blaeser (Personal Correspondence). For the Ojibwe, life has always been influenced by the seasons. For example, Jim Northrup's (Fond du Lac Ojibwe) documentary *With Reservations* chronicles how each season carries its cultural ways-of-life. He says, "we live our lives with the seasons": In spring (*ziig-wan*) we spear fish and go to sugar bush; in summer (*niibin*) we gather birch bark for making baskets and canoes; in autumn (*dag-waagin*) we go ricing and hunt moose; and in winter (*biboon*) we tell stories. There is a time for everything according to the land. In Blaeser's poetry, the speaker often names these activities, specifically, as a way of not only celebrating but also re-fashioning her influences, her landscape. In "The Last Fish House" from *Absentee Indians*, the first few lines illustrate how the oral tradition is linked with the seasons: "January crosses the calendar / like a good story. / Slow and steaming breath / words swirling / up our ankles" (11). It is as if this part of the year is a piece of the story; words carry people through the changes and they are felt like the frozen air of mid-winter. The first stanza of the poem creates a scope of the landscape the speaker savors and can articulate: "Wind drifts shapes / we tell and can taste / like meringue tufts of memory. / Derbies, fish shacks, poker runs. Winter ages slowly" (11). The season not only becomes flavorful but is also personified. The speaker implies that this time of year, likened to a "good story" and "meringue tufts," is something she relishes and is something as alive as she.

From this point on, the twenty-one stanzas of the poem ring with the immediacy of a "good story" as the speaker narrates a day of ice fishing: "Now metal runners squeak across frozen lake . . . silver minnow bucket sloshes . . . Oversized boots insulate / toes wiggle giddy

with excitement" (11). When they finally reach their fishing hole, it is as if they've found solitude *within* the landscape:

Stand now in the moment of arrival
each breathless with the efforts
of journey,
of quiet centering
in the blue white middle of being
here.
Thick-parka-clad and bright-colored
flashes upon the revolutions of ice
encircled by barren arbor
womb-covered by winter sky.
Here,
in the turning compass of time
in the still point of ritual
lives curl fetal in contemplation
uncurl in sweet bounty
of motion and sensation (12).

The speaker continues to make reference to the present moment, the repetition of "here" and "now," that brings memory, story, and landscape to one focal point. It is through this ritualistic activity embedded in the cycle of seasons that allows for the expression of the speaker's interior and exterior landscapes. At this point, the physical landscape has become a nurturing womb thriving on all it encompasses while the speaker's words express the cycles of nature and seasons, the personified landscape, as they determine the rituals signified by time's motion. It is the perpetuation of these seasonal rites that allows the speaker (and her community, presumably) to keep in rhythm with that which has always sustained them, the earth. They re-engage with the landscape, become part of it, as the auger spirals its way down through the ice, and they push squirming minnows through the ends of hooks. While they wait for bites, "all eyes concentrate on the water / epicenter, only light area / in our six by eight world" (15), stories are told—stories within a story: "How once a muskrat rose sleek to the surface / snapped inches from your hand"; "Remember the broken-backed / pike who scarred your hand"; "Remember the white fish / swimming just below the surface" (14). Later, "No excess motion now / hardly a whisper" (15), they try to lure the walleye, the bass, or the northern. More storytelling follows the missed attempt, as the telling of the narrative, or the poem itself,

becomes the ritual; memories conjure the story and the narratives recapture a culture: "Caught by the spear / or caught in story / we carry them from this snug burrow" (16-17). Fish are finally caught, but the importance squarely lies in the ritual of the action, the time spent together, the day itself. They head for home, "And vision trades depth for distance—," towards the "oh too human land" (17). It is as if the experience, this ritual, has been sustained through a mythic center, as if the womb the speaker depicts early in the poem is the myth's locale, where the speaker understands her origins, this earth she treads upon.

The poem ends on the brink of transformation: edges are blurred, but connections are made—where myth explains the speaker's positioning in it all:

This emergence.
Another strange exhilaration
joy fresh, unwarranted.
Seeking cause
in the stiff scattered bodies of fish
in the white ice now stained
time marked with blood and urine.
Cold settles like vapors
around our warmer bodies
steaming to define our edges.
We stand shaped now in air by relationship
the falling temperature talking of pattern.
And these things told, too
passing time
while winter waits
on water (17-18).

The speaker's snow-white world, now stained with "blood and urine" and the evening cold creeping in, becomes extremely visceral—a palpable patterning that both seasons and rituals set into motion. Underneath the ice is the moving water, a sign of the season to come; thus, the "winter waits on water" (18) knowing the metamorphosis spring will bring. The poem concludes with an "emergence," where the speaker finds her place in relation to the patterns of season, ritual, and community. One of the definitions of myth is to help one understand his or her origin. For the speaker, ice fishing—a winter ritual practiced for millennia by her people—stands as metaphor for a lived connection to landscape because it is through memory, story-

telling, and participation that the speaker understands this emergence, this vision, her place in the world. In this way, Blaeser's poem exemplifies how creative expression enacts myth that can ultimately heal. As narrative is linked to her landscape, so are her interior processes of imagination that connect to the knowledge of her place in community and on the earth.

Blaeser continues to contend that through the process of writing, through poetry itself, one gains connection and community. In the final pages of *Absentee Indians*, Blaeser includes an epilogue followed by a last poem, "Y2K Indian." In these pages she quite literally is leaving the reader with thoughts toward the future, both in the purpose served by an epilogue and the implication of the poem's title. It is here in the end of the collection that the interior and exterior landscapes of the speaker expand beyond the page. It is interesting to note that the two pieces revolve around the communal aspect of writing poems, "the larger experience of poetry" (127). Blaeser begins her epilogue:

The energy of poems constructs a community. Arising as they do from the whole of our experience, they are not ours to start. They come from a history we were born into, a collection of family names and accounts we have heard, a map of places we have traveled. They are sifted from music and books and dreams. Even in their writing they seek shape from an aesthetic older than our remembrance of it. Beyond this, their written life and their speaking continues only by the grace of and on the lips of other lives (127).

She cites two examples as a means to describe what this communal aspect of creative expression means: first, at a poetry reading, someone in the audience mouthing the final words of her poem as she reads it, and second, a class project that involved incorporating the lines from each of the student's poems into one single poem. In each respect, she sees "the honor involved and the spirit of community this cross-pollination expressed" (127). And so, Blaeser's final poem, "Y2K Indian," emulates these sentiments. As she puts it: "It is a poem constructed of the many connections my writing and living has to the stories, experiences, and writing of others. It celebrates the woven story paths of Indian nations by building itself partly from the words of other Native authors" (128).

Blaeser inserts into her own poem lines from others' writings. Again, she addresses the idea of the "absentee Indian," but in this

poem presence is gained through a community of writers that have influenced her life and her work. Her poem literally gains presence through others' creative expression. It also reveals the presence of contemporary Native ways of life, where she finds comfort in her Native brothers and sisters, "Finding their reflections / harbor mine" (131), and where she realizes they are much like her, moving between two worlds: "They move with me / easily passing / between wilderness and civilization / the university and the pow-wow circuit / the church pew and the cedar smoke circle" (131). She is not alone in her migrations, nor is she alone in her "celebrations of influence." For Blaeser, using the words of other writers is not theft, it is honor, since Native poets and their works are the cornerstones of her own being. In fact, other Ojibwe poets, Blaeser's sister-writers, contemplate this sense of communal motion and migration, as well as the healing effects of creative expression. Denise Sweet (White Earth Ojibwe) writes in her poem, "Migration," from her collection *Songs for Discharming*,

A migration built
into the blood, I scuttle towards a source
that left a mark on my soul's geography
part clock, part compass, part feral force

I drift to rest somewhere beyond
the rigmarole, the daily treading of water
holding my head above any turbulent wave
in my returning or in my remaining,
It is a long, hard swim either way (4).

For the speaker, this movement is inherent and emotionally charged. It is "built into the blood" and is part of her "soul's geography," implying the grossly innate desire to be in rhythm with it. It is part of her make-up; therefore, it will always exist for her. Migration is both "returning" and "remaining," because by re-calling one's history, re-memembering one's home, re-constructing one's language, the motion is there; however, it is not always easy.

Kimberly Blaeser's creative expression and communal dialogue are the way dreams are enacted, the way landscape is enlivened, the way ancient voices are heard. Her poetry relies upon the orality of her Ojibwe ancestors, the land, and the language; it is what literally moves it—as when she says, "Learning the land means learning not only its history but its motion" ("On Mapping and Urban Shamans"

123). In a recently published poem entitled "Apprenticed to Justice," Blaeser envisions the spirit in the generations to come, the phoenix rising, the trails home—what we all must learn in order to heal. She says this prayer for all of us:

And this is a poem
for those
apprenticed
from birth.
In the womb
of your mother nation
heartbeats
sound like drums
drums like thunder
thunder like twelve thousand
walking
then ten thousand
then eight
walking away
from stolen homes
from burned out camps
from relatives fallen
as they walked
then crawled
then fell.
This is the woodpecker sound
of an old retreat.
It becomes an echo.
an accounting
to be reconciled.
This is the sound
of trees falling in the woods
when they are heard,
of red nations falling
when they are remembered.
This is the sound
we hear
when fist meets flesh
when memories rattle hollow in stomachs.

And we turn this sound
over and over again
until it becomes
fertile ground

from which we will build
 new nations
 upon the ashes of our ancestors.
 Until it becomes
 the rattle of a new revolution
 these fingers
 drumming on keys (*Valparaiso Poetry Review*).

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NOTES

- ¹ From Kimberly Blaeser's paper given at the 32nd Annual Conference on Editorial Problems, University of Toronto, November 14-16, 1996, as published in "Writing Voices Speaking: Native Authors and an Oral Aesthetic." *Talking on the Page: Editing Aboriginal Oral Texts*. Ed. Laura J. Murray and Keren Rice. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. 52-68.
- ² Taken from the preface of Kimberly Blaeser's *Trailing You*. New York: Greenfield Review Press, 1994.

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POEMS FOR THE TURN OF THE CENTURY: JUDITH MINTY'S *WALKING WITH THE BEAR*

JANET RUTH HELLER

In the fall of 2000, Michigan State University Press published *Judith Minty's Walking with the Bear: Selected and New Poems*. Themes in this volume include self-knowledge, friendships, solitude, the relationship between people and nature, and the evolution of the new woman. *Walking with the Bear* addresses many of the issues that we face as mature adults at the turn of a century: how can we deal with change, adjust to different passages in our lives, and renew ourselves for a new era?

In a 2002 study of Minty's *Dancing the Fault*, I emphasized the importance of rituals in her poetry and the similarity of her view of nature to that inherent in Native American beliefs in the interpenetration of the human and the surrounding environment (Heller 57-68). These principles also hold true for *Walking with the Bear*. Minty is part Mohawk and has studied Native American beliefs and legends. Certain animals like the bear seem to haunt Minty as if they were her totems. The frequent personification in her poems is intense and deeply felt, not casual.

When I last dreamed the bear, he laid
 his black head on my thigh,
 the bear-smell rising rank around us,
 his coat bristling my skin,
 the great weight of him leaning, leaning into me.
 And though we never spoke,
 I knew then that he loved me, and so began
 to stroke his rough back, to pull him even closer.
 (*Yellow Dog Journal* Part 29, p. 75, 1979)

This poem captures what anthropologist Victor Turner has called the "element of risk or danger in the atmosphere of living ritual. And something numinous" (95). Minty and her persona overcome their fear of scary animals like bears and wolves to form bonds with them and accept the dark and wild elements buried in all of us. Elinor Benedict has pointed out that *Walking with the Bear* highlights a "journey through inner and outer wilderness" (188). The bond here between the speaker and the bear is personal and erotic. Human and animal share a deep love.

Later in the same poem, Minty emphasizes that people, like birds and animals, tend to return to places that are special. Just as she goes back every spring to her family's cabin in northern Michigan, other creatures also retrace their paths. The parents take their children to a specific site and baptize them with a commitment to that location. Note that the baptism here is not a traditional church ritual but rather an ancient custom. Minty was raised as a Roman Catholic, but she prefers natural ceremonies to church rites.

They dipped their daughters in the stream so that we rose
enchanted, eyes starry in the forest.

No longer theirs, though always theirs
since we fell wet from the mother,
now bound by wing and fur and claw, we come
back and back to their place. Each time
we stand breathless at the edge of light and shadow,
before the river takes us, before we step into its current.
(*Yellow Dog Journal*, Part 30, p. 76)

As in many Native American rituals, there is no separation here between the natural world and the human sphere. All people, animals, and birds participate in the same life cycle and rely on the river as a source of life. The river also symbolizes the flow of time and changes wrought by the life cycle.

In the last poem in this volume, "Walking with the Bear," the season has shifted from spring to winter, but Minty again links the human and the animals surrounding her.

New snow, and I follow
the dim path through woods, sink
into silence. Meadow vole, squirrel,
snowshoe hare, fox:
my tracks walk next to theirs.

If it still falls tonight, by dawn
none of us have traveled here. (168, 2000)

People and animals share the same path through the woods. Furthermore, all living creatures face the obliteration of their efforts by natural forces. Such poems demonstrate awareness that nature can threaten the survival of living creatures and also demonstrate an understanding of humans' true place in the ecosystem. In a letter to me, Minty writes, "I think I have spent my entire life attempting to move with ease in the natural world—not dominating, rather accepting/entering/vanishing" (18 July 2001).

A similar image of obliteration occurs in another recent poem, "Walking the Beach in Fog." The woman speaker and her dog get caught in fog in New Era, Michigan, where Minty now lives. The fog severs the persona's connection to familiar aspects of her environment, which she describes in the first line as "this blind world" where she feels "lost." The line ends with the word "lost" to stress this disorientation in both time and space. The fog erases all distinct features of the landscape, which becomes "Muted, without color." In a series of negations, Minty describes the persona and the dog as now "nameless, / suspended, viewed by no one, walking nowhere." The experience reminds her of skiing among clouds in the mountains in Switzerland: "We groped our way then, cautious ghosts / traversing the trail." The alliteration of *g* sounds and the repetition of *t*, *r*, long *o*, and *s* emphasize the confusion and depersonalization. The poem ends with an unanswered question:

Even these deer tracks fade to nothing. If I
walk deeper into this fog, the dog may not follow me
and if she doesn't, what will know me there? (161)

Both the woman and the deer risk a loss of identity if they travel further. In this poem, the natural world threatens the very meaning of the lives of people and animals.

Many poems in *Walking with the Bear* portray a female persona who is alone, especially in the North Woods of Michigan, where Minty has spent part of every year since she was a child. These poems capture the insights of an individual removed from the comforts and support of other members of society and thus resemble Native American separation rituals. The most common Indian customs involve an adolescent who leaves the tribe for a period of time

to hunt, keep a vigil, and experience a vision. However, Minty's persona is an adult woman who returns alone to the North Woods repeatedly where, every time, she has new insights into her life and her relationship with the natural world. Solitude enables the quester to face the unpredictability and potential for exploring "wish, desire, possibility" that Victor Turner identifies in traditional liminal experiences (82-83).

Being alone in the North Woods brings Minty's persona into close and often intense contact with nature. Watching the full moon from her cabin as she writes a poem, Minty captures the paradox of solitude: one is alone and yet enmeshed in the universe. Her speaker perceives both the visible world and unseen spiritual forces. Note that a Christian image, the cross, appears in *Yellow Dog Journal*; however, the context of the image is not a traditional Christian one. In fact, this apostrophe to the moon has a pagan quality closer to Native American paeans to nature.

Oh moon, full again,
oh perfect ball of reflected light,
these crossed haloes,
North, South, East, West,
your brilliance, light
this page I write on, move
me to know this *loneliness*
of celebration. Who,
there in the other world, is chanting,
praising you? Who hears them,
those she-wolves, howling
and baying as you rise,
as I open my mouth now,
this shadow singing behind me.
(Part 25, pp. 73-74; italics are mine)

As in many of Minty's poems, the woman here merges with the wolves. In this blurring of the boundaries between animal and human, the persona gains new insight into the spiritual world and celebrates both her solitude and her bonds with all aspects of nature, represented by the moon, the wolves, and the shadow.

In one of the new poems in this volume, Minty is alone in Prairie Creek, California, a state where she lived and taught for years. As she walks through a meadow to reach the redwoods, she experiences the potential of the liminal as Turner describes it: "This morning,

between prairie and forest, / anything is possible" ("Alone at Prairie Creek" 141). She remembers a previous trip to this site with her friend Christine and the quasi-religious intensity of that encounter with nature. Minty finds Christine's camera lens cap

... where we stood gaping up
at those tallest trees, the tender parts
of our necks exposed, where light
fell through in shafts as if the gods were
looking down, trying to reach us as we prayed. (141)

As usual, Minty uses the vocabulary of Christian prayer, but the context and meaning of the passage are not traditional. These lines emphasize the vulnerability of the two women, who expose their "tender" necks to see the redwoods. In risking this vulnerability, the women enable themselves to get in touch with the spiritual world lurking in nature.

In "Counting the Losses" (1986), Minty traces her own life cycle, beginning with her earliest memory of seeing a crab tree in bloom. Even as a toddler, she experienced a merger with nature as "the tree entered her / like blood, food for bone and heart" (89). This section of the poem reminds me of W. B. Yeats's "Among School Children" in its emphasis on a human's attempt to perceive and understand a tree, both its separate parts and its entirety. Minty concludes the opening of "Counting the Losses,"

"Tree," she would have said, had she
known the word and not just the sense
of bud and leaf, petal, tart little fruit.
This to carry inside: to know branch
and limb. It must have been
her father who carried her, her hands
like blossoms on his shoulders, feeling
roots stretch down to hold on. (89)

Father and daughter become one with the crab tree here: the daughter like the delicate blossom and the parent like the sturdy roots.

As a child, Minty gets her first taste of what she calls "darkness," which includes racism, anti-Semitism, poverty, sexual molestation, and death. In "Counting the Losses," the bear becomes a symbol of the frightening aspects of life (92). The child must engage in "Learning to take in this darkness" (90), and Minty implies that readers must also learn this skill. The child must also learn to let go when

her family's house gets "torn down for an expressway." Then she must detach herself from one phase of life:

Letting the child go: Ghost of the past
covered by its own darkness—cloak, shroud,
black skin of the bear.
She'd never meant this to happen,
never meant to put on a wanderer's shoes. (92)

The image of wandering is a good one for much of Minty's work. She alternates between city living and returning to her cabin in the woods. She teaches in New York, California, Oregon, and Alaska, but always comes back to Michigan. She lives a modern life as a career woman but is also committed to her family and her Finnish and Native American roots. Readers can identify with wandering at this turn of a century, when many people change jobs, many workers move from one career to another, and fewer Americans than ever before still live in their hometown.

Springtime brings Minty back to her Michigan roots and the North Woods. Driving across the Leelanau Peninsula, she yearns to turn aside like Frost in "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening." But in Minty's "Counting the Losses," the falling whiteness is cherry tree blossoms. This fifth section of the poem recalls the opening passage, which describes the toddler's fascination with the flowering crab tree. Minty's persona imagines a walk through a cherry orchard: "wanting to walk / on white petals, white under her feet, white falling on her hair" (93). Again, the human and the natural world intersect in a very intense way.

A few lines later, Minty moves from descriptions of spring in other areas of the United States where she has lived—Florida and California—to conclude the passage with allusions to the human sexuality aroused by the season.

Mating dance of snowy egrets in the salt marsh
in Arcata, California, snow on the mountains behind them.
Blue iris in the vase inside her rented house, their beautiful
fan like slow wings spreading. Her own arms opening
to jewels of hummingbirds at the feeder—darting, suspended,
then buzzing and clicking—red throats, green
wings—gold, real gold, for crowns.

O Heart.

Erotic lichee nuts in the mouth. Scent of sex

on the sheets, night jasmine through the open window. (94)

The imagery here emphasizes opening oneself up to spring and to passion.

Section seven of "Counting the Losses" poses a key question in the opening line: "How to be a woman in this universe, no steps to follow" (95). Minty does not feel comfortable following the traditional patterns of older women in her family, though she learns survival skills and independence from "three Finnish aunts in Ishpeming" (96), nor does she want to imitate the patterns of famous writers of previous generations. She wants to mother her children without being a mere housewife, to be a wife without subservience. Minty cannot live as a lesbian, but she wants the freedom "to love women without being 'in love' with them" (96). She rejects the path of suicide but wants to squarely face "her own weaknesses and those of her sisters." Like Eve, Minty will succumb: "temptation surfacing, snakes in both her hands" (97).

This exploration of a new woman defining herself continues in section eight. Like many feminists, the persona experiences anger; however, she avoids obsession with rage, which Minty compares to "wind slipping through her fingers" (97). She learns to question male authorities, begins to say "No," learns to use "I language" and to identify what she shares with other women.

Section nine focuses on how women and their families cope with the death of their fathers. She begins with a Freudian insight: "[o]ur fathers were our first loves." Daughters miss their fathers with all five senses: "We miss their hands and voices, their step in the house, / the scent of pipe and shaving lotion, sweat and whiskey breath" (97). Minty catalogues the various deaths of her friends' fathers, some dying surrounded by their loving families, others dying alone and suicidal. Some fathers nurtured their daughters, while others tried to stifle their emotions (98). A related portion of the poem, section eleven stresses the importance of letting go after we suffer the deaths of birds, animals, or people. Minty seems most troubled by the death of her grandmother, who hung herself (100).

