

# After *Antonia*



Willa Cather  
**REVIEW**  
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## After *Antonia*

**Something new.** In its several incarnations over the years, this publication has published the occasional original verse or piece of art. But until now we have never dedicated an entire issue to original works of fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and visual arts. Last year, in recognition of the hundredth anniversary of the publication of *My Antonia* and the Foundation's rebirth as the National Willa Cather Center, we sent out a request for submissions from writers and artists who had found inspiration from Cather's classic novel. Here you have the results of that appeal. You'll find a broad range of voices and perspectives, from many newcomers to these pages and a few veterans; works from tyros and seasoned pros alike.

## CONTENTS

### Essays

<b>Being Antonia</b>	2
Antonia Welsch	
<b>Gazing Out the Windows: Reflections on Willa Cather and <i>My Antonia</i></b>	8
Nathaniel Lee Hansen	
<b>Willa: Writing in the Wilderness</b>	22
Cathy R. Schen	
<b>Another Evening on the Farm</b>	32
Gina M. Barlean	
<b>Reading <i>My Antonia</i>, Visiting a Memory</b>	36
Max Frazier	
<b>MY <i>Antonia</i></b>	44
Nadine Lavagnino	
<b>Finding <i>Antonia</i></b>	54
Zak Zarben	
<b><i>Antonia</i> and the Farm Boys</b>	72
Will Fellows	
<b>Indelible Moments</b>	78
Michelle Oppenheimer	

### Fiction

<b>Brick by Brick</b>	12
J. E. Brenton	
<b>Flowers Nodding</b>	18
Timothy Schaffert	
<b>Seconds</b>	28
Terese Svoboda	
<b>After Black Hawk</b>	41
Kaylee Penry	
<b>The Fledglings</b>	46
K. E. Butler	

<b>Nia's Destiny</b>	56
Mardra Sikora	
<b>Rebecca</b>	66
Ricardo Moran	
<b>Dude's Life</b>	74
Abbie Harlow	

## Poetry

<b>Through a New Frontier: Possibly not so Divine but Definitely Comedy</b>	7
Charles Peek	
<b>Jaffrey, 1917</b>	17
Charmion Gustke	
<b>Mister Shimerda's Soul</b>	27
Reid Mitchell	
<b>A Middle School Book Report</b>	31
Gail Wade	
<b>Still Mine</b>	34
Becky Boesen	
<b>The Land Gets in You</b>	50
Beth Hiatt	
<b>A Sunset Observed</b>	77
JoAnna O'Keefe	
<b>The Fallow Heart</b>	80
Rachel Oakman	

## Original Artwork & Design

<b>Our Flowery Pagoda</b>	16
Charmion Gustke and Laura Trigg Gilbert	
<b>Up on Kite Cemetery Hill</b>	35
Cassia Kite	
<b>From the Pages of the <i>Lincoln Union Leader</i></b>	36, 37
Todd Richardson	
<b>Cuzak's Pocket</b>	40
Todd Richardson	
<b>Beautiful Talk</b>	48
Elizabeth Wells	
<b>Ántonia</b>	52
Kaydence Johnson	
<b>Portraits Inspired by <i>My Ántonia</i></b>	62
Lyn Fenwick	

## & Etc.

<b>Contributors to this Issue</b>	81
<b>Letters from the Executive Director and the President</b>	83
<b>Welcome Home!</b>	84

On the cover: **Picture Writing on the Wind** by Todd Richardson

# Being Antonia

## Antonia Welsch

*Antonia Welsch is the daughter of the prominent Nebraska folklorist and writer Roger Welsch and the Nebraska artist Linda Welsch. She grew up just outside Dannebrog, Nebraska, the small town made famous in her dad's "Postcards from Nebraska" segments on CBS Sunday Morning. The following essay is adapted from her talk and presentation at the 63rd Annual Cather Spring Conference, which celebrated the hundredth anniversary of the publication of My Antonia. This is her take on living with the name and legacy of Antonia.*

### I.

Hello, I'm Antonia.

The organizers of the Spring Conference asked my dad and me to work together to present a talk, so we went ahead and worked completely independently of each other, not letting the other person see even a word of what we had come up with. That's what we call "Welsch teamwork." But as I was beginning to think about what I would say, my dad did give me some advice. He told me how many people would be attending the conference who, in various capacities, have devoted their lives to Willa Cather. To *My Antonia*. There would be writers, historians, artists, scholars, even the Pavelka family in attendance. He said that no matter what I decided to say, I couldn't try to "out-Cather" anyone with jewels of scholarly wisdom they hadn't already thought of. I could only talk about what I knew.

I took his advice to heart, but that meant I only had one possible topic to discuss—one thing I know well enough to speak about. And that's my experience being Antonia. Living with the name and the legacy.



### II.

Inside my tattered copy of *My Antonia*, there's a note. My mom wrote this note to my Czech grandmother many years ago. It says:

*Dear mom, Happy Mother's Day 1982. I want you to keep and read this book (dad too). It's so good. It's about us. Notice the references to food. This is just one of Willa Cather's books, but it will give you an idea about our Cather book Rog and I are doing. I love you very much.*

The book she mentions working on became *Cather's Kitchens*. My dad researched and gathered the recipes Cather mentions in her books and my mom did the accompanying artwork.

When I was born about a year later, they chose the name Antonia for many reasons. It honored my mom's strong Czech heritage. It tied into the work they had been doing on *Cather's Kitchens*. But mostly, Antonia captured the connection they felt to the plains and how well Cather had written about the land and the people in *My Antonia*.

### III.

Other than hilariously not being able to spell my name when I was young, I do have a few other memories of growing up Antonia.