The final section of "Counting the Losses" portrays the adult poet coping with the death of her own father by learning to say the word "tree" and understanding all of its implications. Note that the toddler in section one of the poem could not say "tree," nor could she fully comprehend her environment. Section twelve begins with many

commands and moves into a flashback of Minty's returning to the family cabin with her father for the last time.

Say "Tree." Say it, say "Tree." Tree. Isn't that what
that wall-eyed poet told her years ago? "Go back to tree,"
he'd said, "every tree you've ever known."

Begin with crabapple. Begin with Spring,
begin with blossoms, begin with Father:
White birch near the Yellow Dog, her father
wanting to show her each secret place that was his.
Smooth skin, white gleaming in dark woods.
"I love these trees," he'd said, and wrapped his arms around one.
Something lifted from the ground, something white, and flew.
He knew it was his last trip to the river. (100)

Minty goes on to name thirteen different kinds of trees, implying that each has a different message to reveal to humans. She also recites the different parts of trees, as if she were chanting a litany. Like the trees, people need to learn "to survive" (101), despite the turbulence and suffering of life. People need every part of themselves and an understanding of their own wholeness. They also need to acknowledge their role in the natural order.

In "Destroying the Cormorant Eggs" (2000), Minty imagines the havoc wrought by a man who, like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner and unlike her father, does not understand his role in the ecosystem. The unnamed fisherman has smashed 2000 cormorant eggs to prevent the birds' competing with him. This actually happened in rookeries for the rare bird on Little Gull Island and Gravelly Island in Lake Michigan. Minty compares the blue eggshell fragments to "small pieces of sky fallen down." She repeats the word "black" five times in this poem to highlight the "darkness" of this act and ends the poem by imagining the fisherman's nightmare of swimming in yolk after his crime.

... Black
as the night waters of a man's dream where he gropes
below the surface, groaning with the old hungers,
the luminescence of his skin covered by something
so thick his arms stroke heavy with it, the water
without end, and no island, no island in sight. (162)

Minty builds intensity in this poem by constructing it as one long complex sentence. The closing lines isolate the man from land and human assistance. He has separated himself from the natural world, but it will take its slow revenge.

An opposite movement occurs in "Deer at the Door" (2000). As Minty and her husband eat dinner at their home in New Era, Michigan, a sparrow sings and a herd of white-tailed deer come right up to the door. Just before sunset, we find "everything in harmony for a few beats of the heart" (160).

Readers of *Walking with the Bear* will share the harmony of Minty's poems where people take risks to merge with the natural world and gain new insights into themselves and their environment. She celebrates rituals that help readers cope with change and darkness and realize the potential of a new century.

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FIGHTING THE DARKNESS:
THE POETRY OF NANCY GENEVIEVE

LOREN LOGSDON

Nancy Genevieve (Perkins, nee Steinhauer) was born in Kentucky and spent her youth there. For the past fifteen years she has lived and taught in Illinois and is currently on leave from the University of Illinois at Springfield, where for the past five years she has taught creative writing, chaired her department, and directed graduate students' creative writing theses. Recently, she was the featured poet for Poetry Month at the Vachel Lindsay Home in Springfield. In addition to several poems published in a variety of magazines and journals, Genevieve has published two books of poems: *NYX: Mother of Light* (2001) and *NYX: Daughter of Chaos* (2002), hereafter referred to parenthetically as *Mother* and *Daughter*. She is presently at work on the third book of a planned trilogy inspired by NYX, the primal Greek creation goddess who was the personification of Night.

In his preface to *Zen in the Art of Writing*, Ray Bradbury explains that writing revitalizes us and enables us to survive. He believes that some people must write or they will die. Counting himself among such people, Bradbury says, "We must take up arms each and every day, perhaps knowing that the battle cannot be actually won, but fight it we must, if only a gentle bout. The smallest effort to win means, at the end of each day, a sort of victory" (xiii). What Bradbury means by "the battle" is the tendency of the world, with all of its grim realities and sad corruptions to "catch us and sicken us." Certainly the caring, loving, sensitive person can be overwhelmed by the cruelty of the world and lose faith in life, so Bradbury urges us "to stay drunk on writing so reality cannot destroy you" (xiii). Nancy Genevieve does not literally become drunk on her writing, but she does write to

fight against the ugly, destructive aspects of reality. She must write, not exclusively for the survival purpose that Bradbury outlined above, but rather because writing is a labor of love, a way to learn about herself and the world, a way to celebrate life's delicious and precious moments, and a way of connecting with other people and sharing meaningful insights with them. It is a weapon she uses to fight the darkness.

The following as yet unpublished poem provides a clear statement that the Midwest is the *locus amoenus* for Genevieve's life as well as the inspiration for her poetic subjects. It is also a good example of what Genevieve calls her "storypoems"—poems which are stories that are accessible to children and to adults who say they cannot understand poetry.¹ But the storypoems are also metaphors which increase in depth when read several times:

End of the Season

Nodding in a chair by the edge of his last garden,
he waited for the corn tassels to grow brown.

Since early spring
when the newly turned black soil hid the seeds,
he had started his wait.

When tiny blades of green shoved upward,
his naps became longer.

Then the stalks unfolded their leaves,
the sun burned July life, and
he began to cross his suspenders
over one of his every-season flannel shirts.

Occasionally, he would walk the rows
he had walked for eighty plus summers
and pull out a morning glory.
but more often than not,
a long-past grown grandson would do that for him
while he slept.

All summer
his shoulders drooped more,
as the ears formed and tasseled and ripened
under their firm husks.

He was holding on for harvest.

"End of the Season" could not have been written in any other part of the world except the Midwestern prairie with its constant reminders of growth—in gardens, in fields, and in relationships; and of seasons—in one man's life, in one family's lineage, and in one summer's garden. The awareness of the sky and the majesty of sunsets, the sense of the Midwest itself as a garden, the awareness of the human connection to the Creation, and the passing of time measured in distinct seasons and family rituals and celebrations—these elements constitute the identity of this Midwestern poet. As Nancy Genevieve has said, "I could sit on my back porch and learn the wisdoms of nature—if I would only open my eyes—and on a really few good days—I did!" (letter to the author). One is reminded of Emily Dickinson in her garden, finding mystery and meaning in nature's tiniest creatures.

Nancy Genevieve's two books of poems reflect both a personal Midwestern upbringing and an attempt to connect with universal human experiences. Thus her two major subjects are place and time. Many of the poems of her first book are about her experiences growing up in Kentucky and are melded with her adult observations living in Illinois. Some are nature poems (such as "The Lake," "Cricket Song," and "The Last Butterfly") that portray the joyful, healing, elevating effects nature can have on the observer. The most eloquent poetic treatment of a young girl's experience is found in Genevieve's poem, "The Forest," which is a metaphorical journey involving a young girl's discovery of the darkness in life and her willful decision to struggle through it to come to terms with it. Unlike Dante in *The Inferno*, Genevieve's protagonist encounters the dark wood early in her life, not mid-way through it, but she has no Virgil to guide her. Near the end of the journey, as she discovers the power of laughter, she achieves a life-affirming awareness. She senses that beyond the forest is a lake and that her answer is there. The resolution of this universal human situation is presented in the poem's final two stanzas:

She had missed
so much in her
ancient fear of the
darkness that she
had lost her sense
of those who had
walked before her and
beckoned by their

laughing and splashing
an invitation to
join them.

But they had
never forgotten her,
and by remembering
her future, they had given
her the courage
to make her first step. (*Mother* 5-8)

Just as the young protagonist has discovered that her existence was always supported by the love of family and friends, many of Genevieve's other poems also celebrate family and reflect the family values that are so strong in Midwestern life. "In Search of First" is a storypoem that is accessible on the surface but has a complexity that necessitates a footnote to clarify its metaphorical and historical underpinning. In Genevieve's title, "First" refers to a Native American wisdom explained at Potawatomi Gathering in Peoria, Illinois: We are all responsible for seven generations. Since ONLY the Native Americans can trace their lineages to the soil of central Illinois before the early 1800s—all the rest of us must go elsewhere. In this storypoem the speaker, a mature woman, is in a cemetery in Germany, trying to find her family name among the tombstones. Unable to speak German, she feels at a disadvantage in this place, but finally she is successful:

And yet.
My father's name is block printed beneath
"Hildegard" and "Wilhelm."
Could they have been cousins or aunts?
Did they hate sauerkraut too?
Do their children's children live nearby?
(*Mother*, stanza 7, p.43)

The gathering darkness prompts her to whisper "thought-goodbyes" to the ones sleeping there who might be "relatives or distant strangers." It really doesn't matter which because she has found, in this place far from Kentucky and Illinois, something of value—a feeling of connection—to take back with her.

But.
I will take the images

home to the third
and fifth generations
as a gift of family. (*Mother*, stanza 9, p.43).

The sheer delight in family is celebrated in "Click," and also in "Cousins," a poem about two girls growing up "too big for our childhood retreat." "Cousins" is accessible to every central Illinoisan who has ever climbed trees and viewed "hen-houses" and "new calf pastures" and has heard "worker bees drone" and has seen "startling white blossoms" (*Mother* 45). On a deeper level of meaning, climbing is also the metaphor for knowing, for ritual, and for sharing, which make the ordinary so exceptional. We humans have the capacity to celebrate all the best of being alive from the time we are children. However, not all family experiences are pleasant experiences to be celebrated but rather crises to be met and overcome, as we learn in "A Chance." Uncle Jim, who has always reminded the young girl of the sinister Mr. MacGregor in the "Peter Rabbit" story, plans to do away with the girl's mother cat and kittens by trapping them under the house. The plan fails when the girl releases the mother cat and her kittens while Uncle Jim is taking his nap.

Mother wondered out loud
for the whole neighborhood to hear,
"How did that cat get away?"

And so did Uncle Jim. (*Mother* 26)

"A Chance" is a poem about "a sort of victory," as Bradbury would express it, but some youthful encounters with the darkness end in chilling defeat. In "The Drowning," the narrator observes as men search the bottom of a bay with grappling hooks for a drowning victim. Despite the prayers of the protagonist that this event is a joke, the men recover the body of a child, and before "I could turn away, etched in my memory, the too small foot already blue" (*Mother*, stanza 5, page 43). And yet humanity also has its glorious moments as in the poems "Slow Dancing" and "Soul Mate." These two poems convey the still points of perfect unity in the calm "whispering [of] the chimed song" (*Mother* 21) or "a two-step around the open barn" (*Mother* 22).

Central to *NYX: Mother of Light* is Genevieve's treatment of time. In fact, the very first poem "Extinguished?" alludes to the fatal triangle of King Arthur, Guinevere, and Lancelot. The sadness in the

poem comes from its allusion to a time when people were believers and actual dragons existed. The "what if" speculation of the poem asks us to contemplate the outcome if Lancelot had not crossed the channel and Arthur and Guinevere's love had been deeper than passion. Even if Camelot, Arthur's dream for a perfect kingdom, had not been shaken by Lancelot's betrayal, there would still be the dragon.² "But perhaps, just perhaps, the dragon breathes fire" (*Mother* 1). The destructive and dangerous element would have still been present even if Guinevere had remained true to Arthur. "Return to Awe" describes the loss of wonder as the child grows into adulthood. The passing of time dulls our sense of wonder at life's mysteries, and Genevieve calls for an attempt to regain the awe we had as children, for we can to some extent recapture that feeling of discovery, or at least we can try:

The fluid
quantum of too
much order could
destroy the chaos
of discovery

So
walk with your feet
bare, my friend
next to every
ocean, becoming
one with
the mysteries. (*Mother* 19-20)

In "A Place in Time," Genevieve's persona describes herself as a cork bobbing on an ocean "partially on the surface, partially submerged" (*Mother* 12). She sees herself as powerless in the face of the wind and the waves. She "basks and burns in the sunlight and dreams and weeps in the moonlight" (*Mother* 12), but she stays afloat. This poem is not pessimistic, however, because the resolution suggests that the cork will one day be washed ashore and be discovered by a child "with dancing blue eyes and soft red curls" (*Mother* 12). One suspects that this child is the poet's daughter and that the poem itself is a metaphor about the relationship of mother and daughter.

The best "time" poem in the book is entitled "Time." This poem is particularly moving in its descriptions of the complex workings of time. Time is measured in "heartbeats, teacups, and half-lives," and

"time slides, glides, and crashes." Time is a silken thread that "weaves connections so delicate and fragile," and also connections that are strong in binding "generations together." Just as we weave our connections in time, "predators weave their webs to ensnare us" (*Mother* 13). But this poem is also a love poem and ends much like Marvel's "To His Coy Mistress." The speaker declares to an unidentified other that "together we can do anything," even though they cannot conquer time and its problems because time cuts us all down. However, they can achieve a victory in defeat, a "sort of victory" that is achieved by a love that is mutual (*Mother* 13). Another "sort of victory" over time can be achieved by "memory pictures" of family gatherings in summer—the subject of "Click," whose title, language, and imagery suggest that an actual photograph has been taken (*Mother* 48).

Four poems in the book are about a mother's relationship with her children. "From the Beginning" describes the mother's emotions as she carries her son and gives birth, not realizing that one day she will have to say goodbye to him. "Chosen Child" is interesting in that the speaker takes her daughter through the four ages of man according to Greek mythology—gold, bronze, silver, and iron. In "Child Wisdom," the daughter turns the tables on the mother about the issue of smoking. First, she attempts to persuade the mother to stop smoking, but it doesn't work. When the daughter appears with a cigarette dangling from her mouth, the mother realizes the error of her ways. "To My Child" expresses a mother's desire to protect her child from the pain and injuries that life hands out. There is a saying that when you have a child, your heart will forever walk around outside your body. From the earliest human families, parents have wished that they could absorb the cruelties their children will suffer. "To My Child" is accessible to anyone who has had a child, and its concern is similar to that expressed in Anne Bradstreet's famous poem about her children leaving the nest to go out into the world.

In the last group of poems in *NYX: Mother of Light*, Genevieve's speaker is a mature adult who is concerned about the problems in her life, but she has gained much wisdom and understanding. "Hurray!" is a good example of the mature wisdom the speaker has gained:

Laughter. It is,
I realize now,
Laughter that
washes my soul.

Not tears. (*Mother* 17)

However, the speaker had forgotten what she learned about laughter in "The Forest," and she announces that tonight "the laughter came from a place so far inside that I'd thought it had forever moved and left no forwarding address" (*Mother* 17). Some of these poems are humorous and lighthearted, especially the poems which tell of the speaker's attempts to quit smoking. "Close Call" is a lighthearted poem about growing up or perhaps about not growing up.

Three poems near the end of the book are very serious, and laughter is not an appropriate response in any of the situations. "Order of Peace" is a personal poem about wounding and healing and freedom. "Uncle Hank" is about the death of a beloved person whose many kindnesses are recalled by the speaker. "Seventeen This Fall" describes the speaker's thoughts about her cat as it nears the end of its life. All three of these poems are about letting go when the time is right and going on with "scars of victory," "an emptiness for what was . . ." (*Mother* 39), "a lineage of goodbye" (*Mother* 47). The last poem in the book fittingly is "When I Am Old," a poem about facing the final darkness of one's own death and possibly of getting lost in the darkness and doing so alone.

NYX: Daughter of Chaos, Genevieve's second book, continues the themes of family, nature, and time, but the outcome in the story-poems in this volume is not resolution but the lack of it. She writes in her introduction that this second book is "about facing the hard things in life and seeing them and growing wiser because of them" (*Daughter* vi). The poems in this book are characterized by their knowledge—their frank, unadorned truth. The personification of *NYX* in these poems is that of a mature woman who has been bruised, hurt, and disappointed by life. She is a woman who has suffered, but with that suffering she has gained strength and, above all, a determination to look directly at the most difficult truths of life, truths that most of us would rather avoid or forget. The poems in this second book close not in resolution but in ambiguity and uncertainty.

"Candling" portrays a grandmother's hands delicately searching the egg for shadow-fertilization and birth-promise, baking sweets for her family, performing kind, loving, gentle tasks. But it also paints the converse: a single pop of the wrist decapitating a hen whose "body flaps/ its wings in habit/ pumping red over the/ white for the

end of eternity." These "same hands/ place a drumstick on the plate" (*Daughter* 32). "Candling" offers not a resolution but an implied question for the reader to answer or at least struggle with: Is an act of violence ever an act of love?

"Reality Myth" is a story-poem that retells the Creation Story by putting the first human family into a contemporary setting. Cain is a drug addict who kills Abel when he interferes with "Cain's experiments of pleasure." Adam is a workaholic father who misses his children's Little League games and neglects Eve, who escapes with "chocolates and soap operas." When Adam "backhands" Eve in front of the children because he is tired of frozen pizza, she "goes home to Mama" (*Daughter* 1). The last character in this poem is God Himself, who declares that "Eden this ain't," questions the wisdom of "Free Will," and "clicks the remote to change channels" (*Daughter* 2). By placing Adam and Eve in a contemporary context, especially by using the metaphor of television, Genevieve asks the reader to question the accomplishments of human beings: What have we done with the glorious gift of life? Have we come all this far from the Garden of Eden only to waste our creative force and trash our lives with drugs and soap operas? Are we, collectively, a life form that has gone wrong through the exercise of our own free will? What can be said in favor of the human race? "Reality Myth" can be enjoyed as a story-poem that satirizes modern life, but the more one contemplates this poem the more one thinks about its haunting implications and important questions.

Another poem which faces a difficult truth is "Baby Boomers," a story-poem that looks at what has happened to the flower children of the 1960s three decades later. This poem is not a celebration of the many changes brought about by the idealism of the people under thirty but rather a statement about what the passing of time has done to the idealism of the 1960s. There is not the slightest touch of congratulation or nostalgia in this poem; instead it is a lament at the failure to sustain that idealism over time:

And
 then,
 out of such collective force,
 such idealized changes,
 such moral imperatives,
 we grew
 rigid and set in our ways and lost

our vision along with our sight.

(*Daughter* 11).

Instead of continuing the fight for a better world, for racial justice and human justice, the Baby Boomers have tried to "recreate a secure status quo," with "alarm systems," "gated neighborhoods," "swimming pools," and "prep schools." "Baby Boomers" asks a question: What happened to the dreams, the passions, the strength, the sense of brotherhood, and especially the idealistic promise of the 1960s? The speaker, who identifies with the Baby Boomer Generation, wonders if "we can breathe our souls back and/ braid the million loose ends together/ for our strength/ at least one more time?" (*Daughter* 11). This poem ends with an either/or dilemma: to try again or to end up in the Old Folks Home wondering where everyone went. Once again, Genevieve's poem ends not with affirmation or resolution but with the implication that collectively, as a generation, the Baby Boomers have lost their soul.

Another storypoem is "The Biggest Dragon," whose opening stanza establishes the metaphor for the entire poem:

The biggest dragon
we ever have to slay
lies sleeping, on a good day,
and spewing fire on a bad one,
in the center of our own souls. (*Daughter* 4)

In the traditional mythic story, the dragon is a powerful external enemy, but Genevieve asks us to consider in this poem that the dragon is an internal one. The speaker is faced with the dilemma of trying to get past the dragon or to retreat to "my tiny Alice-life." The dragon is identified as "the demon of my birthing" (*Daughter* 4), and through an act of courage she kills the dragon only to discover that the dragon was Grendel's infant son and that she will have to face the mother dragon. The hard truth in the poem is that each of us must face alone our own dragons—our fears, the demons that limit us and prevent us from becoming better than we are. That truth is complicated by the realization that a victory is only temporary, that we will always have dragons to fight.

"Le Conté" is the longest poem in the book and for good reason. Its subject is mountain climbing, in this instance Mt. Le Conté, which is the second tallest mountain in the Smoky Mountains. In Genevieve's poetry, climbing is always a metaphor for knowledge

and also for the human impulse for transcendence. The poem's length is appropriate to convey the specific details of nature as well as the arduous and dangerous work needed to climb a tall mountain. After the speaker has passed the six-mile point, she describes a mystical experience in which "the body continued its routines," but "Spirit is freed to wander the mountain." What the spirit achieves is a return to faith and belief: "In this fairy land, it is possible again/ to believe with child-like clarity" (*Daughter* 24). Then, later, at the top of the mountain, "The fairy land is complete" (*Daughter* 26). The sense of accomplishment for this successful climb is not expressed in the wild, frenzied activity that one finds in a Mountain Dew commercial. Instead, it is a quiet feeling of connection and healing: "And the quiet of a created place/ mends the spirit in all the worn places" (*Daughter* 26). This poem does propose an answer to a question: How does one respond to the mystery and miracle of the Creation? The answer: with a quiet sense of awe, a reverence for nature's majesty, and the humble acceptance of a moment of grace.