The accompanying photo was taken at an event at the Pavelka farmstead. I think I was around four years old. I remember that dress. I didn't like to wear dresses growing up and I didn't like that one.

I remember it seemed like it took a long time in the car to get there.

But mostly I remember the farmstead and being at the center of a hubbub. People seemed pleased and delighted to see me—to see the little Antonia. Some even wanted a picture. I had a lot of questions . . .

“Mom, where are we?”

“We're at Antonia's house.”

“But this isn't my house.”

“Well no, it's Anna Pavelka's house.”

“OK, who is Anna Pavelka?”

“She's Antonia.”

“But I'm Antonia . . . where are we?!”

I couldn't figure out how we could both be Antonia and then there was also this Anna person. Not to mention Jim Burden who people said was actually Willa Cather. That's a lot to unpack for a four-year-old.

Willa was someone everyone talked about like they knew her, and the best I could come up with was that since she was a writer and my dad was a writer they must be brother and sister. Of course! That had to be it—Willa Cather was just an auntie I hadn't met yet.

Now when you look at the picture you can see the confusion! I had no idea what was going on.

Of course, that confusion did eventually pass. It did. And what took its place was connection. A very strong, almost familial connection. To Antonia and Jim, to Willa and Anna. I felt that the dirt roads I grew up running down were the same as Cather's back in the 1800s. That my hometown, Dannebrog, was Black Hawk. And that my best friends growing up were about as close to Lena, Tiny, and the three Marys as you could get.



When I talk about it out loud, it's a very strange thing to have your own memories indistinguishable from that of a book. But that's really how it was.

You've got to understand that Willa Cather has always been there in my life—even before I was born, even when I was just an idea in my parent's minds—I was sharing space with her. So the way Cather describes the plains is really how I see them. And the way she talks about Antonia? That's what I wanted to grow up to be.

### IV.

It's easy to get caught up in the passages that paint Antonia as a larger-than-life figure. Here's just one:

*Antonia had always been one to leave images in the mind that did not fade—that grew stronger with time. . . . She lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true. . . . She still had that something which fires the imagination, could still stop one's breath for a moment by a look or gesture that somehow revealed the meaning in common things. She had only to stand in the orchard, to put her hand on a little crab tree and look up at the apples, to make you feel the goodness of planting and tending and harvesting at last. All the strong things of her heart came out in her body, that had been so tireless in serving generous emotions.*

*It was no wonder that her sons stood tall and straight. She was a rich mine of life, like the founders of early races.*

**That had to be it—  
Willa Cather was just an  
auntie I hadn't met yet.**

I was named after this person. This person who “lent herself to immemorial human attitudes which we recognize by instinct as universal and true.” And being Roger Welsh's daughter, being lovely Linda's daughter, having this larger-than-life name, I came to believe that I had to accomplish a very particular set of things in order to be successful. I had to be great. I had to be larger than life.

The thing is, I didn't shy away from that challenge. I embraced it. I could do it. If anyone could do it, I could do it and the path there seemed so obvious and so close. I had one focus, one destination, one result on every aptitude test I ever took. I was going to be a writer. But not just any writer. I would follow in the footsteps of my dad, and my mom, and my brother, and also of Cather herself and I would write stories



that stirred emotions and defined generations. Words that really moved people.

I made it all the way through college with these grandiose, and what I assume were absolutely insufferable visions of greatness.

I graduated with honors from Nebraska Wesleyan University.

And the day after graduation, with the entire expanse of time in front of me, I cracked my knuckles, I turned on my computer, and I sat down to write the great American novel.

Some of you can already see where this is headed.

I stared at the screen. Nothing came out. Not one thought, not one word. Nothing.

The next day I sat down again to write and there was still nothing.

And the next day there was nothing.

And the next.

And the day after that.

And even the day after that one.

These days stretched into months.

And it's funny, right? It's funny looking back on what I thought I could do so easily. But at the time a darkness was growing in my heart. It grew so large that I felt strangled, until even speaking was difficult.

After all those years of work and study and *being* Antonia—it turned out I had nothing to say. I had nothing to write. I was lost.

I did get a few small essays and short stories down on paper but they were so forced. It was all just meaningless garbage.

When I saw the words published with my name attached—the Welsh name, the Cather name—it was worse than being empty. It was humiliating. I hadn't lived up to my own name, not even close, and I felt the purpose of my life crumbling around me.

The only thing I had done successfully was drown myself in ego and expectations.

V.

When I reread the book I had to laugh about how Cather wraps up Jim's college experience by simply saying his "Lincoln chapter closed abruptly."



Mine did too.

I loaded everything I had into my two-door Honda Civic and I left. I headed north. It didn't feel like an exciting new chapter. It felt like a humiliating defeat. Not only had I failed at the one thing I was meant to do, but I was running from that failure as fast as the interstate would take me.

There's this moment, when you're on I-35W heading into Minneapolis: you crest this enormous plateau before you hit the river valley and you can see the entire Twin Cities metro on the horizon. Only then do you realize how big it is. I'll never forget that moment when I saw it in the pouring rain after my nine-hour drive to get there. It might as well have been a jungle. Or a sea. It was so expansive. And there I was driving straight into the depths of it.

I found a terrible minimum-wage job at a grocery store co-op. And then another at Barnes and Noble. I worked the 4:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. shift at the bookstore stocking shelves, opening the cash register, and selling the *Wall Street Journal* to old white men in suits. Then I would bus to the co-op where I would work from 1:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. ringing up and bagging expensive organic produce.

It didn't take me long to find a small studio apartment in a bad part of town.

I slept on the floor because I had no furniture.

I got bedbugs.