Genevieve's second book continues the concern for family that was strong in the first book. "Old Wooden Spoon" is a tribute to a grandmother for her "Hand-whipped angel kisses/ and pepper nut cookies/ and strawberry jam." Language is the key to this poem, especially the use of the word "eloquent." The best eloquence is the wooden spoon itself, old, "lopsided and smooth from use," "a worn spokesperson delivering a speech/ we should have given to her." There is sadness in the fact that she was given no plaque to recognize her artistry or no testimonial to frame and hang upon the wall. This grandmother is like so many artists at living whose talents go unnoticed and unrewarded by the world at large, but who are appreciated by the family's "contented sighs" as they leave the table after enjoying one of her dinners (*Daughter* 34).

The poem "Strawberries" could be a companion piece to "Old Wooden Spoon" because the reader can imagine the grandmother either preserving the strawberries herself or directing the narrator in that process. However, this poem focuses not on the grandmother, but on the strawberries. Language and imagery conspire to transform what is a common fruit in the Midwest into earthly "delight" and a "taste of heaven." But it is work to preserve the strawberries, and one is tempted to shove them down the garbage disposal. What prevents this from happening is a vision of . . . "ruby glass/ [also a sign of royalty] in the sunlight/ on the pantry shelf/ tomorrow" (*Daughter* 40).

The family ritual of preserving strawberries has a much greater significance than the physical action itself, for this poem is about how the ordinary is changed into something valuable and precious.

What happens when a community is dislocated because the government condemns the land and floods it to form a lake? That situation is the subject for Genevieve's poem "between the rivers," a sad poem because all traces of the human activity of the people who lived here are gone. Only the graveyards that did not have to be removed remain as testimonies that people once lived there. These graveyards cannot convey any sense of the dreams, the celebrations, the children's laughter, or the determined fight by the people to save their homes. The land between the rivers has become "people-sterile," and outsiders come to pick the spring flowers that still bloom there. The people who made this land their home "were flung like seeds/ to grow as best they could," without the guidance and security of a community that has provided them with rituals and traditions that have nourished their families for generations (*Daughter* 8).

Clearly, the most important family value in Genevieve's poetry is the need to care for our children, the idea that human beings have a very special responsibility to protect our children. This concern is powerfully expressed in "15 January 1991, 10:39 p.m.," the eve of the Gulf War. The speaker thinks first of her children whose lives are safe, at least for this night, but then she realizes that all children's lives can be touched and cut short by war. The speaker is plagued with the question: Why do we continue the cycle of war? One answer offered in the poem is that those who call for war and give accounts of it use a language that conceals its true horrors. In other words, the official language used by political leaders removes us from the truth about war, which is that war is "the ugliest profanity that we can utter." The poem ends with the speaker's relief that the war has not started; however, that relief is only a slim hope (*Daughter* 46).

In addition to her storypoems, Genevieve uses another poetic structure which she calls her Japanese line painting poems. Such poems are very short, much like Emily Dickinson's poems, and they depend not on a story but upon sharp imagery and carefully chosen language. She strives to make them the single stroke of a Japanese line painting. The best examples of this poetic structure are "A Little Rebellion "The Pond," and "Evening Cicadas":

Evening Cicadas

tune
up for night,
practicing their
lull-a-bye
for summer. (*Daughter* 39).

One is almost certain that Emily Dickinson would enjoy this poem.

A major subject of several poems in *NYX: Daughter of Chaos* is the relationship of male and female, especially in terms of love. Genevieve's attention to this subject is consistent with her personification of NYX as a woman who has experienced the world and its cruelties, compromises, and tragedies and has learned from her experiences. The poems about love are mainly about mature love, and, collectively, they offer the reader some key ideas about what constitutes a mature relationship of male and female.

The most important quality that defines mature love is that it must be mutually addressing, like Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship,³ one which is respecting of the sacredness of the other, non-using, and non-exploitative (*I and Thou* 60-62). This point is dynamically expressed in several poems through the recurring metaphors of dancing, singing, rhythm, and sync. Love is two people being in sync with each other. Love must be shared experience because "If you want to dance with me, /you must at least hum the song," for "a waltz/ of one/ is no dance/ at all" (*Daughter* 13). The title of the poem "Worth Remembering" implies shared experience by emphasizing that love is

Knowing that I'm not alone
That all the moments of that
day matter to someone else. (*Daughter* 29)

The speaker tells the listener in this poem that she will know if it's love when she finds in the other "the missing rhythms that I carry in my head." The most lyrical description of love is found in Genevieve's Japanese line painting poem "One."

Your voice curls
around my soul,
as your bare legs
pull me even closer,
cuddled together

as one heartbeat. (*Daughter* 36).

A poem which provides an interesting test to see if love is mutual is "Broken Shells," in which the speaker asks the other to dance with her by the ocean. These dancers will cut their feet on the shells on the beach. The speaker wonders if in the morning her companion will complain about his cut and bleeding feet or will instead "cherish" the patterns of the shared experience. The answer is crucial because it will reveal the difference between real love and self-centeredness (*Daughter* 14).

Mature love, as it is portrayed in Genevieve's second book, is not expressed in bold promises or dramatic gestures, but rather in quiet moments of shared feeling and small gestures. It is also expressed in living actions such as a grandmother's cooking, a sigh of satisfaction after eating a wonderful meal, preserving strawberries, a hand gently covering another hand, and a teacher's attention to a troubled child. Mature love is seen in images of attempted union or communion. Mature love exists as a quiet strength and a promise of hope against the menace of the darkness "when the world promised void" ("To Love," *Daughter* 31). Mature love is so important in Genevieve's poetry because it is a way of living fully and fighting the darkness.

Although mature love is a way of fighting the darkness, NYX is aware of some of the difficult negative truths about love, serious obstacles or limitations that prevent it from being achieved. The destructive power of time can overwhelm love and cause it to die, as we see in "Second Chance." The aggression and violence of the male ego may lead to the abuse of the female, as we see in "Brother Man, Sister Woman." The predatory nature of the male may ruin any chances for mature love to develop, as the reader can see in "Unspoken. Unheard," perhaps the angriest poem in the book. Passion instead of love may prevent mature love from occurring, as in the example of Lancelot and Guinevere. It is then not surprising that Genevieve portrays mature love as something rare and delicate and mysterious and precious. In truth, for humans to experience mature love is one of the most important ways we have to "become one with the mysteries."

Nancy Genevieve seeks in her poetry the same desire for union with the Creation that one finds in Walt Whitman's poems and in Martin Buber's I-Thou explanation of relationships. (*I and Thou* 60-

62). Like Emily Dickinson, she looks to nature to discover mystery and miracle in the ordinary, and her Japanese line painting poems are similar in form, language, and imagery to Dickinson's. Genevieve's essential vision of life is based on a belief in a creative, loving force which expects us to do what we should do; and she believes in "the healing power of love and laughter which are the gifts of our own creative force" (letter to the author). Her poems celebrate those life-affirming values that enable us to do battle with the darkness because Genevieve does not underestimate the powers of the darkness—the destructive power of time, the cycle of war, and the personal dragons and demons that seek to exert tyranny over us. Her poems also celebrate the joys of the Creation, and she realizes that joy, like so many other important experiences in a human life, "rides on butterfly wings, glistens in gentle rains, and hums on in heartbeats" ("Second Chance," *Daughter* 15).

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NOTES

1. The term "storypoem" is one that Genevieve uses to describe the poetic structure that she most frequently uses. She believes this structure makes her poetry accessible to the widest possible audience.
2. There are several allusions to dragons throughout Genevieve's poetry. Dragons have a rich complexity of meaning. First, they are representative of the time long ago, in the childhood of the human race, when humans had a simple faith and capacity for belief. As such, dragons carry the suggestion of child-like magic. Second, dragons are associated with our inner limitations and are equated with those fears that may cripple the creative force in us. Third, dragons signify a natural destructive force much like the passing of time. Generally, dragons convey Genevieve's notion of life as mystery.
3. Martin Buber was a Christian theologian whose book *I and Thou* has as its thesis the notion that we humans have two ways of relating to other people and to the world. I-It is defined as a using, manipulating, exploiting relationship in which people view the world and other people as things, as objects. The I-It relationship is necessary for all of us to live in the world. However, those who live by I-It alone may become highly intelligent and accomplished, but they will never meet the mysteries of life or experience a sense of absorption in or oneness with the Creation. In contrast, the I-Thou relationship is defined as a respecting and mutually addressing one that views other people and the world as sacred. Buber believes that we need both relationships to live in this world but that only those who are capable of the I-Thou can experience the richness of the Creation as mystery and miracle. The samadhi-like moments in Walt Whitman's poetry are good examples of the I-Thou in action ("samadhi" is a sanskrit word which means total absorption). Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" and "Me Imperturbe" are examples of the sense of mystical union of I-Thou. Genevieve's "Le Conté" is an example of the experience of union or absorption in her poetry.

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DIANE WAKOSKI'S MICHIGAN

NANCY BUNGE

Midwestern literature embraces the ordinary, often using common speech to write about everyday lives and dilemmas, a tradition for which Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* serves as a literary and historical benchmark. Diane Wakoski seems an unlikely addition to this canon. Although she has always consciously used American speech in her work, from a young age, Wakoski has seen literature as a way to evade reality, not rest in it. In her poem "Saturday Night," she explains how, as a child, she hated to leave the car that had just carried her to a day of escape at the library and movies and return to real life:

wanting to snuggle down into the warm
 backseat while it carried me through the night
 of fragrant oranges.
 a treasure of books at my feet
 in a world where I could always be the princess,
 never the servant,
 never the poor peasant, living alone
 in the country
 with only an old mother. (*The Magician's Feastletters* 89)

Wakoski's most recent collection, *The Butcher's Apron*, ends with "Greed" part 14. At the beginning of this section, Wakoski reprints a poem first printed in 1969 where she portrays herself as the protector of pure poetry:

and here I am
 painfully awake
 remembering
 that I have been put in charge
 of all the gold

in this world.

Only I
can keep it polished
to its right
color. (195)

In the accompanying note, Wakoski says the poem reminds her "that even before I had culminated my on-the-road poetry life and entered academia...I was already fiercely fighting—perhaps wind-mills, but what I thought of as the battle for true poetry, pure poetry, the best poetry, the gold, or whatever you want to call it" (197).

Near the end of "Greed" 14 Wakoski includes a poem that suggests, once again, beautiful art offers relief from unpleasant realities:

It is time to savor the moment,
trying neither to preserve nor keep it. And certainly no longer
To change it. The moment
is all there ever was.

It is a moment
when only you can see rooms full of gold:
The world's gold,
polished to full luster.

By the morning sun.

Cherish the fact that you might be the only
One who sees this. (241)

The sentiment of this poem seems about as far as one can get from the reverence for the common place central to Midwestern literature. But then the poem makes a very interesting, perhaps even Midwestern, turn away from aesthetic elitism into a democratic tolerance:

then despise not the others who
claim their gold;

despise not the others who
do not see yours;

do not try to pass on the flame to anyone
who doesn't come asking for its fire. (241)

And, indeed, during her twenty-year sojourn here in East Lansing, Wakoski has written poems about Michigan that satisfy the

basic definition of Midwestern literature: they use common speech to embrace the ordinary.

Wakoski settled in East Lansing after traveling, teaching and living all over the country. Hence, a section of her most recent poetry collection, *The Butcher's Apron*, has the title "A California Girl Moves to Michigan via New York City." One might think that after seeing the world, Wakoski would find Midwestern solidity stultifying, and one can find poems that espouse this point of view; but Wakoski's persistent take on Michigan seems a celebration of apparently small events like those found in the work of two other Midwestern poets, Theodore Roethke and James Wright.

Wakoski's complaints about Michigan correlate well with her affirmations: she faults her Michigan neighbors for their lack of imagination. In "For Clint in East Lansing While I am sitting on the Adriatic Coast," she reports that:

Michigan is not the only place
where there's no appreciation for
native cuisine/what we cannot
forget
Is how civilization and imagination
allow someone to take what is available—
the salmon
or the cherries,
the asparagus,
or millet,
or squid,
or milk,
a certain kind of grape,
rosemary growing wild,
and turn it into
a remarkable food (*The Butcher's Apron* 139)

Even in the few poems where Wakoski complains about Michigan, she links her Midwestern home to art, often comparing East Lansing to a scene from an Edward Hopper painting as in "After Edward Hopper's Marbletop Table: A Sestina for Anne Waldman":

I know my main street
well after twenty years of Midwestern living. At night
it will always be like a painting by Edward Hopper,
and remind me, as do you, that even a moment's flash of
retrospective glamour

is what poetry's about. (*The Butcher's Apron* 185)

And Wakoski often suggests that the limits she sees in the Midwest reflect those of her own mind. In "Our Lady of the Chanterelles," after guessing that Michigan native Judith Minty would find California a more hospitable climate for her lively mind, Wakoski begs Minty to help her see Michigan's beauty:

Our Lady of Chanterelles,
I turn to you. Open your hand: show me the secret,
The beauty of this aging
desolated terrain. (*The Butcher's Apron* 156)

Some poems record Wakoski's ability to see around her in Michigan resonances of the more glamorous landscapes she's inhabited in the past. In "Salad Flowers," she comments:

The
ocean is there, whether it is
California or Michigan. (*The Butcher's Apron* 87).

In "Grain" she sees both Paris and the ocean in East Lansing:

Winter comes every year, crusting over the stubbed grain fields,
here in the midwest
where, driving to work in the snow,
I sometimes think I am in
the city of Paris.

In summer
I look out my back windows into the oak trees,
and pretend that beyond
the back fence
Is the Pacific Ocean. (*The Butcher's Apron* 80).

But most of Wakoski's Michigan poems suggest that she likes her life here precisely because she no longer has to rely so heavily on imagination to transform it. She has found a way to accept and enjoy reality.

In a sense, Wakoski's poetry always had been down to earth. She has earned the right to urge her fellow poet Clayton Eshleman to own his American roots as she does in "Letter with the Ring of Truth":

I chide you, my friend, for exploring
the caves of the Dordogne
rather than meandering on the American continent.

Wakoski speaks the truth when she claims in this poem,

I say I know
my roots,
my American fathers,
And claim my native speech. (*The Butcher's Apron* 113-114)

So, in a way, Wakoski's Michigan poems, which celebrate the richness of daily life, grow naturally from her poetic history if not from her geographic past. But Michigan has also played an important role in Wakoski's personal history. In "The Orange," she writes of a drive through the desert, in flight from her life in California:

You are driving from Los Angeles to Las Vegas,
running from your loneliness, an empty house,
An ocean which brings neither father nor lover.

But as she drives, she comes to feel content and free. In retrospect, she wonders:

Did you see
a map of Michigan filling your hand
as you peeled the big navel orange,
The one which glowed like fireflies
that wink
In Michigan summer nights? (*Medea the Sorceress* 13-14)

As she explains in her collection *Medea*, Michigan is the place where Wakoski married a man who did not betray her; a

kind husband who whispers,
'Poor Diane,' and pulls you closer like a child
To assuage you, to hold you, to love you securely, as no father
as no lover, even the invisible one,
ever has. (*Medea the Sorceress* 180).

And according to Wakoski, her husband, Robert Turney, specializes in taking ordinary events seriously. This is from her poem "Robert Waxes the Car":

Any job—to make a salad,
to wax the car,
remove the icicles,
hanging over our doors,
or to print the perfect negative into flawless
black and white,

he does fulsomely,
to present the gift of the everyday,
a kind of art,
an offering, an image,
shining,
silver,
round and perfect as the
ball studs
pierced into his upper ear. (*The Butcher's Apron* 142)

And so, it makes total sense that Wakoski's poetry often celebrates ordinary Michigan life and that these poems sometimes emphasize Robert's role, as in "Robert's Spaghetti Sauce,"

So this pot with the chopped tomatoes,
olive oil, basil, garlic, oregano and salt,
augmented by a shot
of red wine goes on the simmer. I leave to
go to the twilight movie, and when I return from my
Magic Theatre,
thick German, Polish woman that I am,
I don't find Steppenwolf,
I find Robert, as if he were Prince Machiavelli
ladling his sauce over the *al dente* pasta. He smells fresh
from the shower. We aren't in Italy
just East Lansing. It is a world right out of a book
or a movie;
we don't speak. Eat
together.
Live our imagined life
In autumn's studded light. (*The Butcher's Apron* 171).

Wakoski extends this calm savoring of daily life to all kinds of activities. Even a simple breakfast becomes a rich ritual because Wakoski has come to understand:

Everything
We will ever have
is present
In each day's life. There is no more. ("Breakfast," *Emerald Ice* 317-318).

Draining all one can from each moment means paying close attention to "the small things" as Wakoski does in her poem "Parkin":

Sitting here with words,
with the yew bushes in the Michigan backyard,
covered with pillowy snow,
the bird feeder abandoned by even
our unshowy birds, but now filled,
a small thing,
waiting for the cardinals and blue jays and infinite flocks of sparrow
to discover we're back and offering
the small things....
as we've come home to our small lives
and the small things....
which save us from
desolation. (*The Butcher's Apron* 178-179).

At the end of "Greed" 14, Wakoski asserts that, sometimes, in her current life, the ideal and the real become one for her:

Now we have
the day ahead, the boiling water
poured over tea leaves,
themselves the husk of some other past,
but now eroding their amber
into my cup,
the stain of pleasure slowly
changing the boiling
water into a libation. This is purity.
This is the gold of poetry and art: this silence that is so
eloquent it is both a toast
and a prayer.
The day is mine.
I hold its purity to myself. (*The Butcher's Apron* 248).

Diane Wakoski may have to call upon her considerable imaginative powers to make her life in East Lansing rich and it may strike her as dull when glamorous visitors pass through town, but Wakoski's poetry suggests that Michigan has become a genuine, even nourishing home for her. Her Midwestern life has brought her that appreciation of the commonplace that shapes the work of the finest Midwestern writers. Indeed, Sherwood Anderson declared a Robin's Egg Renaissance underway in the Midwest because he felt that his contemporaries, like himself, had recovered "the faith that came out of the ground" that he lost while under the influence of "the sons of New Englanders who brought books and smart sayings into our Mid-

America" (190). Under the influence of this recovered faith, Anderson saw the beauty of ordinary experience, lives and language. This same faith pervades Diane Wakoski's Michigan poems.

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LAND AND SPIRIT: THE PROSE AND POETRY OF LINDA HASSELSTROM

MARY DEJONG OBUCHOWSKI

Although Linda Hasselstrom was not born on the land where she grew up, in her writing she describes a profound attachment to it that is a kind of microview of her respect and love for the environment in general and the northern prairie in particular. When she heard of Navajo rituals centered on land, she adopted them and added to them ceremonies and objects from other cultures that seemed to reinforce her spiritual connections. Land and spirit play back and forth in her prose and poetry so that it almost seems that when she describes one she is at the same time illuminating the other.

This land that so informs her life and vision is a cattle ranch near Hermosa in southwestern South Dakota, hardly the place, one would think, for a spiritual vision, and on one level indeed it is not. An only child and thus a recruit to all aspects of ranch work, she learned early to deal with angry steers, ankle-deep manure, the bloody and often painful process of delivering calves, and chasing what seem to be impossibly stupid heifers from danger to safety when they don't understand that it's for their own good. Except for the brief period of prairie flower bloom in the spring, the weather is never gentle — too dry, too stormy, too windy, or too cold, and the encroachment of farming on what was grassland damages the soil nearly beyond repair. Yet the harshness of the life, the aridity and rough beauty of the grassland and hills, have captivated her and have generated a fierce protectiveness that expands far beyond the bounds of her own fences.

Her four books of personal prose explain such aspects of her life as she chooses to share and present from several perspectives. They may be said to represent passages: *Going Over East* (1987), the passage from one pasture to another, including the natural features and

history of each piece of land; *Windbreak* (1987), the passage of a year on the ranch, season by season; and *Feels Like Far: A Rancher's Life on the Great Plains* (2001), her passage from childhood into maturity. In the clusters of essays in *Land Circle: Writings Collected from the Land* (1991), one group deals with neighborliness and another with coping with death in midlife. Her poetry often reflects the same themes as does her prose and interacts with it when poems appear in the books of prose. Her books of poetry include *Dakota Bones: The Collected Poems of Linda Hasselstrom* (1993), in which she gathered her earlier volumes into one, and *Bitter Creek Junction* (2000). In the poetry as in the prose, she takes details from ranch life or the prairie but goes beyond the prose by shaping those details into metaphors that put into focus the larger themes of her writing. For instance, in the poem "Grandmother" she lists the few material things her dead grandmother left behind as representations of the nurturing which lives after her:

She left us little: brown unlabeled pictures,
a dozen crocheted afghans, piles of patched jeans.
In the cellar, crowded shelves bear jars of beans,
peas, corn, meat.
Labels like silent mouths
open and close in the dark. (*Dakota Bones* 10)

Perhaps it is the details that betray Hasselstrom's affection for the prairie and for the life that formed her views. It seems that every time she walks outside (that is, when she has the leisure to walk for pleasure) she must catalogue the plants and animals that she sees or expects to see: the birds as they return from the South, the flowers that bloom on a particular day, or the kinds of grass (and the unique qualities of each) that might grow in a particular spot. On a camping trip, for example, she says: "I treated myself to a long walk just to look at the flowers this morning; the varieties here so different than at home. Clutching my wildflower book, I found dogtooth violets, wild hyacinths, sego lilies, alpine buttercups, blue columbine, cinquefoil, lupine" (*Windbreak* 184-185).