The first winter I didn't know to buy real boots or a parka for the Minnesota cold, and I remember digging my car out during a snow emergency with my bare hands and feeling the icy cold seep into my very bones.

The weight of my failures still pressed down on me. But slowly, in the middle of the honking horns and sirens and the traffic jams and miles and miles of houses stacked in rows, I was able to turn my focus away from it. And honestly, it was exactly like Cather describes. In Minneapolis,

*I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.*

It wasn't the sweeping grasslands or the small prairie towns like Black Hawk or Danneberg that I always thought I would dissolve into. It was the city. It was the flashing lights of the liquor store outside my window and the over-packed city buses. I was anonymous. Part of something complete and great and I didn't want to be anything more.

In Minneapolis, I wasn't destined to be anyone or anything. I was just your grocery store cashier. With an unpronounceable name.

Years went by.

## VI.

Up north, I discovered the joy of riding a bicycle. I found Duluth and when I saw the sunrise over Lake Superior, I swear I saw god. I got myself a proper pair of boots and coat and started to live through those harsh Minnesota winters like they were a badge of grit and honor—car stuck in the driveway? No worries, I'll drag my sled to the store for bread and margarita mix. That's really what it's like up there—people do that, they're nuts.

I adopted a blue heeler/border collie mix named Evey, who's still a better spiritual guide than I think the Dalai Lama could ever be.

I quite literally stumbled on the love of my life, Andrew. I married him. And then I got to meet the other love of my life, Henry.

If you thought I wouldn't take the opportunity to show everyone a picture of my sweet baby, you don't know me very well.

As Cather put it, I did dissolve into something complete and great. And when it came it did come as naturally as sleep. But I wasn't sleeping. I was becoming.

And the more I started to recognize myself—the real person—not the one who had wrapped herself with larger-than-life visions of greatness, but the real, actual person underneath it all, the more connected I felt. And the more connected I felt, the more I was finally able to look back on everything that had happened before and accept it.

I'm not going to pretend this journey was like a fairy tale where it all wrapped up sweetly. It's been a rocky road. But especially after Henry was born I changed. My world changed. And that dam that had built itself up inside me—it broke loose.

I wrote about motherhood. And postpartum depression. I wrote about exhaustion and circles of women. I wrote about

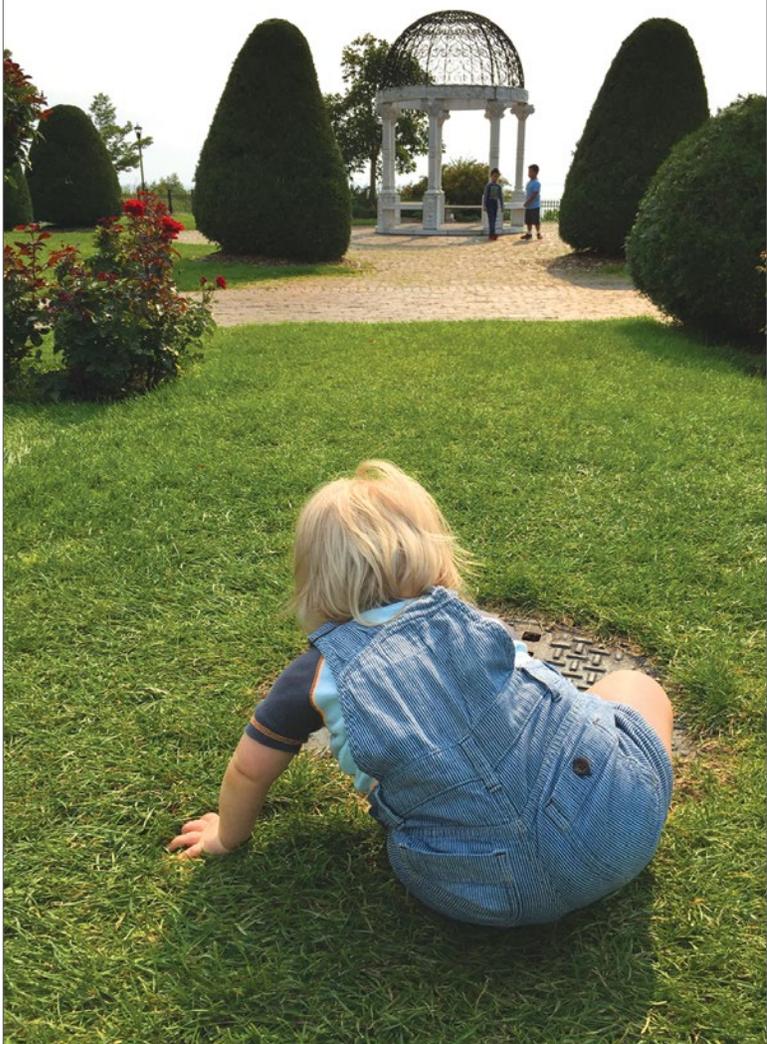


I can be my own Antonia. My own unique person.  
Whatever that means, wherever that takes me.

social justice and riding my bicycle and body image and feminism and taking up space in my own life and finding my power and using my voice. And I don't know if any of it is any good. But for once in my life I wasn't writing to be good. I was writing because the words needed out. The stories needed out. My stories. No one else's.

VII.

When the opportunity came along to speak at the conference, I reread the book. I thought it might be good to have a little refresher before I got up and spoke in front of everyone. Henry was being kind of a bear, what with teething and ear infections and being almost two year old, so I decided to take a vacation day from work and really focus. So I did . . . and I read the entire book from cover to cover.



Henry

I was flabbergasted. Have you all read *My Antonia*?  
Ántonia makes so many bad decisions.  
She trusts people she shouldn't.  
She loses everything a few times over.  
She is so bullheaded, so stubborn that no one can get anything through to her until she fails at whatever it is herself.

I couldn't believe it . . . *I had lived up to the name!*

This time when I read it, it was just so clear. Ántonia had faults. She endured hardships. She loved wholeheartedly. She was a person. I had this puffed-up idea of greatness and destiny tied into Ántonia. Maybe I had zoned in on the parts where Jim is remembering Ántonia with nostalgia, or I had been so focused on Cather's writing, that I'd missed it, or . . . I don't know. I thought all the confusion about who these characters were had faded away when I was a child but they hadn't. Not even a little bit.

In fact, it took me all these years, all the miles of separation; it even took me getting the invite to the hundred-year celebration to come to terms with . . . to come to terms with my own name.

I'll never stitch together a narrative as brilliantly as Willa Cather.

I'll never be some kind of larger-than-life woman who lingers in memory and founds early races.

I'll never be as comfortable speaking in front of an audience as my dad.

But I don't have to. I can be me. I can be my own Antonia. My own unique person. Whatever that means, wherever that takes me.

This has been my journey being Antonia. It continues. It's not done. I still feel that strong connection to Cather, and I still see so many things just the way she writes about them.

I'll close with a quote from her that I think perfectly captures what the 63rd Annual Spring Conference means to me. And it's actually the same words she chose to end the book, *My Antonia*.

*I had only to close my eyes to hear the rumbling of the wagons in the dark, and to be again overcome by that obliterating strangeness. The feelings . . . were so near that I could reach out and touch them with my hand. I had the sense of coming home to myself, and of having found out what a little circle man's experience is. For Ántonia and for me, this had been the road of Destiny; had taken us to those early accidents of fortune which predetermined for us all that we can ever be. Now I understood that the same road was to bring us together again. Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past. ■*

# Through a New Frontier: Possibly not So Divine but Definitely Comedy

*Inferno* What is the right coin for the ferryman?  
Late night after a kitchen brouhaha has emptied the steak house  
My wife and I are the only others out to eat in Boelus  
Except for Eva Marie Saint and Jason Robards,  
There after a long day's shoot, the film a journey into Ántonia's world,  
Nancy and I overhearing Robards on the nearby wall phone,  
Hollywood at the other end of the line:  
"Maybe we could play the character a little differently."  
"What?"  
"A different psychology, a different motivation."  
"Not Cather's?"  
"Right. More 'now.'"  
The telephone wire a way of containing fire, the annotation:  
Some fires warm, some burn.

*Purgatorio* A couple dozen of us, one rotation of the tours,  
Trampling down the tall grass in the Pavelka yard  
On the divide north of Red Cloud, west of Rome,  
Moving toward our descent, one at a time,  
Down into the cave of Ántonia's fruit cellar,  
And from there, like her children, to ascend the stairs,  
Emerge into sunlight, the celebrity guest of ripe age,  
Who had enjoyed a few morning toddies, and I,  
Now two-by-two, my hand gripping his elbow,  
Guiding his unsteady steps. In spirits,  
Sometimes veritas, sometimes just trying to move up  
One step at a time.

*Paradiso* At the Abbaye Saint-Michel de Frigolet,  
One-eared Arles not far away, the great river and palace,  
The 180 passengers and their luggage  
Swiftly shoved and shuttled from the fast train,  
Mosquito spray found sufficient to the evil of the day,  
The sound of "Laudate Domino" drifting  
From the eleventh-century chapel out over the seminarians,  
The sound of that something within us that Cather sought  
So successfully to dramatize, something there in each of us,  
Along with the too-much baggage we carry  
And whatever, this day or another, that plagues us,  
Something in a chant that orders lives,  
And something too that we,  
Strangers in a strange land, simply find enchanting.

Charles Peek



# Gazing out the Windows: Reflections on Willa Cather and *My Ántonia*

**Nathaniel Lee Hansen**



Growing up in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, I was an avid reader; however, I rarely encountered writing set around my prairie town or in a locale similar to it. Granted, there was the *Little House on the Prairie* television series—the nearby town of Walnut Grove did not resemble the depiction in the show. I deemed the books too girly, nothing I would dare read. In junior high and high school English classes, our readings rarely connected to a place I could identify as similar to Sleepy Eye. *The Hobbit*. *The Outsiders*. *Tom Sawyer* shared some elements, I suppose. The works we read in high school? Not really. Edgar Allan Poe. Nathaniel Hawthorne. Jonathan Edwards’s “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” The poems of Robert Frost. The sonnets and plays of Shakespeare. In those classes, as much as I was engaged in the readings, I often glanced or stared out the windows. I can still hear the voices of Ms. Borth and Mrs. Oglesby telling me to pay attention. I wasn’t bored. I wasn’t ignoring the discussion. I have always been fascinated by what is on the other side of a window, any window.

In a dual-credit English class my senior year I was assigned Willa Cather’s *O Pioneers!* A Dover Thrift edition. At last here was a book set relatively near to where I grew up. A couple hundred miles away as the crow flies, Nebraska not yet a place I had visited. I remember enjoying the book, feeling immersed in the world Cather created. I remember writing my paper about Alexandra’s dreams, but I have forgotten what I claimed. All that was twenty-four years ago.



Thirteen years later, in 2008, my wife and I had just returned to the Upper Midwest after three years in Portland, Oregon.

It was my second semester in the English PhD program at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion. I was nearer to Cather country, the Nebraska border just a few miles away. While taking a course in the twentieth century American novel, I read my second Cather novel, *My Ántonia*.