The fact that her family raised its beef without fertilizers, herbicides, or pesticides and with minimal plowing of the soil or diversion of water explains her urgency to preserve the nature of the land from encroachment. It is natural, then, that she should attempt to prevent development that would change the nature of the soil and importa-

tion of waste from elsewhere. Such waste might take any of several forms—from trash that would render the area useless to nuclear waste that would poison it for centuries. She admits that her activism against using the vast stretches of South Dakota as a trash dump antagonized some of her neighbors, who saw money and jobs coming into the state as a result, but she has remained adamant.

A number of symbols carry out these themes and of them, I believe, three are particularly significant: circles, prairie grass, and weaving. In the aptly titled *Land Circle*, Hasselstrom explains her personal attachment to the particular piece of land on which she grew up and extends the personal and physical to the spiritual, citing Navajo rituals that express the faith she had developed without previously verbalizing it. In *Feels Like Far*, for example, she writes, "I have come to believe that both my physical life and my spirit are so deeply connected to that particular plot of land, the family ranch, that I might be a stalk of grass myself, rooted in arid and meager soil" (2). A few lines later, she continues, "[a] Navajo may conduct her spiritual ceremonies privately, in a certain site in a particular landscape. As soon as I learned of this Navajo manner of prayer, I identified with it" (3). She documents this by quoting Black Elk, an Oglala Lakota:

[E]verything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tried to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation . . . This knowledge came to us from the outer world with our religion. . . . The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood and so it is in everything where power moves. Our tipis were round like the nests of birds and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children (*Land Circle* 240).

He, I might add, is but one of the Native Americans she quotes to similar effect. In *Going Over East*, she brings land and circularity further together, asserting

I think of our lives as circular: Our work is dedicated not just to profit-making but literally to feeding ourselves. We are sometimes able to choose work that sustains us mentally, or at least gives us variety, and to plan our own days rather than working to a schedule set up by someone else. But the steady rhythm of night turning to day, spring to summer, birth to death, the progress of the moon and sun, the

sweep of wind and rain—those natural cycles determine how we arrange our lives. What does not fit into the smooth circle of our days, into the repeating cycle of the seasons, does not belong here (36).

She connects the state of the land to prairie grass, which has disappeared from the landscape more quickly than it can reproduce. She says, for example, "Any crop that requires plowing this land will ruin it" (253). She is not the only environmentalist writing out of the Midwest to be concerned about this. In *Living Downstream* (1998) and *Out of this World* (1996), Sandra Steingraber and Mary Swander both use prairie grass as symbols. For Steingraber, the grass is an example of and a metaphor for her roots and for ordinariness; its disappearance becomes a synecdoche for the effects of industrial and agricultural growth on matters that touch all of us. The same impulses which shaved the land of its original prairie flora replaced those grasses with domestic crops (increasingly poisoned by herbicides and pesticides), introduced gas-fueled cultivators and harvesters, and encouraged industry nurtured by population growth and easy transportation by rail, river, and highway.

Hasselstrom would certainly agree with Steingraber, as she would with Swander, when she says she has "come to rage at the way the prairie has been ravaged by the people who settled the Midwest, my ancestors and the pioneer women among them," where the native grasses had "been sustaining populations of Native Americans for hundreds of years without much cultivation. The prairie was, and still is, devalued" (168). She describes her decision to discover ways to search out native species of plants — weeds, to us — that she can use for food, and that will have the advantages of resisting drought and pests and growing organically. She asks, "What if, deep down in our own tissues, we began to feel the changes these native foods brought? The return of a portion of control over our food sources, our physical and mental health, and balance of our natural environment" (169-71). To her, bringing back the prairie plants would not only return a source of beauty but also provide a healthy, sustainable source of food.

For Hasselstrom the grass represents, in addition to her sense of rootedness to place, a loss that people have imposed upon the earth, and the damage that must be repaired, if it is not beyond repair. She says, "Though the marvelously resilient earth and its plants and animals may survive, it will be unable to sustain human life. We will

become the people who murdered ourselves, and did it knowingly" (*Land Circle* 259).

The third symbol, which appears less frequently but with no less importance, is weaving. Hasselstrom seems to associate it with creativity, heritage, and the roles of women, all of which are closely linked. Perhaps the most powerful representation comes in a poem dedicated to the political activist, feminist, and poet Meridel Le Sueur. It is worth quoting at length:

Tapestry

.....
 She stretches, sighs, begins untying knots,
 loosening the threads
 that bound her to this day,
 seeking the strands
 knotted over the door
 to sleep. . . .
 Their weaving blanketed the earth,
 supple and strong.

Then one and another of the shuttles
 stopped; the tired old hands lay still,
 were planted in the earth they patched and tended,
 made sacred by their work, their burial. . . . (*Dakota Bones* 92)

Women's hands in Hasselstrom's writing not only weave but sew, cook, can, bring up children, and tend to their men. In a poem titled "Hands," the author's own hands "hold a calf, / . . . pour cake / for the yearlings, seed for the garden / to feed my family" (*Dakota Bones* 50). The ranch wives whose hands she also cites do not call themselves feminists. For example, in "Clara: In the Post Office," a woman describes how she not only can repair a tractor but can fix its carburetor and fill in "when the hired man didn't come to work." Still, she illustrates some of the strongest qualities of feminism in spite of saying, "That's not feminism; that's just good sense" (*Dakota Bones* 100).

Hasselstrom herself is far more activist and outspoken. The title poem of *Bitter Creek Junction* represents her advocacy of women at its most vivid. This three-part, first-person narrative records a stop made by a solitary woman driver at a dilapidated gas station/grocery store, where she encounters a battered woman and child but is unable to speak or act on the woman's behalf because both are surrounded by not only the batterer but other leering men. However, she slips money to the child. In the second part the narrator recalls that hunters

sometimes find anonymous bones buried in the wilderness. In the third, she imagines that the woman, having had enough, plots the murder of her abuser, waits, carries it out, dumps the body in the desert, carries on at "the bar the way she always did," and says she will "Maybe move / next summer." The note at the end of the poem says, "Written for the battered woman at the place I call Bitter Creek for her protection" (63-70).

Hasselstrom and two friends solicited manuscripts from women all over the West, selected, and edited them. In *Leaning into the Wind: Women Write from the Heart of the West* (1997), and later in *Woven on the Wind: Women Write About Friendship in the Sagebrush West* (2001), we see dozens of essays, letters, reminiscences, and other prose and poetry from the hands of Western women which share deeply held beliefs, vivid experiences, aching hardship, and close-knit friendships, experiences and feelings sometimes never before expressed.

In addition, since the deaths of her husband and her father, she has been unable to run the ranch alone, but she has turned it to good purpose. Perhaps her strongest and most active role has been to encourage young women writers by conducting workshops there, at Windbreak house, as well as elsewhere.

Hasselstrom sees in women, especially country women, the qualities that constitute awareness of the importance of the earth and the drive to take responsibility for the damage done to it. As women are most in touch with the processes of birth and death, so women are the right ones to "lead the attempt to rethink our relationship to it" (*Land Circle* 279). Thus, the circle is complete. The processes of the land and life are circular; the circle is being broken, damaged; and women, being most involved with the circularity of life and what is necessary for it, are also necessary to save our damaged world.

What does all this have to do with spirit? The spirit is in the land, in the circular processes of life and death, of the seasons, even of the shape of the earth. Hasselstrom feels particularly tied to her small section of South Dakota but realizes that it is not isolated. What endangers it and what touches it, and her, in spiritual ways, cannot be separated from each other. If she is awed by the circle of stones at Stonehenge and admires the Aboriginal mothers who teach their children to respect the surface of the earth, these acts reverberate with the natural processes that so tie her to her small portion of land on the Great Plains. What is essential to save there applies equally to the

Great Plains. What is essential to save there applies equally to the rest of our endangered planet.

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BOUNDLESSNESS LIMITED BY SKIN:
AMERICANA AND ARTIFICE IN ALICE FULTON'S
"UNWANTING"

DANIEL NESTER

In *The Poet's Notebook*, a 1997 collection of excerpts from twenty-six contemporary American poets' notebooks, Alice Fulton transcribes a rather famous quotation from country singer Dolly Parton: "Most people spend so much time looking natural, when somebody like me takes less time to look artificial" (47). Because the timeline is approximately right, I have always liked to think that Fulton was sketching out a study for her poem, "Unwanting," which first appeared in the literary journal *Epoch* and was later published in her 1995 collection, *Sensual Math*. On the surface, the Parton quotation is similar to "Unwanting" in its use of comic relief to address rather serious subject matter. Both also raise very potent questions of what is "natural" and "artificial" in an American experience rife with excess and artifice. Fulton addresses these themes in "Unwanting," pitting descriptions of Middle Americana against what I will say is the thing represented: reality, memory, and ultimately, death, what the poem calls the "exdream."

Unwanting
Laura Fulton Carpenter, 1969-1990
Laura: Latin feminine of laurus, bay laurel

1

As the wave grew ample in the outer mantle
of her mind, my mother dreamed
she was at Laura's grave.
There was a picket fence around it,
and inside, a little tree. From each of its leaves

a discrete fragrance reached:
a carnation, lilac, rose, and more.
She thought—a tree like this will never need flowers.

2

When she woke, day was undimming
the windows with so much *enough*
that some leaked into the house.
Over her instant "cup of dust,"
the freeze-dried stuff, and muffin with Promise
that wasn't an abstraction but safflower oil
spread thin, she could still smell
the hardy perfumes—bloom split into bloom's
constituents—within the fence.
She had "Today," her morning shows, the heater
rumbling when she summoned. The touch-tone to me.
But she wanted that tree.

3

(To get a grip on memory, hold your hands apart
like so
and think of this space, though definite,
can be minced into ever and much
smaller bits. And staring at that boundlessness
limited by skin, you'll grasp it: things go
farther into diminishment
and still exist.)

4

I'd like my presence this hour
to be idolatrous—to have and to hold
the instant rather than the else:
the meadows—held by winter purl—and galaxies
of books against the wall.
The synapses of taste, touch, tone
and sight. Of smell—
that helps us know things at a distance.

5

"I was scared of the fence.
But the tree I just loved.
Where did anybody get a tree like that?"

6

When the hushed philharmonic of the lightning
bugs upstaged the Independence Day displays,
I realized one firefly—
the minimal—could not have
turned the tree sidereal.
We put out the headlights to take it all in.

7

Desiring is nothing to having
the night sing to you in scents or gem.
Trees of completion—presence—and immersion,
what can compete with the unwanting—
the exdream—the world gone into god again? (69-70)

(Note: stanza numbers have been given for reference purposes.)

At its core, the poem's language and meaning focus on separation—physiological phenomena, physical boundaries. My essay will try to make out a system of Fulton's images with, I think, greater and lesser degrees of success. The enterprise is very much worth the effort, however, since a fuller reading of Fulton's poem, as with all great poems, bears fruit and helps us find possible alternative readings, especially when one unpacks the words, images, and sounds. "Unwanting" addresses issues of what I call Americana, boosted and contradicted by an artificiality and, ultimately, death. All of these focal points support what I call the poem's "thesis" in stanza three's last lines: "things go/farther into diminishment/and still exist." The poem moves away from an objective tone of a narrative in stanzas one and two. Although it maintains a pastoral element of Americana that describes the speaker's mother's dream and life, the poem dovetails abstract, elegiac commentary into the narrative situation by poem's end. After the parenthetical, indented third stanza, a commentative strand takes over, builds momentum, and switches the poem's point of view. This culminates in the poem's final statement-as-question: "what can compete with the unwanting—/the exdream—the world gone into god again?" As we move along here in the poem in a slow, deliberate fashion, it is my hope that we can appreciate how this meditative lyric's images of Americana are wedded to Middle America, the place where the poem was composed, the place that inspired it. But I also want to point out the poem's many negations. I wouldn't go so far as to say these negations offer some

sociopolitical comment on an artificial American experience, but they do counterbalance the memories and feelings that images of Americana have long offered.

On a mechanical level, the poem's internal rhyme, regular consonantal sound system, and irregular line lengths all support a sense of boundaries, of hesitation. This hesitant tone underscores the internal dialogue of the poem, its binary narrative-commentary strands. Let's take a look at stanza one:

As the wave grew ample in the outer mantle
of her mind, my mother dreamed
she was at Laura's grave.
There was a picket fence around it,
and inside, a little tree. From each of its leaves
a discrete fragrance reached:
a carnation, lilac, rose, and more.
She thought—a tree like this will never need flowers.

Let's also backtrack briefly to the poem's two epigraphs. One names a person whose life ends prematurely (at twenty-one years). The second outlines the etymology of that same person's name. Thus, the reader is encouraged by these two epigraphs to think of both a physical being as well as the name of that person on a language/ word-oriented level. Much of stanza one's commentary is, ultimately, separate from emotion, or least emotionally reticent. Several possible readings of the poem's sense denote a separation; some are literal, some are abstract. The first line's "outer mantle," for example, carries a curious ambiguity: we have one meaning, that of a cloak or garment; another that of a covering; and still another, that of the geological region between the Earth's crust and core. The meanings of "wave," too, ring with ambiguity. A wave is a ridge of water, or something that represents or implies this, and is also a single curve in the course of a wave. Any and all of these meanings may apply, since we are talking about a person's "mind," which poets and philosopher have always broken down into elements and metaphor.

But what is curious here in our artifice-as-Americana reading is that, from the very first line of the poem, we witness both the concretized and ethereal. The imagined, clichéd Americana of "picket fence" around this more conceivable, literal grave also denotes a separation. Compared with the solemn "grave," "picket fence" sets a mood; but it also carries a certain American pastoral weight, similar

to stanza six's "Independence Day" scene, as we will see. The "discrete fragrances" from "each" lead the reader's ear into a sound-level poetic compartmentalization with, one could say, no real, literal resolution. The use of "discrete" is the first of many unlikely syntactical moves that hinge on the ambiguity of the word's meaning, in this case a question of being discontinuous or individual. The stanza's last line introduces the emblem of a narrative strand that the poem will follow through on: the tree that appears in the mother's dream, addressed as if it is real, one that would give off distinct smells from different flowers, but nonetheless "will never need flowers." One thinks of an installation piece instead of a tree, inside a picket fence, giving off different smells; an Americana-as-artifice smell memory machine, if you will.

We're hardly inside an ideal or simple prosodic scenario here. Regardless of the overwhelming smell from the indefinite amount of flowers needed from this "little tree," we are placed in realms of synesthesia and a diminishing metaphor. For instance, the tree is called upon to represent all-encompassing "trees of completion" by poem's end. This kind of illogical logic is supported with definitive verb forms (i.e., "will," "to," and "still"). The use of internal rhyme through long verb sounds, too, in particular the long-*e* sound, creates a singsongy quality. In the poem, words that unnaturally appear together—line one's "As the wave grew *ample* in the outer *mantle*" and "From *each* of its *leaves*/a discrete fragrance *reached*" (italics mine)—are not only supposed to make sense: they are part of the narration. To be sure, the long-vowel sound cacophony is in part due to the repetition of the word "tree," and is imitated by other words, as the abstracted commentary imitates a real life. The varying line lengths throughout the stanza, too, are carried throughout the poem, which adds to a hesitant quality and prompts borderlines of thought: 12-, 9-, and 7-syllable lines are stacked on top of each other, and the effect borders the lines' prosody. Two of stanza one's three 12-syllable lines bracket the stanza and impart a tone of definitiveness of what has been said, suggesting that it was all true.

When she woke, day was undimming
the windows with so much *enough*
that some leaked into the house.
Over her instant "cup of dust,"
the freeze-dried stuff, and muffin with Promise
that wasn't an abstraction but safflower oil

spread thin, she could still smell
 the hardy perfumes—bloom split into bloom's
 constituents—within the fence.
 She had "Today," her morning shows, the heater
 rumbling when she summoned. The touch-tone to me.
 But she wanted that tree.

Stanza two is the aftereffect, the residue of stanza one's dream. Words such as "undimming" and "leaked" break down the barriers, respectively, of "fragrances" and the "mantle" and "fence" of stanza one. The rather Hopkinsian negations in the "-un" and "-ex" prefixes, too, break down strands of logic: "undimming" is more than just a play on "dim" and an artful way to say "illuminating." It is emblematic of the way of the whole poem, negating what is being said in an opposite tautology, and through this we have a peculiar order. In other words, there is second, shadow set of concrete, domestic images that jibes with the border creating, abstracting, and fissioning of those descriptions. The "day" undims; it is "leaked into the house." It would be obvious for sunlight to do so; on a prosodic level, then, we're prompted into synesthetic skepticism at its clearest level. We grasp for the literal here, searching for meaning, only to be rebuked, "with so much *enough*."

But it's not until this stanza's use of commercial product names that we get down to the real Americana-as-artifice nitty-gritty. Promise—what a great brand name to use in a poem—is a kind of margarine, an artificial butter spread that regularly appears on many an American retiree's breakfast table. The poem makes a point of pointing out the artificiality of this "Promise"—it "wasn't an abstraction but safflower oil/spread thin." Some readers of a certain age may also remember the Promise ad campaigns. One slogan seems apt for our reading here: "It's not nice to fool Mother Nature." "Promise," literally and figuratively, isn't real, isn't "promise"; it's a physical substance that has been broken down, "spread thin." Perhaps more relevant to our reading of Americana-as-artifice is the instant coffee, described in the poem by the mother as a "cup of dust." The coffee is described by someone who, plainly put, has actually *seen* dust and would have that word on the tip of her tongue. These rather *Grapes of Wrath* images could deflate, if not negate, stanza one's "picket fence": both are colloquial, down-home terms, presented immediately after separation and border terminology, in this case

the hardy perfumes—bloom split into bloom's
 constituents—within the fence

Again, borders separated by borders. One is reminded of the last few lines of William Carlos Williams's "Queen-Ann's-Lace," another image-negation poem "machine," as Williams himself defines poems:

Each flower is a hand's span
 of her whiteness. Wherever
 his hand has lain there is
 a tiny purple blemish. Each part
 is a blossom under his touch
 to which the fibers of her being
 stem one by one, each to its end,
 until the whole field is a
 white desire, empty, a single stem,
 a cluster, flower by flower,
 a pious wish to whiteness gone over—
 or nothing. (21-22)

In "Unwanting," the "bloom" is "split" into its "constituents," one of many Latinates used in the poem, and put "within the fence," a concrete term that a reader would normally take as straightforward. But this reader, at least, has to remind himself again that it is a fence *from a dream*, soon to be the "exdream" by poem's end. Even the warm, approachable tone, the down-home, concretized account of the mother's daily life is held at bay through tone, syntax, and sense. As in the Williams poem, I see the use of sound as compounding the rattling effect on the poem's meaning for the reader. Granted, it is simple enough to say that a poem's sound is distinctive or unlike common speech. But it's quite another thing to explore how the sound parallels and supports strands of logic in a poem. Even so, the reader may end up asking what the point *is* in the poem, what all this listing, for instance, is *leading up to*. This questioning, to my mind, is compounded by a mellifluous *f*-sound repetition in this stanza "enough," "stuff," "muffin," and "safflower." Only one of these terms ("enough") is used in a truly poetic way; it personifies comments coming out of a certain room, presumably from the speaker or the speaker's mother, while the remaining three deflate a classic image of a pastoral, peaceful breakfast scene.

The reference to *The Today Show*, or “Today,” really takes the Americana-as-artifice cake, and continues the *leitmotif* of introduced-then-debunked terminology for the next two stanzas. *The Today Show*, for those readers who do not have a TV, is NBC’s long-running morning show, which for the past ten years has maintained a stage outside its studio in Rockefeller Center in midtown Manhattan. I worked as a proofreader for advertising agencies in that area for a couple of years, and I can assure you that, far from being a hip venue for native New Yorkers to stop by, it’s an island for early-rising tourists from the middle of the country to get on TV, often with signs for friends and relatives back home (random sample from a recent morning’s telecast: “Hi Grandma in Lansing, MI”; “Kansas City Cheerleader Champs!!!”). *The Today Show* experience—I would say, as have many others—is one of Americana looking at itself, a manifestation of the Americana artifice’s self-gaze. The tone in the poem comes from that antiseptic variety of imagery, and how it packs its wallop from the difficulty of broaching the subject matter at hand—namely, a mother dreaming of the grave of her daughter, her daily life at home described by a sympathetic speaker—because of the gratuitousness of the poem’s hesitant, irregular quality.

This hesitation, this Midwestern reticence, culminates in the end of stanza two’s rim-shot punch line—“But she wanted that tree.” Before this line, there is a pause, an out-of-breath end stop after the speaker’s catalogue of items. The packed-in *e*-sound (“she,” “tree”) reminds the reader of the poem’s opening passage, the dream of the mother; the effect of recalling this dream provides a kind of precarious balance until the poem’s end. Stanza three’s parenthetical indent, for instance, will address the reader directly, as if conscious of the two warring elements the poem had dealt with thus far, aware that a respite is needed from the warring elements of memory and commentary.