It was late January, winter ruling the landscape. It had been a brutal homecoming, a shock after the mild winters of the Pacific Northwest. (Our power went out one night when it was minus twenty.) Inside our house, I read the newly released Penguin Classics version, our brown tabby Flannery nestled in my lap. And I read it at a downtown coffee shop, the store characterized by the high tin ceiling of other buildings from the late nineteenth century. Sitting in one of the high-backed booths, I read—pencil in hand—underlining passages, adding asterisks, exclamation points, and occasional words. In a classroom on the second floor of Old Main, I joined other graduate students to discuss the novel. I sat in the back row, the snow-covered campus visible out the classroom’s west- and south-facing windows. While reading the novel, I regularly thought, “What a book. That voice of Jim Burden.”

Because I was pursuing my PhD with a creative writing emphasis, I especially examined each writer’s craft and style. Cather’s prose had a lyrical quality to it that I found pleasing: control, pacing, rhythm, and precision. Here is one of my favorite illustrations: “When spring came, after that hard winter, one could not get enough of the nimble air. . . . There was only—spring itself; the throb of it, the light restlessness, the vital essence of it everywhere; in the sky, in the swift clouds, in the pale sunshine, and in the warm, high wind—rising suddenly, sinking suddenly, impulsive and playful like a big puppy that pawed you and then lay down to be petted.”



That passage was so *accurate*. Maybe that was part of its draw for me then, and its draw for me now: when a writer is exactly right in his or her depiction of something. We look to writers for this skill; as a creative writer, I strive for it. When later that year winter at last absconded, the excitement of spring bounding across the landscape joyfully overwhelmed me as I ran the newly snow-free streets, the sunshine and the wind and the (relative) warmth all a playful puppy against my skin.



Late autumn of the next school year, I had a book order to complete for Introduction to Literature, a second-semester freshman course. While the principal text was a multi-genre anthology, I also was required to assign one novel. As a starting point, I reviewed the novels from the prior semester, some of which I ruled out immediately. I kept returning to *My Ántonia*. There is a danger, as any English instructor knows, in assigning a text that you dearly love, aware that the students might not share your enthusiasm and you spend the relevant class sessions acting as a cheerleader: “Can’t you see how wonderful and amazing and beautiful this text is?” I decided to risk it anyway.

The student body consisted (and still does) of students from South Dakota, Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa. I assigned them to write papers on the novel, the assignment their longest essay of the semester. For the weeks that we read the novel, the students were eager to discuss it, even my 8:00 a.m. class. Perhaps to them, here in *My Ántonia* was something they could recognize, the majority of them having grown up in small towns, grown up on farms.



*My Ántonia* is a novel of intense longing, with Jim’s descriptions of the prairie and of Ántonia thick with nostalgia, characteristics that appeal to me. Yet at the same time, even though Jim romanticizes certain elements, he doesn’t shy away from some of the harsh and brutal narratives. He doesn’t paint a picture of life as though it were perfect. It is a novel focused on the past, a past that still affects the present: “Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, the incommunicable past.” In my own creative works, whether prose or poetry, the past—

its people, places, and events, and their effects on the characters or speaker—is prominent. Without sounding too cliché, the past is the window through which to understand the characters or speaker in the present.



In August 2016, while traveling home to Texas after visting family in Minnesota, we approached a sign for Red Cloud outside of Hebron, Nebraska, near the intersection of U.S. 81 and U.S. 136. It was early afternoon, and I was relaxing in the passenger’s seat in our van, my old running shoes off, my legs stretched out, my wife relieving me from my long morning drive. I had already scoped out the town via Google Maps, researched it online, read about the opening of the Cather Center. At that point in my life, I hadn’t made any literary pilgrimages. As we rode past the sign on which a redwing blackbird rested, I declared, “There’s the sign for Red Cloud!”

“I know you want to go there someday,” my wife said from the driver’s seat. “Maybe next year.”

My wife’s words don’t have subtext. She says what she means,

and she means what she says. Clearly, Red Cloud *was* a possible stopover on a future trip to Minnesota. It wasn’t *that* far off the route we took between Texas and Minnesota, our annual trip to visit family “up North.” As I briefly eyed the green sign through the van’s passenger window, I thought, *someday*.



On a Sunday afternoon in February 2017, my wife and I were plotting our

summer road trip to Minnesota. Our son and daughter had been asking to see Mt. Rushmore. We agreed it was time for a family trip to the Black Hills, the Badlands, and Wall Drug, before heading east. After consulting various routes on my map app, we settled on heading due north and then cutting across Nebraska and entering the Black Hills from the south. Then I asked my wife the big question: “Can we stop in Red Cloud?”

“I figured we would,” she said.

“You have made me *so* happy,” I gushed and thanked her profusely.

For months I daydreamed about Red Cloud. I was as excited for the second day of the journey as I was for our days camping in Custer State Park. By the time we departed in late July, I had



finished reading all twelve of Cather's novels. I had read through the *Collected Stories*. I was one hundred pages into the *Selected Letters*. I was prepared for this pilgrimage, yet it was complicated by the fact that I had roughly an hour to tour the house and visit the Cather Center—we would have to continue to our hotel in Kearney, ninety miles down the road.

When I was a child, I would regularly become overly excited for an upcoming event. This excitement typically had two common adverse effects: difficulty sleeping the night before; a headache the day of the event. Fortunately, this time, I had none of those effects, but I had all of the excitement.

I remember driving over a slight rise on a curve and then the road heading due north. There was a creek, and then a river. After several months of dreaming about it, here it was. The blue sky and clouds that one comes to expect in that part of the country in late July, the warmth of the plains.

I located a shady spot for the van adjacent to the Red Cloud City Park. My wife and kids would be playing at the park while I visited the Cather Center and toured her childhood home. I walked over to the house on the corner, the house I had been waiting months to see in person. There was the plaque out front that I had seen on Google Images.

Over at the Cather Center I inquired about tours, and a woman working at the desk told me that the group would be heading to the house soon. I returned to the corner, wishing for a breeze to help dry the sweat from my forehead. Sure enough, though, a group came walking over. The guide welcomed me, asked me to introduce myself. I did so, noting that I was a college English professor. She asked the group how many of us had read any of Cather's novels, and how many novels we had read. It was a moment of pride that I could say *twelve*. The guide joked, "Well, if you have a question about the novels, you can ask Nate."

Inside the house the air was an odd mixture of stuffy and cool. In the dining room, the tour guide pointed out the family high chair. Cather had been in that small chair at one point—something so simple as that was a revelation to me. This was the dining room in which she'd eaten thousands of meals. She had lived the formative years of her life in these two floors. She had sat in this room, passed through this room, and I, too, was now in this space.

We stood in the kitchen, a room much warmer. And then we journeyed up those steep steps, the guide warning us to be cautious. Of course, the steps creaked. Upstairs was a stuffiness that I had expected. Off to my left was her childhood room, the wallpaper she had brought home each day in small pieces. This

was the space where sometimes the snow came through the rafters. This was the space in which one of my favorite authors had slept, had spent time reading, had spent time daydreaming out a window, just as I had daydreamed out my second-story bedroom window in Sleepy Eye, Minnesota, just as I do now daydream out my home office window in central Texas.

But there's something about being somewhere where someone whom you admire, whose work you admire, has done her living. The knowledge that the space, the place that you're occupying is one that this individual, too, occupied. The knowledge that the big sky which takes over everything also was a sight to that person.

We've all had that feeling of profound significance as we journeyed somewhere that is important to us. It could be for any number of things. A place connected to family. A place connected to a writer/artist/creative type. A place of religious devotion. I've had my share of visits to special places: Notre Dame; the Black Hills; Crater Lake; the reconstructed Fort Clatsop along the Oregon coast; Pompeys Pillar outside of Billings, Montana, with the signature of William Clark.



For the first time last spring, I taught American Literature II, a junior-level course for English majors and minors. It was my sixth year at the University of Mary Hardin–Baylor in Belton, Texas. Besides the second volume of the Norton, faculty typically taught one novel as well. *My Antonia*. I was in central Texas. *How would my students respond?*

My focus in the class was largely on the importance of place, especially the drive of westward expansion. Whenever I teach literature, whenever I write, I always focus on place—every work needs to happen somewhere particular. Cather helped reinforce the importance of that aspect of literature.

Over six class periods in our stuffy, windowless classroom, we read and discussed the novel. On the first day, I distributed a copy

...there's something about being somewhere where someone whom you admire, whose work you admire, has done her living.

To reread one of my favorite books, to share it with students who cared deeply about literature, what more could a professor really ask for?



of the 1918 introduction (the one I favor), and we compared and contrasted it to the 1926 version (which the Norton Critical Edition has at the outset.) Each session, discussions were productive, and just as nine years ago with my freshmen, these students engaged with the novel. There was so much to talk about, and their level of attention to the text made for deeper and more insightful discussion.

During the final day of our discussion it was clear that students were reluctant to leave behind *My Ántonia*. The book really allowed us to initially investigate several ideas that we explored through the rest of the term: issues of place and space, the role of the narrator, ethnicity, and race divisions. For me during these three weeks, I was experiencing my most enjoyable time of the semester. To reread one of my favorite books, to share it with students who cared deeply about literature, what more could a professor really ask for?



On Friday, June 1, 2018, I drove north on U.S. 281, the sky absent of clouds. The day promised to be hot, in the mid-90s. Having already given my conference presentation the morning before, I was relaxed, anticipating my mid-morning activity. Shortly after the big curve into Nebraska from Kansas, I pulled over on the left side of the road and parked on the gravel by an interpretive sign: The Willa Cather Memorial Prairie. There were no other cars around. Six hundred acres before me. I had forgotten bug spray, but I didn't care, and there was enough of a breeze that morning.

For the next hour I traced narrow dirt paths across a landscape much more contoured than what I could discern from the highway. I paused every so often to snap pictures of the horizon, the greens of land and the blue of sky both otherworldly. There really were very few trees as far as I could see in any direction. And when I descended to the bottom of the hills, the greenery and the sharp blue sky consumed my range of vision. I could begin to understand the terror and wonder that must have struck those early settlers chronicled in Cather's works. I was in awe, at the mercy of the landscape. I shuddered to think of the place in a February blizzard.