(To get a grip on memory, hold your hands apart
like so
and think of this space, though definite,
can be minced into ever and much
smaller bits. And staring at that boundlessness
limited by skin, you’ll grasp it: things go
farther into diminishment
and still exist.)

This indented, colloquial aside reduces meaning to linear statement. It is presented as directions, not unlike a cooking segment on a talk show such as *The Today Show*. The words “can be minced into ever and much/smaller bits” seem straight out of *Iron Chef*, except we’re talking about “this space” of memory, not onions for a nonfattening soup. There’s also reassurance here that you will be able to grasp the space/memory the speaker is speaking about. The tone here is instructional, but also reassuring, maternal. It’s almost metrically regular as well, and notice that it rhymes (“so”/“go”, “bits”/“exist”). In short, it’s pure, plainspoken Americana, which, much like the Dolly Parton quotation from Fulton’s notebook, talks about an artifice “limited by skin.” Stanza three acknowledges the predicament of borders, limits, consciousness, and, ultimately, that of the poem; the narrative and commentative strands switch gears, as does its sound-meaning. Beyond fulfilling those tonal requirements, however, the stanza is a distraction: stanza six’s Independence Day narration will depict another distraction, a break in attention span that, in a prosaic sense, adds to the characterization of the speaker.

Because of this uneasy dance between real emotion and its negation, between images of Americana and its artificiality, and with it a documentarian’s struggle to avoid condescension to her subject, it would be acceptable by stanza three not to trust the poem’s speaker. Such distrust may help the poem along, you could even say; we are, after all, being taught about distances, about separation. The speaker seems to be giving these directions for personal as well as poetic benefits, as if it’s a brass-tacks, bucolic lesson in distance, in borders. How are we to be taught this lesson of separation and memory, the speaker seems to be asking, without being separated from something? Structurally and tonally, the internal rhymes are still present, albeit quieter; to my ears, thought, it is a hollowed-out version of the *e*-sounds or the loping, soft consonantal system of stanza two’s *f*-sounds and internal rhyme. The stanza supplants these with the softer *t*- and *s*-sounds. And then we get to the poem’s thesis statement, “things go/farther into diminishment/and still exist.”

Stanza three eludes the reader rhythmically—what is addressed, we think, is no different than stanza one’s fantastical narration or stanza two’s border-breakdown *leitmotif*. But in the first two stanzas, the 12-syllable lines are the support beams. They carry less emotional weight than the shorter, more succinct lines, and they impart less meaning. But they do add to the poem’s chatty tone. In my suc-

cessive readings, I imagine stanza three as an 8-line hiatus from form, content, and meaning. Call it a poem-within-a-poem ("The stanza's the thing!") that plays by its own rules and prosody. Ultimately, however, the reader is not allowed to enter this internal poem as literally, or at least get inside the thought of the speaker or both speakers. To "get a grip," we are told to hold our arms apart

like so

And so, there the reader is, holding out hands, twiddling thumbs, told to imagine memory for no other reason than for the information it provides. The directions given lead up to the larger, prosodic point: "things go farther into diminishment/and still exist." Arguably, the last two lines could have gotten this message across by themselves.

So why is this stanza in the poem? The very use of parentheses, as well as indention, forms a palpable border around the stanza, a "picket fence," a "boundlessness/limited by skin." By the time we reach an explanation of this "boundlessness" and "memory," we realize it is a kind of parlor trick, and speaker's authority hits bottom. Fulton uses a kitchen-sink, mild concrete poetry approach to get across an image of physical space—"like so." The gesture is explicit, followed by a quieter-sounding syntax and off-rhyme scheme ("minced," "diminishment," "bits," and "skin"). In stanza one, the diminishment was manifest in the grave, the picket fence that surrounds it, and the tree that emits "discrete" fragrances from within the fence. In stanza two, the idea of real-world artificiality is shown with instant coffee, "Promise," "perfume" (instead of the natural world's term, stanza one's "fragrance"), a heater that is "summoned," a call to daughter with a touch tone.

Stanza three's direct tone, on the other hand, has this reader twiddling thumbs and hands. The body becomes involved, like watching an exercise tape. Another narrative situation, introduced in stanza five, will maintain a balance of narrative and commentative tones that support the notion that no memory can be understood. The narrative returns in stanza four's rather declamatory tone, one that reminds the reader of an accountable speaker. I say this not only because of the introduction of the speaker's "I," but because all answers provided to the borders question have been loaded with representation, and so the speaker as well as the reader must get involved:

I'd like my presence this hour
to be idolatrous—to have and to hold
the instant rather than the else:
the meadows—held by winter purl—and galaxies
of books against the wall.
The synapses of taste, touch, tone
and sight. Of smell—
that helps us know things at a distance.

The "idolatry" here, I would say, is another version of Americana, the idol instead of the thing idolized. This representation of nature is another separation: an embroidered, or "purl"[ed], representation of nature. These lines mark yet another separation, the frame that surrounds the image. This stanza's personal statement talks us through the issues in the poem thus far: the speaker's presence is equated with the instant, the point where nature takes a back seat to humankind's attempt to imitate, even perfect, the natural world. The tone of stanza four, as in stanza two, contains the sound- and literal-meaning residue of the previous stanzas. In stanza two's "leaking," we are led to the last line's comment by the mother.

In stanza four, we also arrive at the key word of the poem's prosody: "distance." Stanza three's "diminishment" and "minced," as well as so much of the rest of the poem's scenes and scenarios, address this issue of distance. It is a testament to the poet's and the speaker's hesitancy that a word as unmitigated as "distance" sounds so immediate, even refreshing to read. The main point of stanza four—to acknowledge the differences of senses, rather than stanza one's sense-bundling—is an attempt to bridge the gap of commentary and narrative, and, as we shall see by the testimonial stanza five, narration will take over, dovetailed or stitched-in with commentary. The speaker jump-starts dialogue between the self and "else": perhaps the abstract, perhaps the mother, probably a combination of the two, a distinction the speaker would probably not care to recognize. Just as the mother enjoys her instant coffee—her "cup of dust"—the speaker enjoys the referred rather than the referent, the account rather than event, the stitched and framed embroidery "held by winter purl" rather than meadows it portrays.

I have long felt I would be stretching my reading of the poem a bit here if I relate it to my notion of Americana as artifice as an overriding theme in the poem. But then I came upon other fragments in *The Poet's Notebook*, where Fulton asks, "Why do we value what is

real? Rather than imitation? Real in what sense?" Here's another fragment: "Book Shapes: The unwanted. Enough. The line infinite & closed. Surfeit rather than desire. To have rather than yearn or lose" (47). Fulton echoes the marriage vows in this stanza ("to have and to hold"), I think, to ask how, when our desire is satisfied, is that feeling satisfied again, if we are to assume one always feels desire. If we assume again that these notes are studies for "Unwanted," we see that Fulton is also thinking about the very act of writing, the "books on the wall" as a "picket fence" around words, a border as well as a consummation of desire. If questions about what to do with a surfeit of material things a person has isn't an American question, I'm left wondering what is.

So with that out of the way, some words about the primary sense of the poem: smell. It can be said that the olfactory sense, equated with "distance" in this stanza, is the most honest and pure of senses. Indeed, there is no way to ignore smell or not smell except by distance. Something stinks or something doesn't, just as something is fragrant or simply isn't appealing. The only real way to get away from a bad smell is to walk away. There are no grand aesthetic debates over smells, nor is there a literature of olfactory criticism, as in music or painting. The main sources of smells are either fragrance makers—perfumes, great foods, coffee—or things that simply stink—dog shit, body odor, a decomposed body. There's no middle ground in a smell argument, as there may be for "taste, touch, tone/and sight." This argument for the appeal of the idea of smell, that it "helps us know things at a distance," also benefits the reader in decoding what has motivated the poem's argument: that by recognizing the senses we use to perceive distance, we can actually distance ourselves from the perception of that distance and see that the world's artifice, the Middle Americana landscape, far from being robust, is in fact fragile and ephemeral.

By stanza four we've gone full circle in the poem's argument. As we have at the end of each stanza in this poem, another distinct device is about to be foisted upon us, stanza five's testimonial:

"I was scared of the fence.
But the tree I just loved.
Where did anybody get a tree like that?"

After the back-and-forth of distance and perception, and the narration filtered through a filmic eye and a breakdown of senses, stanza

four's snippet of dialogue turns the poem again on its own head. The quotation, presumably from the mother of stanzas one and two, reminds the reader of the dream, the tree, the grave, and also the border, the fence, which the stanza's speaker is "scared of." The mother's re-introduction here is the most haphazard move in the poem. It grounds the readers over the sense of the poem, but it also holds us at a distance. Put another way, it's a case of too much information (a "surfeit"): we don't feel privileged enough to hear this. Because of the distance and point-of-view tricks from the poem thus far, the quoted passage is perceived as a found object and is treated with commensurate skepticism. There is a sheen of genuineness, a generosity that echoes stanza two's convalescence vignette. The reader may also detect some mild senility—"Where did anybody get a tree like that?"—or at least infer that someone is getting over being upset, an attempt at comic relief from what was a disturbing vision. The plain-spoken tone, however, is deceiving; the stanza's meaning is yet another microcosm of the poem's arguments. The fence is mentioned, as is the tree, in dramatic terms, an eclogue from a pastoral where the narration-commentary balance must be held. It is Shakespeare's "visitation scene" where Henry V is visiting the common soldiers, the real King asking questions about himself and the upcoming battle. Again, as in stanza two's punch line, we are reminded of the tree, and an *e*-sound is repeated to echo the poem's sound-meaning scheme. In dialogue, narration and commentary meet, and it can be said that stanza five is the quiet epicenter of the poem, a continuation of stanza three's inertia and stanza four's assertions regarding distance.

The next stanza begins with a first-person vignette, another distraction:

When the hushed philharmonic of the lightning
bugs upstaged the Independence Day displays,
I realized one firefly—
the minimal—could not have
turned the tree sidereal.
We put out the headlights to take it all in.

The pastoral stanza six, as mentioned earlier, echoes and fulfills the image of stanza two's Americana. There is an element of finality embedded in the narrative approach to the commentary; rather than the hand exercise of stanza three or an argument of small-distances

in stanza four, both narration and commentary work toward proving the same point: that the smallest of stimuli can distract from the most grandiose. Just "one firefly" can "upstage" that ultimate sacrament of Americana, the Fourth of July fireworks, to the point of distraction; we "know things at a distance." From the use of the past tense and our assumption of a mother-speaker relationship from our reading of the poem up to this point, we can assume this is a childhood memory or at least one that involves family. The tone here is one of resignation to nature; for the first and only time, nature is pictured in real-world, real-time terms. And although the speaker realizes that the "minimal" version of the real thing, rather than the fantasia of fireworks, cannot displace a vision ("turn the tree sidereal"), the stanza offers an appreciation of the lightning bugs' "hushed philharmonic," the natural world. The ambiguity of "philharmonic," involving a society of like-minded fireflies, is another type of fragmentation, an attempt at naming each "smaller bit"—a stitch of embroidery, a cacophony of smell. "Sidereal," meaning "of or measured by the stars," also implies documentation, placing or domesticating the visionary within a frame, no matter how fantastical. The double *e*-sound of "tree sidereal" reminds us again of the tree-dream and is part of the overall sound-meaning scheme. (Here's a statistic: long vowel sounds dominate the poem: out of fifty-one lines, only eight do not have long vowel sounds.)

The distractions of the light, as in stanza two's "undimming," also comment on the sense of sight: all it takes to distract one by sight is fireworks or fireflies, turning off the headlights to "take it all in." The speaker, on the most basic level, is trying to say the dream of stanza one explains her daughter's death and somehow allays the mother's grief, as if that sense merely required some sieve, unlike stanza four's "synapses" that hold certain overloads at bay, to "know things at a distance," light or grief. There is a sense of relief in knowing the soul cannot wholly obsess, that distraction and distance are lifesaving, natural tendencies. The poem's last stanza wraps up the commentary began in stanza six:

Desiring is nothing to having
the night sing to you in scents or gem.
Trees of completion—presence—and immersion,
what can compete with the unwanting—
the exdream—the world gone into god again?

One of the great points about this poem is that when there is distraction or borders, when one element is separated from another, there is a judgment, a "desire" to "compete" between one and the other. In the process of that inevitable choice, there is at least a second of distraction, like the "hushed philharmonic" or fireflies, the "instant rather than the else" of domestic comfort, or the idyllic "Trees of completion" in stanza seven. One does not choose because of want or need of exclusion; rather, one chooses because of an accumulation of experience, stanza four's "galaxies/ of books," or stanza seven's "immersion." The poem works not because it makes some rather quaint comment on how Americana is full of artifice; anyone who has seen the bathos and pageantry of a fireworks display can draw that conclusion. The poem is effective because of its equating distraction and artificiality with unconscious desire, instant coffee with an "idolatrous" space between nature and the self, characterized by sense.

It would be unfair to say the last lines of the poem, "what can compete with the unwanting/the exdream—the world gone into god again?" can be paraphrased as direct competition between god and the natural world. What should be taken away from the poem is an idea of free will, that assigning these classifications is the ultimately humane task of naming, again an exploitation of our notions of Edenic Americana, separation, border-creation, the speaker's "unwanting." What these last lines address is the aesthetic debate of preternatural versus organic, how human relationships prevent us from direct criticism, just as the speaker relates to the mother. Remember that this commentary, by combining itself with narration in stanzas four, six, and seven, attempts to find the order of things through borders, separation through representation, and what we have in the end is, in part, an elegy to the American landscape, the pastoral, very human in intent. No choice was really made between the two strands in the poem, but only one can really be addressed at a time. In this sense, death is perhaps the ultimate order, the "world gone into god again," a continuous cycle that makes "compete"[ing] with nature a moot, absurd point. Let's throw in the biblical sound-meaning ambiguity of the word "dust"—"for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3: 19). The poem attempts to move outside the sophisticated arguments it is making, whether through plainspoken language, or through narration, or through making the speaker just accountable enough to the reader to empathize with the

personal sense and feeling. The poem's last lines recall W. B. Yeats's "Among School Children," in which the poet asks about the same separations in life. Both poems end similarly, with a question:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance? (123)

In both poems, we are asked to distinguish the indistinguishable. The free will of the imagination, combined with a healthy skepticism and the tricks our own senses play upon us, ensures that there will always be an "exdream," some negation. The speaker, then, remains ambivalent to the end, relying on vignettes of Americana to drive the commentary, and that is perhaps the most powerful argument the poem leaves: we will never have anything to comment on, to desire or dance about, unless we experience life and death itself. Just as Dolly Parton asks about spending less time looking artificial than people trying to look natural, so does Fulton ask about how we spend our entire lives to get to that decisive moment when we grasp memory "just so," put a picket fence around it, and breathe it all in.

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THE ECOLOGIES OF PLACE IN THE POETRY OF KATHLEENE WEST

MARY K. STILLWELL

I feel very strongly that I am under the influence of things or questions which were left incomplete and unanswered by my parents and grandparents and more distant ancestors . . . It has always seemed to me that I had to answer questions which fate had posed to my forefathers, and which had not yet been answered, or as if I had to complete, or perhaps continue, things which previous ages had left unfinished.

—C. G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*
Epigraph, Part One, *Plainswoman:*
Her First Hundred Years by Kathleene West

When we think of the interconnectedness of our world, of ecology, or of our ecosystem in general, we customarily think in a time-bound way, often in the present tense. In a parallel manner, when we acknowledge that the "things" of the universe are, to recall John Muir, "hitched to everything else," we are customarily thinking of things biological. Human beings, as individuals and as a species, because we move through time by way of memory and imagination to other places, enjoy an ecosystem that is time-full as well as time-bound, abstract as well as concrete. When "here" can include "there" and "now" can include "then," each human being is a conversation through time. These ideas may seem rather nebulous in theory, but when we turn to the life and work of a particular poet, in this case Kathleene West, they become clear.

In the pages that follow, I focus primarily on West's four full-length collections and related chapbook, *The Death of a Regional Poet, Canto One*, tracing the theme of literary, geographic, and temporal ecologies of place throughout. This overview of West's poetry

is only that. I hope it will suggest other avenues of analysis and criticism in the future.

In 1971, before the Modern Language Association, Adrienne Rich gave what has become a landmark speech, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," celebrating the "time of awakening consciousness" that was underway for women (106). "Re-vision—the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction," was for women, Rich posited, "an act of survival" even more than "a chapter in cultural history" (106). "Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched," she continued, "we cannot know ourselves" (106). Rich saw women who until then had been "led to imagine ourselves" through a male lens, moving to define themselves by naming for themselves the female experience they lived (106-7).

By the end of the seventies, Kathleene West's work suggests that she was taking Adrienne Rich's words to heart, re-envisioning and redefining for herself what it means to be a woman of and from the plains. In doing so, she opened up her own "psychic geography," to use Rich's term, as well as the land itself, a project that includes looking through time and deeply into place and has continued throughout the thirty years of her career as a poet (107).

"Let it begin with the land, land patterned with field and pasture and a gravel road curving from farm to farm," West writes in "Martin Luther's Children," the prelude to *The Summer of the Sub-Comandante*, a prose poem published as a novel by InteliBooks in the fall of 2002 (15).¹ "Curve with the road over the Beaver River, the Skeedee Creek," West continues, "to a farm where the cornfields press the outbuildings on three sides" (15).

Nance County, where it began for Kathleene Linnerson West, is located in east-central Nebraska, approximately one hundred miles west and north of the state capitol, Lincoln. Valley land soil is "rich ground, consisting of stream-deposited silt, clay, sand, and gravel," and forms the landscape from which West's work emerges (Blaine; Fimple 5). The Loup and its tributaries, including the Skeedee and Beaver that run close to the family farm where the poet grew up, branch through the county like root tendrils. "Sun, wind, flood, and drought deliver their legacy of dust and mud to the people of the plains," West writes. "Let it begin with them, born of the earth, marked by the earth." (*Summer* 15). "Did they choose this place," she asks, "or did the land choose them?" (*Summer* 15).

Tribal historians and archeologists tell us that Pawnee inhabited this area for hundreds of years, building their villages and raising their maize, pumpkins, and other crops along the Loup River, leaving them temporarily twice a year for the spring and winter buffalo hunts (Blaine; Fimple 6). White contact, from 1541 to the end of the eighteenth century, was primarily with Spanish explorers in search of a route to the Pacific who sought to develop trade relations with the Pawnee and other tribes they met with along their journey (Blaine; Fimple 6). By 1854, when the U. S. Congress—not yet one hundred years old—passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, the Platte River had already become a major trade thoroughfare and the Platte Valley road was a chief conduit for pioneers heading cross-continent for "the rich soils of Oregon, religious freedom of Utah, and gold of California" (Fimple 6-7).

In 1857, one hundred Mormon families from St. Louis, Missouri; Florence, Nebraska; and Alton, Illinois, established the town of Genoa as a way station for the Brigham Young Express and Carrying Company, which held the government contract for mail service to Salt Lake City and for Latter Day Saints traveling west to settle in Utah ("Genoa"). Two years later, the town was included in a reservation, home to the Pawnee until 1876, when they were removed to Indian Territory ("Genoa"). White settlers came "pouring in" soon after (Fimple 9).

In West's abbreviated history of place found in "Martin Luther's Children," she summarizes the story of settlement:

The Mormons gone to greener pastures, the Skidi and the rest of the Pawnee pushed away, the trading post and the old gristmill closed down, but the Union Pacific inspires a town and people to farm the land. These plains people are descendants of Scandinavian fisherfolk and peasants who followed no glamorous dream to America but hoped for something to live on, something to own. The surveyed acres hold them in the cycles of plants, growth, and harvest. This is the land of farmers and their children. (*Summer* 15)

West, "a woman born a hundred miles from the center of the country, so close to the heart she will always feel its beat," traces her plains roots to the nineteenth century when her paternal grandmother emigrated from Norway and her paternal grandfather arrived from Sweden (*Summer* 15; e-mail). "Grandpa sailed to America on a one-way passage to collect a debt, and the country collected him," she

writes (*Summer* 16). "Back from California, with a piece of fool's gold and enough money to buy a farm . . . in the Nebraska flatlands," he married West's grandmother, who worked as a washerwoman in Genoa (*Summer* 16; e-mail).

On her mother's side, West can, she says, trace her family, "if I wanted to," back to the Daughters of the American Revolution (Interview). Of English, Irish, Welsh, and German Jewish ancestry, West's "maternal grandfather and grandmother were married in Missouri in the nineteenth century and moved to Nebraska soon after," where her grandfather had "lots of jobs, including peddler and foreman of the Murchison Ranch near Genoa" which also employed her maternal grandmother as cook (West e-mail). Their granddaughter would become "a child of farmers, sweltering her summers in the itch of hayfields, dreading the cold that wheezes and cracks the house with winter ghosts" (*Summer* 16).

"Let it begin with a Nebraskan, child of the plains": Kathleene, daughter of Alfred and Irma Linnerson, was born "three days late for Christmas," in 1947, "with a yearning for something more, something other" (*Summer* 17). The youngest of five children, "by ten years," the "tagalong," West recalls her young life as "painful. I was not a happy child . . . always lonely" (Interview). Her third year, which West will return to in her early poems as well as in her later prose, was "traumatic," including her "eldest sister going off to get married" and her paternal grandfather's departure by death (Interview).

With siblings gone to other pastures, West grew up a "hired hand" on the self-sufficient family farm where her father was born in 1905. The Linnersons raised "corn, beans, oats, soy beans, cows, pigs, chickens, and sheep. Everything," according to West, and although "it wasn't a big farm . . . a half section. . . . Not enough," it has provided West with the deep appreciation of place and fertile source of imagination—and the hard work required to live there—evident throughout both her poetry and her prose (Interview).

To date, West has published eight collections of poems and two fiction works, including, in poetry, *No Warning* (chapbook, 1977), *Land Bound* (1978), *The Garden Section* (chapbook, 1982), *Water Witching* (1984), *Plainswoman: Her First Hundred Years* (1985), *The Farmer's Daughter* (1990), *Death of a Regional Poet, Canto One* (chapbook, 1998), and *Romance Tercermundista/Third-World Romance* (bi-lingual chapbook, 2000), and in fiction, *The Armadillo*

on the Rug (short stories, 1978), and *The Summer of the Sub-Comandante* (a novel 2002).

The hard work and solitude of farm life provided West with the subject matter and the time to read as well as to begin to explore her life by writing. She began her early academic education in a one-room rural schoolhouse "with eight grades inside and the bathroom outside" (Hawkins 36). By the time West wrote her first poems, at seven—"Why oh why did my Kitty Cat Die?" and "The Wonderful World of Growing Up," which was, she adds, "obviously a lie"—"I knew enough about poetry to know that it could use as well as inflict pathos and I wanted my mother to be sure to know how bad I felt without coming right out and telling her" (Barnden 48). West, supported by her mother, who had attended Normal School and returned to teaching after her last child was born, began reading, which the poet believes is "one of the most important things for writing," at an early age (Interview). In addition to reading a library book "every Sunday," West says:

Also we had some books of poetry at home. My mother took correspondence courses in order to keep her teacher's certificate and I remember reading in her textbook Browning's "My Last Duchess" when I was ten and loving it, not knowing exactly what it meant, not caring, and because of that I felt affection for Browning forever. Kids should be reading poems early or hearing poems early because it made a tremendous . . . impact on me. (Barnden 48)

West, however, would not begin writing poetry seriously until she was nineteen, a graduate of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, teaching high school English and Spanish, "married and miserable" (West e-mail; Barnden 48). In 1972, after four years teaching in Nebraska and Texas, "unmarried and miserable and still working on poems in little notebooks," the poet moved to the Pacific Northwest, where she entered the master's degree program in advanced writing (creative writing) at the University of Washington the following year (Barnden 49; Interview). There West studied poetry with David Wagoner, editor of *Poetry Northwest*, and Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Elizabeth Bishop, who taught there the spring semester of 1973 (Interview; Bishop 575). Although West was reluctant to write about her farm experience, her teachers at UW and other writers attending the annual Port Townsend Writers conferences—Denise Levertov and Robert Bly, for example—were enthusiastic about her work and

its subject matter (Interview). At one of these conferences, Sam Hamill, an editor at Copper Canyon Press, asked if she had a manuscript (Barnden 49). West sent Hamill *Land Bound*, which was published by Copper Canyon in 1978.

Land Bound

With her first collection, West stakes her claim to what will become her major poetic preoccupations, thematically and artistically. From the beginning, her voice is conversational and frequently colloquial as she addresses or dialogues with herself, her family and friends, her home ground, and her readers. The collection is, in West's words, "divided into two parts, the one which is more childhood/farm poems and which has a geographical as well as a chronological progression, and then the second part introduces what will be one of my thematic searches—what is it that men and women want when they are together or apart?" (Barnden 50).

Just as West's most recent work, *The Summer of the Sub-Comandante*, launches from that place where all geographical and emotional action originates—"Let it begin with the land, land patterned with field and pasture and a gravel road curving from farm to farm"—the first section of *Land Bound*, "Still Life in Genoa, Nebraska," launches the collection from the place to which the poet and her poetry are bound (15). Underscoring the local and the poet's relationship with it, "Fair Enough," the first poem of the section, which is quoted in its entirety below, utilizes colloquial forms of expression to describe the child of the poem and to signal to the reader to be on the lookout for West's subtle use of diction that calls up important associations and extends meanings:

Fair Enough

A toe-scraper, skirt-clencher,
I sidled through childhood
while Mother answered for me.
"She's five. She loves to read.
She's Daddy's girl."
I studied my shoes
as if they were Compton's pictured encyclopedia
and turned to Volume C
to read about the cat that got my tongue
and nurtured it, pink and moist,
until I fled from the towers of shoulders and chin

to the willow by the creek
and ransomed the eggs abandoned by a broody hen
for my unbridled tongue.

At the onset of the poem, Mother answers questions posed by the adult world—"Daddy's girl" is "five" and "loves to read"—while her daughter shyly scrapes the toe of her shoe, clenches her skirt, because, according to another colloquial expression, the cat's got her tongue. Vowel sounds and lines are short, sometimes composed of several clipped phrases and sentences, affording a staccato, breathless effect. By poem's end, however, we enter the child's natural world—"the willow by the creek," "eggs abandoned by a broody hen," and a real cat, its tongue "pink and moist"—which has nurtured the girl and "unbridled" her language in order to celebrate it. West suggests that it was this mysterious knowledge imparted by nature—reflected by a shift to longer lines and open, long vowel sounds—that released the child to speak and later releases the poet to write. The poet is at once bound and unbound: "a woman born a hundred miles from the center of the country, so close to the heart she will always feel its beat within her skin," schooled by creekside lessons that tie her to place as they untie her tongue, an exchange that is, in local parlance, "fair enough."

As in "Fair Enough," each of the twelve poems that comprise the "Still Life in Genoa, Nebraska" section of *Land Bound* serves as a portrait, much as a still-life painting or photograph might, capturing a significant moment in the poet's growth within the rich phenomenological detail of place and time. West's goal in writing about her experiences growing up on a plains farm, "to tell the truth, the way it is, how it's really like, not all this romanticized business," brings a vitality and reality to the poems as they probe and question experiences often softened by plains residents into a one-dimensional myth of "the good life" (Interview). West is intent on re-vision, refusing to take myth at face value, a theme that will be developed more overtly in later collections. Places both bind and provide, and this dual nature of human existence is mirrored throughout all the poems that follow.

In "Hollyhocks," for example, West reminds her readers of those "wayward flowers" that cluster in countless gardens and in incalculable alleyways all across the United States and the way they move in the breeze, "nodding over the clothesline, peering in the kitchen" (2, 5). They are friendly flowers, sticking "close to the house,"

warmly recognized, even if they are "too plentiful / to be cherished" (6, 3-4). These, however, are farm hollyhocks; their home is on the plains where they must "fight the tomatoes and sweet corn for light" (1). They grow:

... safe from plow
safe from rooting hogs.
If their seeds wind-scattered beyond the hen house,
They tumbled unsprouted. Nothing lived easily
among the fireweed, the goldenrod
and the sharp rows of milo. (7-12).

West recalls the ubiquitous girlhood pastime, with the aid of a "toothpick jammed through the stem," of turning buds and blooms into the full-skirted ladies who will glide in majestic cotillions and royal quadrilles of the imagination (15). As grand as they are, and perhaps this is why the toothpick is "jammed," these floral femme fatales speak to what is frequently perceived by girls of a certain age as childhood impoverishment: "headless, flat-chested as I," as West describes it, and the desire to be grown up and someplace else (17). As the poet says, "I used to wonder who I was when I was a kid on the farm in Nebraska, and I think I wondered so much because I didn't want to be there" (Barnden 47). However, this is only part of it. As the second stanza passes midpoint, the emotional center and passionate attachment of a young daughter's life comes into view. Childhood games are thrown aside; the ladies in waiting have served their purpose:

But when I heard my father's tractor
and saw him driving up the pasture lane,
I left them motionless, dumb,
to run to the big wooden gate
and swing it open for him.
The discarded ladies lolled on the grass,
their flounces wrinkling into torn petals. (21-27)

Much of the power of West's work, these poems and others to follow, resides in the poet's ability to evoke in the reader an empathetic understanding and deep recognition of both physical and emotional place. Stanza three of "Hollyhocks" both celebrates the return of the father—royal and regal as he rides through the gate, by association the king of the court of the cotillion ladies—and her own position, unheard—"my greeting overcome by the machine's noise"—unac-

knowledge, trailing behind him (30). A second archetypal moment—Father's return and "Mother's face pressed against the window, distorted by the glass"—is replete with soundings of yet another lesson being learned by the young girl about the nature of relationship and roles of behavior between man and woman as it exists in her world.

In the poem's dénouement, the kingly father alights from his coach/tractor—comes back down to earth—lovingly portrayed by the daughter who watches him:

The tractor sputtered out its hold on my father
and I watched his leg clear the seat
and touch him to the earth.
His face was caked with the gray soil he cultivated,
matching the evening drab of the farmyard,
the gravel, the silo and the elms indistinguishable
by color. (34-40)

Everything pales in his presence; those floral ladies in waiting, "the hollyhocks . . . were dull as pigweeds, / each bloom a faded trumpet, without sound" as dusk falls across the land (41-42).

In the work of Sylvia Plath and Diane Wakoski, Rich observes in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," "[m]an appears as, if not a dream, a fascination and a terror," the source of which is his power "to dominate, tyrannize, choose, or reject the woman" and suggests that is these poets' emerging sense of self—"embattled, possessed"—that gives their poetry its vitality (107). What we have in West, writing nearly two decades after Plath and the Wakoski that Rich had in mind, is a keen and subtle notation of that power relationship between her parents as well as between herself and her father, combined with the loving acknowledgement that the king has, so to speak, clay feet. West's father, the poet suggests, is in a sense also possessed. The tractor, the land, the responsibility of providing for his family: all have a hold on him. What the reader sees in these early poems is the poet taking notes on things as they are in her young experience. Some attitudes West will take with her; some she will gladly leave behind.

Lessons of intimate relationship between women and men as well as the *gestalt* of place and person are ever present in the "Still-Life" section. "Thinking of Rain in the Dry Season" recalls "those summers when the Skeedee ran dry" that flooded with warm feelings

between the poet and her aunt Bakie, between Mother and her sister (1). This emotional energy, this passion, for life as it was witnessed by the young girl, "an uncertain mermaid swaying in the water," is related to the moon—"They stood on the hill beyond the house, / their faces flashing in the sun like two mirrors"—and with femininity (32, 37-38). These are poems that describe some of the important lessons offered by events, relatives and teachers, church and school, and what this growing child made of them. Accident, mortality, religion, loss and gain are reflected in "Not a Hunter," "Still Life in Genoa, Nebraska, 1937," and "The Dark, The Closet, The Augustana Lutheran Church," "In Memory of Mrs. Gerber," and "First Argument Against Marriage." Explicit or implicit, the child's urge to leave the land, however, is persistent.

In "Land-bound," through the adjectival form of the collection's title, the poet addresses the desire of the girl—reminiscent of both Dylan Thomas's "The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower" and Sylvia Plath's protagonist in *The Bell Jar*:

Stretched in the grass, staring skyward,
past the swoop of barn swallows,
their shrill dips and glides,
I watched them perch,
smug on the power lines,
their fat beaks preening.
I wanted to skim those wires like ice,
trusting in the routine of right, left, slide on
and on, bound to the stretch of the lines,
hooked to their currents,
edging as far as power extends. (8-18)

Swallows, ubiquitous riders of wind currents above barnyards throughout the plains, are frequently portrayed in song and literature as the "epitome of diligence and hopefulness" ("Swallows" 477). In a manner recalling Margaret Laurence's Morag Gunn who, as the novel *The Diviners* (1974) opens, watches the swallows as they "dipped and spun" over "the river that flowed both ways," West's persona notes the "shrill dips and glides" of the swallows, her imagination ignited by flight (theirs and her own) and possibilities of life (2, 1).

Section one ends with a dialogue between the two final poems, the first, "For my Mother, Who Lives," from the daughter's point of

view, a testimony to her relationship with her mother and the lessons of life she offered, and the second, "Letter from Nebraska to the Youngest Daughter," in the mother's voice, in epistolary form, to the daughter who has left home. Just as she does in "Fair Enough," the first poem of the collection, in the penultimate poem, West quotes the mother who spoke for the child. The poet returns the gesture, speaking for her mother as she grows older and contemplates death. "For my Mother, Who Lives" opens with a brief description of the mother:

Healthy and sane, she speaks of dying.
It's the regularity of the pension—a monthly reminder
that time passes, she's old.
Although staying alive's a good investment,
death sounds easy, less complex for her. (1-5)

Still the farmer's wife, she drives the "three graveled miles to the Farmer Store," keeps her husband off the tractor, and continues to keep order and plan ahead, purchasing six plots—"First come, first served," she says.—in the Valley View cemetery (6, 9).

The poem of mother and daughter works as an analogy to the mother-daughter dyad as it exists in reality. Implicit in the first two stanzas is the *gestalt* of the accepting, loving parent, frequently the mother, and "aggressive" child who, by discovering apparent difference, discovers herself as an autonomous being.² The poem is a conversation of ideas both within and through time that includes a description of her mother's current life, including dreams that anchor her to the past and remind her of the future, and introduces the themes of story and inheritance, which are closely associated for the poet:

In her sleep, Aunt Bakie and Granny Addie,
firm-skinned and alive, stand in her house
and try to coax her away.
"But I didn't want to go," she says.
"Wasn't that a funny dream?"
Too practical for premonition, she tells me stories. (18-23)

The juxtaposition of family stories and the jewel box legacy that follows underscores the poet's inheritances, emotional and concrete, from her mother as well as the particular receptivity—"whatever fits"—of this child-now-adult, a theme that West will address in her later work as well. Here, not only is there a subtle acknowledgement

of what is offered the child growing up but also of the role of the child's temperament, being able to accept what is given:

I sift through her jewel box—
fifty years of accumulation
and gather my treasures.
A watch, a ring, Grandma Linnerson's comb—whatever fits
in small corners in a suitcase. (30-35)

West includes light and shadow within this relationship as she does in other aspects of farm life: "There are other corners, unfilled," she adds, recognizing that parents cannot fill every need of the developing young woman (36).

This love poem goes on to commemorate various moments of the parent-daughter relationship, the sharing of confidences as well as the telling of secrets, the wounds as well as the healing. "We have a tradition of survival," West closes, "Surrendering it to me, she goes on" (52). The child herself and the poem she writes years later become testimony and testament to the woman who first gave her life as well as many of the tools she will need as she goes out into the world (53). With this passing on of knowledge and tradition, there is also an echo of the close of "Fair Enough," the collection's first poem, where broody hen's eggs were exchanged for the poet's deep and fertile connection to place, a related aspect of her poetic inheritance.

"Letter from Nebraska to the Youngest Daughter" complements "For My Mother Who Lives," which opens, in the mother's voice, with a description that is at the same time both specific and archetypal. So familiar in tone, the letter could have been written by my own mother from her kitchen table on a farm in Richardson County and addressed to me in New York:

Here on the farm it's a dry October,
trees beautiful, weather pleasant and warm
and dry. Only thing, the wheat seed just lies
in the dry dirt. A few sprouted and pushed through
but it's a thin stand. (1-5)

The poem then becomes more particular, recounting family and farm life, although they are common themes found in conversations between members of farm families: poor crop yields, inadequate government programs, health concerns. The penultimate stanza acts as that-next-to-the-last paragraph in letters from home that is

designed to set the recipient straight. The parental tone and regional restraint are recognizable:

Your last poem needs some clarification.
We reserved a plot for you by our side
in Valley View. We didn't think
anyone would care for a spot,
and we just aren't the type to tell our kids
we have a plot for them.
We might make them mad. Oh yes,
and those unfilled corners of your suitcase
are really filled—filled with love.
It is hard for me to express it. (23-32)

The poem closes with a summary of cattle sales, egg yield, the pregnancy of the farm cats, and with the (also familiar) "hope that all is going / ok for you. / Love from / Dad & Mother" (39-42). The section's final poem also brings closure to the farm-centered section of West's first collection. The child's "home-grown" years are over and now, as West has imagined in "Land-bound," she is "edging as far as power extends" (18).

"Wind, Woman and Man," the second section of *Land Bound*, takes place "some place else." The poet is an adult, has moved physically from the farm outside Genoa, and, West says, is engaging in what will become one of her "thematic searches—what it is that men and women want when they are together or apart" (Barnden 50). The two divisions of *Land Bound* are, West acknowledges, "ultimately related" (Barnden 50). Generally, section one is foundational, providing the springboard from which the young artist/explorer sets forth. Ties to Mother, Aunt Bakie, siblings, Nebraska farmland, and the home place become both reference points and points of support in the section that follows. The new friends of section two, however, offer a nurturance related to the soil and to growth. "In Becky's House," for example, where "the plants breathe and mass / spiraling up the walls," the poem's persona feels "attached, / supported. I grow" (1-2, 7-8). The emphasis in "Wind, Woman and Man" shifts from land and earth of section one to spirit and air/wind as the young artist tests her wings and exercises her developing power to create and to fly, like the swallows, on her own.

By section two, mother, mediator between the shy, sidling child and society in "Fair Enough," has been integrated with place and lan-

guage and replaced by the "mother tongue," which becomes the mediating force between poet and the larger world. It is fitting that the section and the collection as a whole closes with "Roundel on a Sonnet by Marilyn Hacker," a tribute to the poet whose first full-length collection, *Presentation Piece*, won the 1974 National Book Award:

We need more boozy women poets,
I read. The whiskey blurs, confuses
me near enough to accepting it,
but first—we need more booze.

And then, define the crucial word. To booze:
drinking to excess, and there we've set
the standard to join our Muse
of bourbon-in-hand woman poets, reciting sonnets

in colorful bars, and not just sonnets,
but bawdy pantoums and tough lyrics—to lose
"poetess" forever, but Hell—we don't need more poets
of any kind. We need more booze. (1-2)

West, who had been introduced to poetic forms by Elizabeth Bishop while she was a student at the University of Washington, was convinced of their potential value to her own work. She says she admired Marilyn Hacker's contemporary use of form that included sexuality and politics, felt a "kinship with her," and "read everything she wrote," (Interview).

West studied for her master's degree, she says, at a time when being from the farm was "not very exotic," even something to be ashamed of (Interview). However, West, like Hacker, was determined to convey her own lived experience, sexual and sensual, in traditional poetic forms and in her own developing voice, breaking ground in her own way. Supported by Hacker's work and the response of Denise Levertov at a Port Townsend Writers Conference reading, West continued to look to her native land for both subject matter and inspiration (Interview).

Thomas McGrath, whose "long lines of farms and combines and harvest" also assisted West in losing "her embarrassment about being from a farm," and Carolyn Kizer, "female and rollicking and energetic," were other important influences and models for both West and her poetry (Barnden 59, 60). In the work of both of these poets, West

observed the advantages of working "with traditional forms, bouncing back and forth between form and free verse," a technique frequently employed throughout *Land Bound*, including "Roundel on a Sonnet by Marilyn Hacker" (Barnden 60).

Although Elizabeth Bishop had "chided" West for rhyming "spring" and "milking" during her student days, slant rhyme and other variations on the rondel (from the *rondeau*—a poem of eleven to fourteen lines that uses only two rhymes with the first two lines repeated in the middle and at the end) provide added energy and playfulness (Barnden 60; "Rondeau" 171-173). Unconventional within the traditional, West, farm-schooled girl gone off to explore the world, ends her first full-length collection with a celebration of life and of poetry and of being a woman.

Water Witching

Land Bound and *Water Witching*, which followed in 1984, are closely related thematically; both draw heavily on West's early farm experiences as well on as her broadening view of the ecosystem in which she participates. "Content didn't change all that much" between the two books, West notes, "because I had so many poems left over from writing *Land Bound*" (Barnden 52). "Farmer's Child," the middle section and the heart of *Water Witching*, was written earlier (Barnden 52). Schooled in the rigors of farm life, West, who continues to offer an unromanticized portrait of what it means to live and work there, opens the section with "Pastoral," a parody of a traditional English nursery rhyme, updated for our generation of country plains children:

Spavined mule, scouring calves
Breech-birth, bloat, crysipelas
Rats in the corn crib, sheep in the corn
Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn.

Rusted wheat, potato bugs
Hoppers, corn borers, nematodes
Hornets in the outhouse, gophers in the land
Little Boy Blue, come wish for rain.

Corn-cob fuel, stinkweed milk
Needles, cockleburs, creeping Charlie
Floods in the pasture, cows on the run
Little Boy Blue, come pray for sun.

Boiled tongue, fried-up heart
 Wash tub, corn shucks, bread & lard
 Mice in the attic, ringworm on the arm
 Little Boy Blue just sold the farm. (1-16)

Lest I am tempted to brush aside the hardships this way of life presents, the last line of West's poem jolts me back to reality. Low grain and livestock prices coupled with high farming expenses have driven many families to sell their farms. The year following the publication of *Land Bound*, 1979, was the peak of the nation's boom years in agriculture, ending a decade of "rapidly rising income and skyrocketing land values" (Davidson 15). By 1984, when *Water Witching* was published, farm values plummeted; farmers have never recovered (Davidson 17).