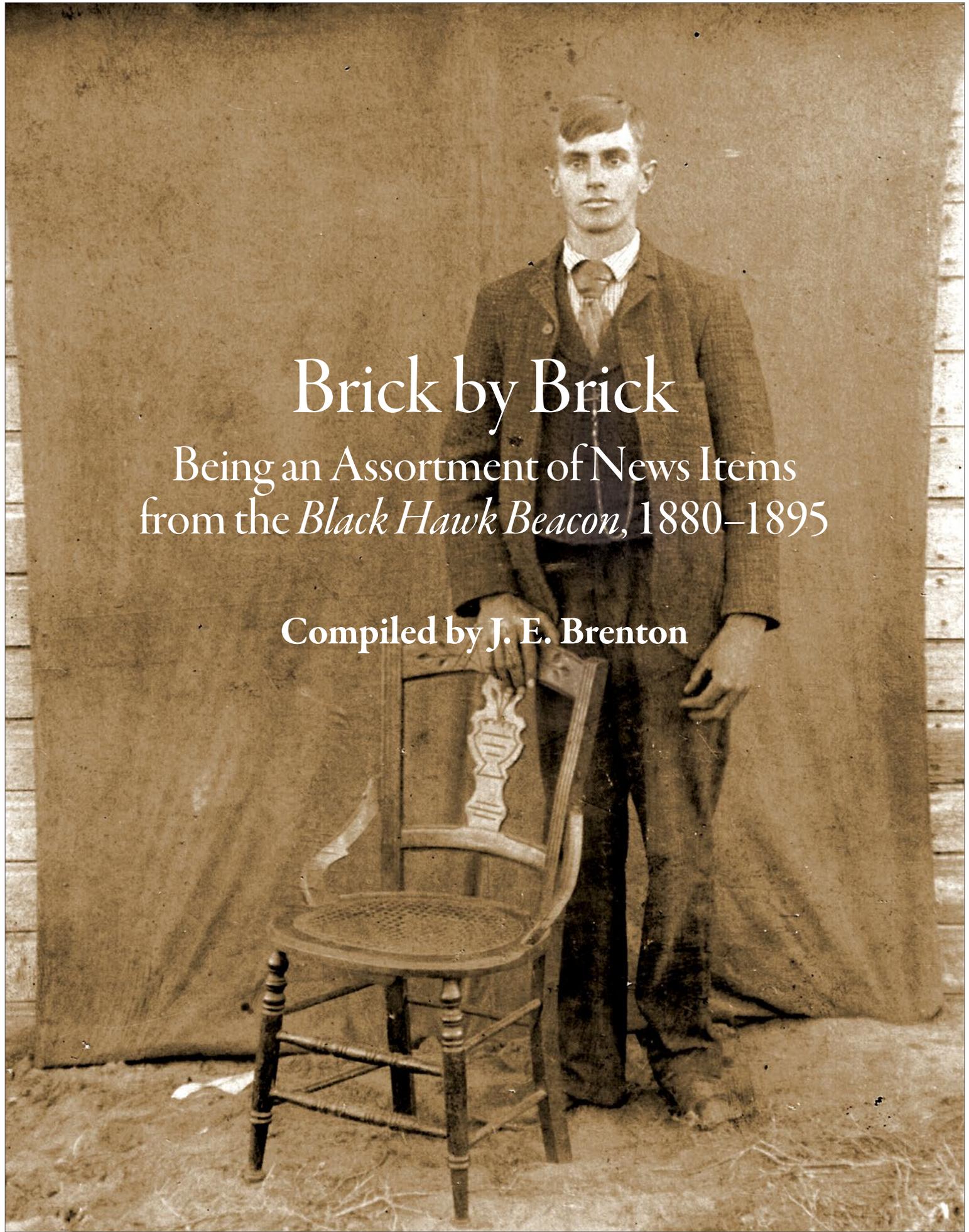
When I meet a fellow writer or just someone interested in what I write, that person invariably asks, "What kind of writing do you do?" I tell them that in my stories, poems, and essays, *place matters*. I tell them that for me, *place* consists of the small

towns, open prairies, corn and soybean fields, unassuming lakes, wide skies, and county roads of eastern South Dakota and southwestern Minnesota. I tell them that my works explore the beauty and the sorrow in a region that might not seem significant to those unfamiliar with the region. I tell them that life happens *everywhere*, even here. I tell them that I have chosen to work in a certain space, or rather, that this space has chosen me. But I didn't always respond this way and with such confidence.

I have learned much from Cather, but what has affected me most is to not be ashamed of my material, of what I'm working with. She has taught me not to apologize. If "regional" is an epithet, I'll gladly claim it. These are the places I know best, the places I love most.

Raymond Carver once wrote that "Every great or even very good writer makes the world over according to his own specifications." He notes that there are worlds according to Faulkner. To Irving. To O'Connor. I would add Cather to that list. Having read all of her novels, and although I am not a scholar of her work, I can say that *My Ántonia* (and to a lesser extent *O Pioneers!*) are the works that resonate with me the most. Cather and her creations inspire and encourage me to continue developing characters in my fictional worlds, writing lyrical, image-saturated lines in my poems, and exploring my own history with this region in my essays, all while making the world over through my eyes, just as Cather did through hers. ■





# Brick by Brick

Being an Assortment of News Items  
from the *Black Hawk Beacon*, 1880–1895

Compiled by J. E. Brenton

**April 2, 1880.** The Black Hawk Cornet Band, some eight men strong and musical prodigies all, will give us their maiden performance next week in honor of the opening of Mr. Olson's new drug store and young Mr. Trumbull's new harness emporium. These two visionary gents who are helping put our city on the map are themselves twenty-five percent of the Band, which they take turns leading. It has reached our ears that the Corneteers may be joined in performance by the gifted Miss Sophie Olson, daughter of the one bandleader and sweetheart of the other, and we are inclined to believe master of both.

**May 14, 1880.** Neighbor Krajiek from upcounty has vacated the dugout he called home and repaired to roomier quarters nearby. Regulars at Kucera's saloon pass along his account that the former abode is to be made over to a family of his kinsmen, due to arrive from the east at any day. We are loath to inquire as to the particulars of this transaction and wish the new Bohemians the best.

**May 28, 1880.** The old Burden couple up north have a new hand to help about the farm, a rough and wiry character named Fuchs from parts unknown. Meek as a kitten beneath the gruff exterior, say the town folks who have made his acquaintance. The BEACON shall reserve judgment.

**Oct. 8, 1880.** The lively demand for brick and mortar in bustling Black Hawk has been fed this week by a large shipment from the brickworks up Heartman way. This batch is bound for Maj. Flood's business block on central Main, rising on lots wrestled away from agent Cutter at the usual Cutterish terms.