Within a single poem, West offers the shadow and light of what it is like to grow up on and work a farm, for example, in the sestina, "Farmer's Child," where "a land / that glistened like a Christmas card, the barn / decorated with snow" is juxtaposed with "the fear that crawls with the cold / and the despair of a sagging, unshingled barn" (1-3, 34-35). If this is a land of milk and honey, it is also a land of cold, harsh winters, of fear and despair and steady pain, a land that "you [the farmer] / owns, or that owns you" (31-32).

West creates in her poems, "an immediate and tactile experience . . . characterized by a strong sense of authenticity, of real events experienced from within by real people," as Stephen C. Behrendt points out in his review of *Water Witching* and *Plainswoman: Her First Hundred Years*, West's collection that followed (117). Not only does West provide the reader with her own voice, she continues to incorporate the voices of others, sometimes in dialogue with hers. "Cattle Call," for example, includes her father's commentary on chasing down cows, including the folk wisdom I've heard at home—"if you raise cows / you're gonna chase 'em"—as West describes her father, her relationship with him, and the lessons interpolated from farm life (18-19). She invites the reader into the *experience* of rounding up cattle with her father:

circle wide, around them, get ahead
 and wait, arms outstretched,
 maybe holding a stick
 to make your arms longer.
 Say you weigh 100 lbs.

say the cow weighs 1000
 and is running.
 You shout something in cow-turning language
 like *Hike!*
 or *Get Back!*
 You imagine looking up at four hooves
 printing their route over your body.
 You imagine Dad's anger if you let the cow thunder by.
 Your life depends
 on turning this cow. (72-85)

West's ecosystem is increasingly layered as she juxtaposes rhythms reminiscent of traditional folk song with a referring refrain against her thoroughly modern story, establishing another sort of dialogue, for example, in "Song for Two Voices," in which she captures change, aging and loss as they affect both granddaughter and grandmother.

West's sustained focus is on questioning the romantic assumptions that we—residents and nonresidents—hold about life in Nebraska and re-visioning the historical past as the poet envisions her future.³ There is death and loss in life as there is joy and love in all three sections of *Water Witching*: "A Woman Defines," "Farmer's Daughter," and "Water Witch."

Although only the middle section deals with Nebraska life directly, the plains are implicit throughout as West engages the theme of relationship to other places and other people. Urban life, the sea, lighthouses, mountains, beaches, apartment life, oysters, and mermaids make *Water Witching*, by the poet's own admission, "the most 'northwest' book I have" (Barnden 52). In "The Sea Witch and the Mermaid," for example, West recalls the story of the mermaid's choice of the handsome prince by which she was made mortal:

In the old story, she would visit
 the sea witch, trade her liquid voice
 for feet and choose the torment
 of earth and men. There is no witch.
 There is no choice.

On the ocean floor, the crabs are porcelain;
 snails glow like the moon. Crusted
 on a rock, gray foam camouflages
 a clam. Once was a time
 when mermaid bodies dissolved into foam

and burst to the surface, to spray
iridescent as a rainbow, intense as the sun. (17-28)

Old stories have not always proved true; things are not always as they seem. By the close of *Water Witching*, however, West is heading back to the Midlands to reconsider the myths and stories from her own past.

"I moved back to Nebraska with the idea I was going to change my life," West says. Even so, her poems of leave taking reflect an appreciation of life in and the land of the Northwest and lessons learned there as they reveal a longing for her homeland. The final poems of the collection reflect her experiences of loss and gain, sadness and longing, fear and hope, landscapes and poet. "Water Divined," set to music—for mezzo soprano, flute, cello, violin, viola, and piano—by Randall Snyder⁴ (and published in 2002 as part of *Traveling West and Other Songs*), evokes some of the complex feelings involved in West's transition:

Still, she allows herself this indulgence,
makes the pilgrimage to the lake,
man-made, shallow,
but water enough to imagine
another geography, another kind of strike.
She splashes her face and waits
For wind and water to meet at her lips.
She has grafted herself to this land
Where the cycle turns on harvest,
Not death.

A last look at the water lifts her spirit,
reassures her that she shares
the ache of return with earth and weather.
Her breath quickens
and she sings, her voice a counter point
to the regularity of rise and fall,
the long melodic line of plainsong,
a chant to celebrate the continuous ritual
that survives without her
that she sings. (31-52)

If there is loss implicit in these poems, there are also self-acceptance, growth, and a desire for continuing exploration. Like the Nebraska landscape, which often appears arid but in fact has vast

quantities of water available underground in the Ogallala Aquifer to nourish its people and its land, the feminine principle, often symbolized by water, is West's sustaining force for self-discovery. An oracular tone, the calm before the storm that heralds change, is also present. West notes that when she was writing these poems, although she "didn't know what was going on," she "knew something was going to happen" (Barnden 53).

It must have been an exciting time for West, as it was for many women. A generation of feminist critics in the U.S. and abroad—Adrienne Rich, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Catherine MacKinnon, and Simone de Beauvoir, to name only a few—began to formalize new ways women and men might rethink our social roles and the assumptions on which they were based. Literary rethinking and re-evaluation of American poetry were reflected in *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets* (1979) edited by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar; *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, also by Gilbert and Gubar (1984); the first edition of *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English* (1985); Alicia Suskin Ostriker's *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (1986); the anthology, *No More Masks* (1986), edited by Florence Howe and Ellen Bass; *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century* (1988) by Gilbert and Gubar; and *Writing a Woman's Life* by Carolyn G. Heilbrun (1988). New questions were emerging, along with the possibility of answers. By the 1980s, women's stories were being recorded and re-envisioning firmly established.

West's poetry and the work of Nebraska writers were no less affected. In addition to numerous anthologies of Nebraska poets of both genders during the 1980s, collections of and by women focused on rescue and revision: *All My Grandmothers Could Sing: Poems by Nebraska Women*, edited by Nebraskan Judith Sornberger (1984), *Adjoining Rooms: Poems by Elizabeth Banset, Susan Strayer Deal, Linnea Johnson, Marjorie Saiser, and Judith Sornberger* (1985), *Songs for the Granddaughters* (1986), for example. The tradition of publishing Nebraska—and plainswomen—poets has remained with us in all three of the "Wind" series—*Leaning into the Wind*, *Woven on the Wind*, and *Crazy Woman Creek*, edited by Linda Hasselstrom, Gaydell Collier, and Nancy Curtis, as well as in *Times of Sorrow/Times of Grace: Writing by Women of the Great Plains/High*

Plains, edited by Nebraskans Marjorie Saiser and Lisa Sandlin and published in 2002 by Nebraska publisher, Greg Kosmicki of The Backwaters Press.

Plainswoman: Her First Hundred Years

"A woman writing thinks back through her mothers," Virginia Woolf wrote in *A Room of One's Own*, acknowledging her desire for a tradition of women writers that would continue to speak to her, providing inspiration by their work and frequently in their lives (101). During the early '80s, in northeast Nebraska where she taught in the Artists in the Schools Program, West began researching Icelandic sagas in an attempt to understand and write "an American epic" based on her grandmother's life (Barnden 53). *Plainswoman: Her First Hundred Years* became the first book of West's trilogy—a triptych that connects her Scandinavian heritage, her Nebraska upbringing, and their impact on her life and work—that also includes *Death of a Regional Poet* and *The Farmer's Daughter*. In each of these books, all written in the 1980s, West engages the interconnectedness of place through time as well as of the individual through heritage and location. All three might carry the excerpt from Jung's autobiography as West seeks "to answer questions which fate had posed" to her ancestors or to "complete, or perhaps continue, things which previous ages had left unfinished" as suggested by the *Plainswoman* epigraph (Jung 233).

West originally described *Plainswoman* as "a cycle of narrative poems with two main voices, a Norwegian woman who immigrates to America at the turn of the century and her granddaughter, who tries to imagine both her ancestor and her ancestor's experience as a means of interpreting her own life" ("Plainswoman" i). "Song for Two Voices" in *Water Witching* first introduced West's readers to Grandma Linnerson who

... moved the rocker into a circle of light
and bent over her fancywork.
They say she wasn't a proper wife,
never cooked a breakfast,
never rose to chip ice in the basin, always kept
a part of herself secret. (6-11)

West, who never knew her father's mother, created her grandmother from stories she heard growing up and felt an affinity with her. When

she heard that her grandmother sat up late doing embroidery "after everyone else had gone to bed," West recalls, "I assumed it was from her I got everything artistic in me. Essentially, I wanted to create myself, or one of my selves, by creating my own ancestor so I wrote what I knew and invented, of course, a whole lot" (Barnden 54).

West soon realized that she would have to return to school to study Old Norse in order to "get the necessary background" (Barnden 54). West, although she grew up in an area settled by Scandinavians and Polish, did not "grow up with any kind of linguistic heritage" (Interview). She sought it in Old Norse language and literatures. Designing her doctoral program at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln around English and Icelandic literature, West began her studies with Paul Schach, the Medieval Icelandic scholar and leading authority on the *Poetic Edda* to whom *Plainswoman* is dedicated (Barnden 55). In 1983-84, West studied at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik on a Fulbright, which was renewed the following year; *Plainswoman* was composed during that time (Interview). "I figured, maybe erroneously," West says, "I've never been to Norway where my grandmother was born, that living there [in Iceland] would be somewhat like living on the coast in Norway" (Barnden 55).

The use of the epic form as the underpinning of *Plainswoman*, although West has said that she abandoned the structure as she continued her work, echoes throughout and is most reminiscent of the Icelandic version, the saga, which originally told the story of a hero or family settling that country (Barnden 54). Attributes of the original intent, although they linger, are frequently in an altered, usually updated, form. Cantos have been replaced by sections, four in the case of *Plainswoman*, that trace the life of a young hero of the New World, the Scandinavian immigrant girl, Olava—renamed Olivia by an immigration clerk when she entered the United States—through the "adventures" of her maidenhood, marriage, divorce, remarriage, and on into old age. As West wryly reminds us via an epigraph from George Eliot's *Middlemarch* that she places at the beginning of section two, "Marriage . . . is still the beginning of the home epic" (15).

West upends the traditional form with the collection's first poem, "The Muse Invokes," in which it is the Muse herself who speaks of the poet:

I sing through a woman and bless her
with my voice, with word and rhythm

I neither knew nor wished for.
 As Calliope spoke no verse
 but descended to the helm of the imagination
 with courage and the shade of companionship
 to the poets who paused before the chaos
 that obscured them from the poem
 so I enter her and allow her to believe she knows me. (1-9)

West explains, "I think it's a little unfair in the beginning of epics or whatever, just to call on the Muse and not let the Muse speak. I mean if these Muses are the inspirers of all this art, they must be rather artistic themselves, mustn't they?" (Barnden 55). This first poem, a triad of voices, muse joined by grandmother, and poet who fixes them on the page, begins the saga *in medias res*, serving as a fulcrum, the temporal present, between grandmother and granddaughter, past and future. In the collection's full title, *Plainswoman: Her First Hundred Years*, the generic term "Plainswoman" denotes at once the epic heroine of these particular poems and the archetype, suggesting that the pattern of this story will resonate with the lives of other immigrant plainswomen who settled the North American prairie, as well as with their descendents.⁵

This is subtly underscored by the collection's second poem, which West has referred to as "love poem to a geographical area," "Plain Talk from the Platte River," where the movement of the Platte reminds the reader not only of Nebraska's landmark river that runs nearly the full length of the state, of particular importance to the Nance County area where West's family settled, but also of the movement of time and the feminine principle, two major themes that run throughout the book (Barnden 56). Once again, West has nature speaking as it inspires the poet:

You [the river] out there, flanked by mountain ranges,
 the foothills dark with soaring fir and cedar,
 speak of *plains*
 as if you'd lose your breath
 scaling the clods turned up by the plow,
 as if the creeks had to be kicked
 into rivers (1-7)

According to West, "A lot of the imagery in that book comes from living in Iceland and from its marvelous medieval literature" (Barnden 55). Connections to the old country, both in imagery and

content, run deeply throughout the collection, sometimes explicitly, as in "Ultima Thule" and "Matrimony," and sometimes as ghosts or as absences in the New World, as in "Phantasmagoria" and "Land of Opportunity." The American landscape, in particular the plains, however, is the deep, unifying presence of all four sections.

West's quest is to understand the influences of the past and to uncover and answer those unarticulated questions of her heritage: What were the reasons for coming to America? What was it like to acclimatize to the new land? To learn English? Why did her grandmother marry the first time, why the divorce? What about the second marriage? How did the ways of the old country inform the new? Was she happy?

West's work reflects the immigrant heritage of the Great Plains, as suggested by Behrendt, which was "settled by people who were, in a sense, doubly displaced: immigrants from abroad, they compounded their displacement by settling in an inhospitable, alien environment that was totally unlike anything most of them had known previously" (113-14). West investigates the themes "of cultural and ethnic continuity" as well as "of endurance, personal and collective" that Behrendt sees as tying her work to Willa Cather and Mari Sandoz (114). The *Plainswoman* poems attempt to juxtapose the experiences of West's own life with those of her grandmother and to meditate on the parallels between them (114).

West visits the actual places in order to understand and convey more effectively her grandmother's story, including Ellis Island and the immigrant museum housed there in order to imagine more accurately the details of her grandmother's journey and landing in North America. In "Land of Opportunity," West describes what it must have been like for her grandmother aboard ship when "The days passed too slowly for words," passing time by reading the letters that had sparked the journey (1). "Here," earlier travelers to the New World wrote their relatives at home, "the buildings reach unto the heavens. / Here you will make a name for yourself. / Nothing you propose is impossible" (5-7). Arrival pronounces the young traveler "free / from disease loathsome or contagious, / find me neither lame nor weak-hearted," and the registrar mispronounces her name whereby "Olava" becomes "Olivia," a new name in a new country (38-40, 31, 45).

"Ellis Island, National Park" is the poet's journey, both literal and imaginative, as she encounters the place of her grandmother's arrival

at the "island that given the proper turrets and towers / could lock up the one who knows the eternal secret / banish the offender to violent boredom" (5-7). A meditation on several varieties of imprisonment, of relationship, of ideals, of civil incarceration, the poem also reflects West's own captivity by and in time. Her life, in the present, allows her only to imagine her grandmother's life while she envies "the man behind her" as he recalls his own grandmother's arrival as she fell "to her knees in joy and gratitude" when she landed (44-45).

In "Dumb Show," West draws on her own experience learning Icelandic in an attempt to understand what her grandmother must have felt hearing English spoken all about her when she arrived. "The whole first year [in Iceland] I could not speak," West recounts, "the language is so difficult" (Barnden 56). "It was very good training for imagining what it would be like to come to the United States without a word of the language," she continues. "I was going to school and someone was trying to teach me, but these people, my grandparents and others, just learned it on their own" (Barnden 56). West captures her grandmother's experience in this way:

Like a cat batting at wool
twisting down from the spinning wheel
they try to catch an American voice.
How fine to speak! To understand!
What wonders lurk in those crowded sounds
resources rich and plentiful as the land. . . (36-41).

West's first-hand experience brings an immediacy and depth of understanding.

"Plains writing is permeated by 'weather,'" Behrendt writes, "by a sense of the impact of climate on all aspects of existence," intensifying the disorientation of many of the immigrants as they settled into life in a new country (114). West recognizes both the harshness and "foreignness" of Nebraska weather and its part in her grandmother's longing for her birth land and, at the same time, particularly in section three, offers a description of uncanny familiarity, once again weaving past and present experiences:

But the chickens bury their beaks in matted feathers
and hold back their eggs from the chill nest.
Cows queue at the stack, their nervous tails
slowed by tangled chunks of snow to a sullen sway.
Even the hogs trudge to the trough—

everything stupefied by the effort of routine.

("First Blizzard, the Plains" 17-22)

Language is as much the hero/heroine of this epic narrative as West's grandmother. Early in the poet's work, she links language with life itself. "We have a tradition of survival," she recognizes in *Land Bound* (27). In language, to use a metaphor West develops in the poem "Land-bound," she has found her wings (19). Through language, she not only forged her way into the larger world, she learned she can create, make things happen, or move the air, as she says in "Landscape With Wind, Woman and Man" (35). In *Plainswoman*, West subtly expands, refines and celebrates poetry/language/speech as the power by which life is both lived and carried from person to person, generation to generation. Language, the said and the unsaid, the old language with its stories, and the new language with its stories still under construction, is the stuff with which human existence is composed, and interwoven as it is with time.

West begins *Plainswoman* with the words "I sing" and ends it with the words "tell this story" (53). Throughout the volume, language is presented as life giving and as important to human life as the "Plain Talk" of the Platte River as it flows across the state (2). In "Land of Opportunity," as noted above, "The days passed too slowly for words. / The sea was our world, our language one and limited" as the sea travelers read from the letters that drew them to make the voyage (1, 2, 4). In "Ellis Island, National Park," West "reconstructs the chaos of solitude," records what she learns of early immigrant experience "to make it true," recognizes that "*It is not enough to survive*" [West's italics], suggesting the necessity of reflection, understanding, and knowing that language, for better or worse, makes possible (9, 7, 51). "How fine to speak! To understand! / What wonders lurk in those crowded sounds, / resources rich and plentiful as the land," West writes in "Dumb Show" (39-41). "Language is wealth" as well as delight ("Dumb Show" 56).

West takes delight in language even as she writes about spousal abuse, alcoholism, and the failure of love. For example, "The Matter at Hand," a dark poem marking the nadir of a marriage, includes these lines that at once remind the reader with the cadence of a nursery rhyme of the vitality of life and the pain of living:

. . . For better or for worse
never held his hurt in relative terms

as a farmer who feels the pitchfork tine
 insert its crusted iron through leather sole to tender flesh
 blames himself first
 for being a man, and vulnerable,
 for being this man, and doomed to the ill luck
 that sets him on this farm, married to this woman
 who bears him the son who chases the horse
 that kicks the gate that topples the fork
 that pushes its prongs through the feet. (17-27)

Limited knowledge of a new language, West reminds us in "Maid Servant and Mistress," can, among other things, be used to keep a person (or group) "in her place." West reminds the reader of the subversive potential of language in "Hired Girl" by fashioning a new home within the language itself as a first, transitional step toward becoming fully at home in a new land.

Physical survival and a continuing, albeit modified, heritage is examined and celebrated and transformed in the final poems of the collection. Section three of *Plainswoman* concludes with "Fruition," with its reflection on preserving the garden harvest for the winter months ahead:

We have altered the harvest to save it—
 rows of dull vegetables preserved beneath lids,
 apples and pears dried into wrinkled caricatures,
 the chokecherries I stripped from wild bushes
 now stiff with sugar and paraffin-sealed. (1-5)

The poem turns, and by line sixteen, the familiar "It is not enough to survive" returns, as West imagines her grandmother's view of her children as "our saving grace," including "Alfred Nicholas, elf-child," who will in time become West's father (22, 28). The bare "bones" of the old stories are passed from generation to generation, preserving them for nourishment in future times. The use of the canning/preserving metaphor is particularly resonant; food preservation was essential to the survival of the early peoples of the plains. Through language and the preservation of story, life is transformed by meaning.

The final section of the volume elaborates on that theme, with the line "it is not enough to survive," appearing in three consecutive poems. The plainswoman, through an intimate relationship with the land, praises the bounty it provides through the knowledge and cus-

toms she brought to it through her tending ("The Garden Plot" 46). West's use of allusion is consistent and always carefully embedded so that it works like a depth charge, as it does in the poem, "Flowers-de-Luce," with its roundabout allusion to the Renaissance poet Giles Fletcher, best known for his sonnet sequence *Lucia* or *Poems of Love*, published in 1593 (Drabble 354).

An excerpt from Fletcher's poem also serves as epigraph to "The Domain of Arnheim," a short story by Edgar Allan Poe:

The garden like a lady fair was cut,
 That lay as if she slumbered in delight,
 And to the open skies her eyes did shut.
 The azure fields of Heaven were 'sembled right
 In a large round, set with the flowers of light.
 The flowers de luce, and the round sparks of dew.
 That hung upon their azure leaves did shew
 Like twinkling stars that sparkle in the evening blue.

With this allusion, West references not only English poetry, another heritage important to the poet, specifically Fletcher, who is well known for his love/nature poetry, but also Poe, an American literary ancestor whose ideas on the art and its relationship to nature are subjects of his short story (originally titled "The Landscape Garden"). West concludes:

I sip honeysuckle,
 grow quiet as chrysanthemum
 and watch the last iris wrinkle
 and shrink its petals.

Even as they fall
 they are strong enough
 to illuminate my journey,
 garden to garden,
 earth to earth. (III 9-17)

Heaven and earth are intertwined as are nature and art and the personae of the poem: grandmother (the Plainswoman of the first one hundred years) and author (Plainswoman of the next). The notion of survival seems both insured and irrelevant.

The poem that follows, "Terrae Filii," further conflates West's heritages, the Latin title a reminder of the Indo-European linguistic roots shared by both English and Icelandic as well as of the pagan

and Christian traditions that inform her life. Translated by West as "sons and daughters of the earth," "Terra Fili" further reconciles human with earth itself, harvest with toil, spirit with flesh and blood as it reflects the harsh life in the new country when the "wheat shrivels / and the wind rattles the corn like dry bones" (4-5). "The garden," however, "will feed us," sustaining West's grandmother as art sustains the poet (2). The final poem, "Grandmother's Garden," serves as an injunction from grandmother to granddaughter: "Dry your tears and remember. / Plant flowers, child, / plant flowers and tell this story," a task that West has done well and will continue to undertake as she completes the trilogy (39-41).

Plainswoman: Her First Hundred Years is both a recollection and a collection. On one level it preserves family memories and stories through the poet's musings about her grandmother; on another level, it reveals the poet herself, the plainswoman of a later century, and cultural and linguistic influences, some of which she will make her own.

Death of a Regional Poet

What West has made of her inheritance is shown, at least in part, by *Death of a Regional Poet*, the second part of the trilogy, of which only the first canto has been published to date. While the first hundred years of the *Plainswoman* is structured and presented as a saga or epic, *Death of a Regional Poet* is stylistically a mock epic. As Virginia Woolf acknowledged, although male writers "never helped a woman yet," she "has learnt a few tricks from them and adapted them to her use" (76). Patterned after Lord Byron's *Don Juan*, *Death of a Regional Poet*, *Canto One* is written in *ottava rima*, combining a jaunty meter with a ribald humor and irony, bringing to the fore two of West's gifts that have surfaced only now and again in her earlier work. Don Juan, the lady's man, meets his match in Alpha Oleson, West's heroine and persona, whom we meet in the first stanza:

Our sexist language plagues me 'fore I start.
 (I see the hackles rise with that confession.
 "She's strident, shrill, flaunts bleeding heart
 On liberal sleeve. Don't bore us with oppression!"
 And so I won't.) Semantics irks my art.
 That lucky Byron's casual expression,
 "I want a hero," declared the chap was masculine.
 I want a hero, but must explain she's feminine. (I, 1-8)

Like Byron, West is colloquial, has a gift of gab, an ear for mischief, and never lets the form get in the way of the fun which, taken together, adds to the immediacy of the poem. The canto is best read aloud for full appreciation of West's use of enjambment, slant rhyme in the service of content, and a feigned, high literary style. West also has a good deal of fun, rhyming "phonics" with "Elusive Minx" and "Trail Mix" in stanza three, a "tonal challenge," as the rhyme is described by William Slaymaker in his review of *Canto One* (6). One wonders what Elizabeth Bishop—who questioned West for rhyming "spring" and "milking"—would make of this (Interview)!

The canto is as personal as it is archetypal, showing with vivid imagery the joy of growing up in rural Nebraska, the imprint of history on place, and the relentless passage of time:

But where was bliss, the sheer and awful pleasure
 Of galloping, break-neck around the farmyard
 On broomstick horse, or digging for hidden treasure
 In the orchard from a map scrawled on a charred
 Grocery sack, or discovering land with Cortez or
 Magellan, planting the flag and standing guard.
 With her five and dime gun she vanquished evil.
 Enjoy! Before time's inexorable upheaval. (XXXIV)

As Don Juan jaunts through life, Byron alludes to historical figures and events—Socrates, Dante, St. Francis, and Robert Stewart, for example. West, like Byron, situates her persona within a broad context that includes Adam and Eve, Teddy Roosevelt, William Gass, T.S. Eliot, the Pony Express, Homestead Monument, Roman Hruska's question, "What's wrong with mediocrity?" (that ultimately cost Nixon nominee G. Harrold Carswell a place on the Supreme Court) and LB662, a bill proposed in Nebraska in 1985 to close down rural schools (a subject dear to West's heart) (V, VI, VII, IX, XI, XV, XL). Indeed, West may well be comparing Governor Kerrey's signature on LB662 to Viscount Stewart's abandonment of Genoa at the Congress of Vienna.

As part one concludes and "The schoolbus hurls its way to Canto Two," Alpha prepares to meet "the challenge of TOWN SCHOOL," located in "Florence," a.k.a., Genoa, Nebraska (XLVI). Although *Death of a Regional Poet* was completed during the summer of 1985, following West's return from Iceland, it was not until 1998 that *Canto*

One was published (Interview). Let's hope we hear more about the life and times of Alpha Oleson in the near future.⁶

The Farmer's Daughter

The third book of the trilogy, *The Farmer's Daughter*, much of which was written in Iceland, was published in 1988, the year after West joined the faculty of New Mexico State University, where she currently teaches (Interview). Although at first glance this collection seems unrelated to the first two, a closer look suggests that while *Plainswoman* has an epic quality and *Death of a Regional Poet* is based on Byron's mock epic, *Don Juan*, *The Farmer's Daughter* has features of an anti-epic. Conflict and stories of adventure, the meat of the epic, are seen in reflection, and there is little of the elevated language readers might expect to find. The plainswoman of the second hundred years, in the opening poem, "Progression," suggests that the three-year-old of the book's cover photograph—she stands in a field of blooming alfalfa next to her father, who is on his haunches to be at her height—has grown up. She is no Odysseus, rather:

the farmer's daughter,
corn-fed, apple-cheeked,
a local yokel from a jerkwater town.
.....

You are the round little Swede,
snub-nosed, tongue-tied,
who rises at the crack of dawn
to milk the cows, slop the hogs
and cut across the corn to school.

You are the first to go to college
one hundred homesick miles away. . . . (1-3, 6-12)

The poem opens "*in medias res*": the protagonist has gone away to college, has married, divorced and traveled abroad, and has returned home again, "wiser of course," to visit her parents who are, as they say with each visit, "Always glad to see you come—always glad to see you go" (37, 41). Home was the destination of Odysseus's adventures. In West's adventures, home is her place of origin, well-spring of inspiration, temporary haven, as well as place of departure. Just as every stanza of "Progression," which summarizes the movement of her life, includes the word "corn" in various permutations

that she carries with her from stage to stage, the farmer's daughter on the gynecologist's table, "like an overturned tortoise," carries aspects of her home with her wherever she goes ("Safe-T-Coil" 3). The forces that have shaped her and her actions, rather than supernatural, are natural, albeit powerful, inherited, and geographic.

In *The Farmer's Daughter*, West consolidates the several personae of her earlier books into a unified, multidimensional perspective and voice. The volume "ties up a lot of loose ends," West said in 1991 (Barnden 57). "I was writing my own myth," she reflected more than ten years later, sorting out what of her inheritance she would take with her and what myths would require revision (Interview). "Farewell to Odin," the first of five sections, reflects both inheritance and revision. An element of sadness lingers in several of these poems as loss is acknowledged even as change is welcomed or sometimes engineered. The work of J.R.R. Tolkien, the literary ecologist *extraordinaire*, comes to mind. Drawing on the *Poetic Eddas* of Iceland, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and *Beowulf* for his *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien despairs over loss of culture and language even as his own trilogy advances.

"Second Generation," which immediately follows "Progression," is an example of change, revision, and the opening of another frontier. "We descend from those who delight not in ancient glories," West opens the poem, recalling the *Poetic Eddas* and family stories, those culture carriers that her grandmother's generation brought with her from the old country, and "who put language and legend to lie fallow in the past" (1-2). The descendents "take their pride in the keel that parts the prairie / and treasure the metal of a sun-gleaming plow," she continues, stressing both inheritance and change (3-4). The pronoun that begins the second stanza, "they," refers to the first generation born in the new country who continue to fear God, "but less than the weather" (5). "They" still go to church and "hymn to a Lutheran sky," but there is no "abiding city," no Valhalla but rather the power and capriciousness of the weather, for example, the rain which "falls on the deserving and the unworthy," a rewriting of Matthew 5:45, "The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike" (6, 8, 9, 13). With the poem's last line, the pronoun shifts once more, to the second generation to be born on the land where "nothing remains to tame—but yourself" (16). For West and her generation, the struggle has become internal and psychological.

In "Farewell to Odin," also in this first section, West recycles and rewrites the well-known Old Norse story for the new country as she writes her own myth. The poem concludes:

As giants and trickery could not,
this land,
this weather replaced you.
And your displacement lingers in the prairie's wise music,
wordless and practical as air,
the rhythm of tool and utensil,
the song of a woman who keeps her own counsel
as she scrapes bones and sinew out the door
to quiet the whines of one more hungry dog. (67-75)

West conserves as she changes, incorporating Odin's story, along with stanza 163 from *Sayings of the High One* (Hávamál), from the Icelandic *Poetic Edda*, resulting in what the poet has just referred to as "the prairie's wise music" (14).

West also reminds us throughout this first section that the heroes of Icelandic sagas were both warriors *and* poets: "Poets strode into combat with the standard bearers / and wielded weapons as they wrought their words." West is explicit in "Of Viking Stock," which also reflects the dual nature of the personá whom we follow throughout the collection (5-6).

Because nineteenth-century pioneering and "the nature of the plains experience" are "inexpressibly different now from what it was only a century ago," Behrendt writes, they afford "both a burden and a dilemma for the contemporary plains writer" (114). Although he or she can follow "the evidence of the struggle to domesticate the land," the writer,

belongs nonetheless to a culture whose nature is governed by quite different values, quite different priorities. Hence much of contemporary plains literature explores conflicting impulses toward community and individuality, continuity and isolation, public and private life within the external framework of a land and a cultural tradition quite distinct from other geographical areas. (Behrendt 114)

Because this is to a large extent true of contemporary plains writers and was true of West's earlier collections, in particular, *Plainswoman*, *The Farmer's Daughter* is a strikingly integrative gesture that is also a freeing one. Conflicting impulses are accepted and

their product, this life here—of this plains poet and by extension all of us—is celebrated.

Section two, "Corn Land" is, by West's own accounts, "celebratory" (Barnden 57). As a student in Iceland, West read *The New Yorker's* "Profile (Corn)" by E. J. Kahn, Jr. and was able to locate a book in the university library on Mayan corn mythology and goddesses in English (Barnden 57).⁷ Her self-described "nostalgia" for the corn country of home, sweeping knowledge of the story of *maize*, and reflective intimacy with her subject resonate in every poem. West begins with "the people of the plains," the Shanleys, childhood neighbors who will show up again in her novel *The Summer of the Sub-Comandante* (25). Not only do they provide a sense of place, of farm community, the Shanleys are an early—Mikhail Bakhtin might say subversive—force on the young poet. The Shanleys are distinctively "other"; you can recognize them by "the way they sit a tractor, / one arm draped over the steering wheel," in lines 2-3, and by the way

... they talk.
They find something that rankles
and keep after you until you fly up
like a clumsy chicken, and they laugh
at every ruffled feather and keep on going.
Dad says he ain't got time for damn fool behavior
And they let him alone.
Not me. (11-18)

The Shanleys tease, encourage the young girl's interest in boys; she envies and celebrates their fast talk and "feisty eyes" from her own home where "we don't tease, didn't joke or fight / and never sat with our knees above the table" (33, 34-35). If these poems are any indication, she's learned a good deal from these neighbors about the joy of life and trading conformity for self-expression.

But it is the bounty of the plains of the New World, indigenous *maize*, genus: *Zea*, species: *mays*—the first words in Latin I'd ever read, outside church, printed on the side of a sack of seed corn: that is the heart of the section. Ours is a "country of gold / gathered in granaries, given back to the ground," West opens the sonnet, "Proving Ground," recalling perhaps those dreams of the New World that included streets paved with gold and "Nothing you propose is impossible" (*Plainswoman* 4). This is a poem of germination, of taking

root, when "the rain-sprites in clouds defy the demons, / discover seed" (5-6). Nature rules supreme where, West writes, "We must trust the design of earth and sky," life just west of the 98th meridian where weather, with its companion luck, controls life (12). In the poems that follow—"Mother Corn, Trial and Error," "Corn, Peas, Beans and Women Grow," "Cornland," and "Zea Mays"—West gives voice to the endurance of *maize*, its long history, and of human dependence on it, the "food / that grew" from the heart of "Mother Corn," the "strength of her people, milk from her breast" (6, 7). Although much of the mythology imbedded in the poems comes from the Mayan people, the whole cycle of the Skidi Corn Ceremony, once celebrated by the Pawnee who made their home on the land before there was a county called Nance and along a river only later named The Loup, sounds in the background.

Along with celebration and the joy—the children call, "It's tasseling!" and "I see a silk!" as they cut weeds from corn rows—there is a range of related undercurrents: of violence, destruction, loss, and change. Once again, West is veering away from a romantic image of the heartland to one that is more textured, more complete. "And if the ceremony alter to include / the custom of percentage and calculation," she asks in "Zea Mays,"

and the rites of autumn begin
with a parade of massive machines
northward on the interstate,
their operators separated from the crop
by a complex of steel and gears,
shall we say there is nothing strict
nor sacred in this observance of harvest? (19-27)

No doubt this farmer's daughter is also well aware of the irony of the rich emotional heritage of corn and the weak corn prices that continued from the 1980s to the present time.

Corn, like the poetry that "establishes what remains," contains our heritage. West urges us in the same poem to see, to remember, to re-experience

the clean-shelled corn fall into a wagon
in a single spectral color
and leaning over the side
a man scooping his hand deep into the yield
to bring forth a handful

held out, as an offering,
then relax and spread his fingers
to watch and feel the smooth kernels
slip from his grasp. (29-37)

We are, like the old timers shucking by hand for the pleasure of it, "participants in a tableau / neither beginning nor ending" ("Zea Mays" 45-46). The existence of time must be acknowledged; death is inevitable. Nature—as exemplified in *maize*, the weather, and the river we now call the Platte—endures and has the power to nourish or withhold nourishment of the generations that pass through the region. West, whether joining in on the hand shucking or writing the poem, is gathering together, recovering the past that she will, "like a priestess," keep—for herself and for those who read her poems.

Along with their celebration of a traditional and common harvest, the poems of *The Farmer's Daughter* also celebrate joys of the physical person in her or his physical world. Like the man running his hands through the corn in "Zea Mays," the men and women who appear in West's poems have bodies and body parts! They dangle their fingers and hide in fields between the rows of corn. In "Cornland," "a woman straightens / to arch her back against her hands," "a man lifts his cap to push his head / into the crook of his arm," and children raise their corn knives ready to head down the rows "to hack away the cocklebur, and chop the pigweed up" (5-6, 7-8, 48, 51). Life, human and otherwise, is captured in the physical manifestation and gesture; take, for instance, this essential description of the corn plant, with its "slashed tongue, flayed skin, the ripped-out gem of a heart" ("Zea Mays" 4).

Although farm life recedes in the third section of *The Farmer's Daughter*, the land and its people are never completely out of sight. "To a Bearded Muse," takes place away from home geographically, but with familiar details. West's travel companions continue to be humor without rancor and her relationship with her art, for example, in "Pantoum to a Bearded Muse on Lines by Robert Graves." It is the Corn Goddess, not Graves's White Goddess, the swallows, not the traditional muse, who inform and inspire her work. She is as interested in sorrow as she is in joy. These poems are also "celebratory, as much as one ever can be when dealing with the male/female," West has said (Barnden 57). "I'd rather write," she continued, "about stuff that doesn't work, like Tolstoy's 'Every happy family is alike; every

unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.' I'm also interested in how people are awkward with each other" (Barnden 57). Poets, West has said, "are the most efficient users in the ecology of emotions. When they experience happiness, they experience it like everybody else, but when suffering or pain or any kind of unhappiness comes to them, instead of just wallowing in it, which people tend to think poets do, they use it and they turn it into poetry" (Barnden 62).

In "Sonnets from Omaha," section four, West returns to form, looking to Rainer Maria Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus*, for inspiration (Interview). Although the epigraph of this section is from Colette's *The Vagabond*, it is Rilke's advice to "live the questions," that she seems to have taken to heart throughout this collection. Published as *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke wrote to the young poet Franz Kappus:

I would like to beg you, dear Sir, as well as I can, to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love *the questions themselves* as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers, which could not be given to you now, because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. *Live* the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. (34-35)

West brings the muse to the plains as did Cather before her. Now she renovates the sonnet form, making it as at home here as it was in Elizabethan England as she examines questions of identity and difference. Take "Woman Against the Landscape," for example:

She finds herself prized by those who nurture
exotica displaced; a cactus under grass,
the taste of escargot in wine-touched sauce
are metaphors appliquéd to her.

But she has cursed the garden slug and snail,
Driven miles through spine-pricked desert
And loves the tumbleweed before it wrenches from the earth,
Indigenous green still yielding to the rains.

In a small-town museum, the curator preens
Before the single relic, rare as the stranger
Who spies it, the miracle in the moment of discovery,
The recognition his to carry off like a keepsake.

There are no saints' bones in her body.

Her ecstasy is earthly, untitled by pilgrim's praise. (1-14)

By the collection's final section, "Nebraska Hide Out," West is on her way to living the answer, taking her own "Advice to a Young Woman who Hesitates to Cross the River on a Fallen Log" (70). "Expect the log to dip and pitch," she writes,

but do not assume
it means to roll you into the river.
It also must adjust.

.....

Then listen
and follow your own voice. Listen
and cross the water. (17-20, 29-31)

In other words, living one's way into the answer. "Herbiphobia," "The Bush Baby at the Henry Doorly Zoo," and "The Woman in La Bella Courtyard," all prepare the reader for the protagonist's departure because, experience has proved for West, living means hitting the road as much as it means visiting the land and those she loves. "That's the way I felt when I last lived there," West says of the final section, "Nebraska Hide-Out," "an outlaw hiding there" (Barnden 57). Time to travel again; the farmer's daughter exits with a burst of energy and humor. Her final poem, "Transition: Villanelle for the Road"—like "Herbiphobia" a few pages earlier—draws on West's knowledge of languages. The root word of "villanelle" and "villain," the Latin word "*villa*," a country house or farm, is the same ("Villanelle" 208). "Originally," poet and editor Don Padgett writes, "a villain wasn't a bad character in a story; he was simply a farm servant, a country bumpkin" ("Villanelle" 208). True to form, the woman, the self-described "local yokel from a jerkwater town," who discovered that the "same old cornfield [is still] east of the house" in the volume's first poem is saying "so long" in the collection's final bittersweet poem. West's readers, like the parents on the stoop, are glad to see her come and glad to see her go—if only for the bounty of her return.

Romance Tercermundista (2000), a bilingual chapbook of poems, and her novel, *The Summer of the Sub-Comandante* (2002), serve as letters home, with news from Cuba, Latin America, and Asia, where she, like her fellow travelers from home, the swallows, travels periodically, widening our world ("barn swallow," par. 6). Unlike

Christopher Columbus, another traveler who hails from Genoa, albeit Italy, West will continue to expand her vision of the interconnectedness of place and human life. West, who "discovered that I'm just as comfortable in a foreign country as I am in my own," is completing a full-length manuscript that includes an "international mixture" of poems resulting from her more recent travel (Interview).

Overall, what West brings to plains poetry is a refreshing, energetic voice that is neither self-congratulatory nor politically correct, neither reasonable nor evenhanded, which makes her work distinctive. "I helped to create a voice that wasn't there before, female struggling, suffering voice that gives appreciation even if it's struggling. I think my humor has saved me. It's the only way to get through without romanticism" (Interview).

Kathleene West remarked in 1986 that she believed that she was "the last of the frontierspeople" (Hawkins 36). "Nothing," as she wrote in "Second Generation," "remains to tame—but yourself" (*The Farmer's Daughter* 11). During the second hundred years of European settlement of the New World, the focus has shifted from the settling of a new land to pioneering the frontier within. West is completing and answering, retrieving and preserving, as well as asking new questions about what it means to be human here and now. Because of West's poetry, significant aspects of our place and our heritage—our contribution to human conversation through time—will not be lost on the prairie wind.

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NOTES

- ¹ "Martin Luther's Children" was previously published in a slightly edited version in *Leaning into the Wind*, the first of three anthologies edited by Linda Hasselstrom, Gaydell Collier, and Nancy Curtis, that brings together the writing of contemporary women writing on and about the prairie.
- ² Many of West's readers will recognize this pattern, described by noted child psychiatrist D. W. Winnicott and Jungian child analyst Mara Sidoli, among others, which is intense during childhood and persists to some extent into adulthood.
- ³ In each of her collections, West insists that knowledge about the world be based on the "direct experience of the everyday world" that Dorothy Smith wrote about in her landmark essay, "Women's Perspective as a Radical Critique of Sociology," an originating point for feminist standpoint epistemology (quoted in Fetterley and Pryse 253).
- ⁴ Composer Randall Snyder has set four other West poems to music. They can be found in his *Four Satirical Songs*. See Works Cited for complete bibliographic information.
- ⁵ Throughout the poems that follow, other hallmarks of the epic, as defined by *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*—use of the epic simile, the apparently simple story line, the trip to the underworld, and the cultural markers (of the New World as well as the Old, for exam-

ple)—are clearly present (65-66). Although a detailed account of West's use of the epic or saga form, as well as her use of Icelandic cultural and historical allusions, lies outside the scope of this work, my overview suggests that a fuller treatment is well warranted.

⁶ An early version of all five cantos may be found in West's dissertation on file at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln. See works cited for full bibliographic information.

⁷ Kahn's essay was later published by Brown as *The Staffs of Life*. See works cited for full bibliographic information.

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