**Dec. 10, 1880.** Mr. Zimmer, of Waymore, an extensive contractor and builder, is in the city this week for the purpose of making an estimate on the new brick block to be erected here by Maj. Flood.

**Feb. 11, 1881.** We are indebted to Mr. Josiah Burden of the Burdenham precinct for the sad news of the death some weeks ago of their near neighbor Shmerda, who had come to the region with his family only recently. Mr. Burden and young Jelinek assisted with arrangements, made complicated by the particulars of the old man's passing. The BEACON acknowledged

to Mr. Burden our sadness that the Almighty has removed Mr. Shmerda from his sphere of earthly usefulness; but Mr. Burden advised that this bleak event was not one of the Almighty's choosing.

**May 6, 1881.** Maj. Flood's brick block is rising at last following delays owing to his failure to receive satisfactory prices for materials, labor, etc.; such economies made necessary after the Major spent dear to acquire the Cutter lots. But fortune smiled on Flood in the person of a youngish man known to his compatriots simply as Dog. This Mr. Dog, and we wonder if perhaps Douglas might properly be his name, is one of the laborers who escorted the Major's brickload to town some weeks ago. Seemingly weary of brickyard life, Dog chose to stick with his clayey wagonload rather than repair back to Heartman alongside his fellows. He has had odd-job work at the Gardeners' Boys Home while he tarried in our town, and a modest attic room at that establishment. Now with only the scantest training he is on his way to mastery as a mason. Flood and his crew are said to be well pleased with his work.

**June 10, 1881.** Mrs. Cutter is entertaining her sister Miss Sylvia Baker, late of Iowa, to a prolonged stay in Black Hawk while Miss Baker recovers from a nervous ailment. Mr. Cutter has chosen to make his annual sojourn to Hot Springs during this time.

**July 8, 1881.** Have you seen those towering piles of new goods at Duckford's if not, it will pay you to go and take a look at his stock of fall and winter goods. He now has on hand and for sale at bottom prices a large stock of all kinds of household and fancy goods just a-begging to be taken home by you and yours.

**July 29, 1881.** The interior arrangements of handsome Anton Jelinek's new saloon are about complete and the establishment will be open for business in about ten days. No labor or expense has been spared to make this one of the most tiptop establishments of its type, ideal for visiting country folk and drummers, and very nearly respectable enough for your better sort of town folk.

**Aug. 12, 1881.** Word on the Rialto is that Dog the new brickman is an asset to Maj. Flood and indeed to our metropolis, if also decidedly offbeat in his very deliberate

ways and not to all tastes. His time in the brickworks has given his complexion the same chalky red hue as his bricks and done nothing good for his well-being, as we observe. He is little given to casual conversation but our chats with the odd fellow tell us his brickyard years have left his soul intact.

**Nov. 11, 1881.** The demand for gold is great, but not equal to the demand for Dr. Marshall's Lung Syrup, the great remedy for coughs and colds. Sold at Polcek's Drugstore. Try it. Price twenty-five and fifty cents a bottle.

**Jan. 13, 1882.** As Maj. Flood's exterior brickwork sits complete and his bays and offices grow ready for occupancy, our friend Dog tells us seriously, in answer to our unserious question, that he personally placed precisely ten thousand six hundred and sixty-eight of the bricks in Flood's new building. He could not be engaged in speculating how many bricks are in the building altogether because how could he possibly know that? The BEACON is happy to note that Dog has found work in the same line at the new Touzalin block going in down by the bandstand.

**June 29, 1883.** Black Hawk will not celebrate next week's Fourth of July holiday on a grand scale this year, preferring to leave the field open to its neighboring towns. But thanks to the visiting Vannis, our citizens will be afforded the opportunity to have some fun and trip the light fantastic under the dance tent erected alongside Mr. Jensen's laundry. Our dear country girls who keep our better households in order will surely be in attendance with their dance cards. Patriotic recitations are planned during the orchestra breaks but the county constabulary will be watchful that weary revelers do not seize on this opportunity to seek liquid refreshment elsewhere.

**Aug. 24, 1883.** An hour's aggravation and indeed fright resolved itself happily on market day last week, when the Shimerdas of the Bohemian quarter, on a visit to town, temporarily lost track of their young Marek. This improbably hard-working young lad, rarely if ever seen unaccompanied by one of his kinfolk, insisted on remaining in the wagon when his elder brother Ambroz made his rounds along our city's main commercial



boulevard. The younger Shimerda was not to be found when time came to return to the family farm.

The search for the boy was hampered in its early stages by Mrs. S's reaction of bitter hysteria, according to reports. Matters improved after Ambroz installed her on a stool in Mrs. Markell's shop for the duration and attempted without much success to conduct a calm and careful search. It was his good fortune that our friend Miss Harling happened upon the scene and ventured what turned out to be the money guess: have a look down where the new Touzalin block is going up. When Ambroz and the ragtag band of Hawk boys and girls who had joined the hunt made their way to the new edifice, they discovered Marek methodically and capably laying bricks alongside our friend Dog, who had provided preliminary coaching and encouragement in the masonry arts. Dog's clear satisfaction with his new friend, and his new friend's aptitude for the work, slightly softened Ambroz's chronic ill humor. Before the Shimerdas repaired northward it was arranged that more bricklaying shifts might be arranged for Dog's new apprentice.

**Oct. 19, 1883.** Impromptu musical festivities this weekend at the Boys' Home. Opera House favorite d'Arnault checked in ahead of his Monday concert and before all members of the Fitzgreene Players had decamped, following their run last week in the lamentably moth-eaten "Under the Gaslight". Darn was joyously giving the business to the hotel's parlor piano with his doubletime syncopated marches when he was joined by young Buddy Brewster, the Fitzgreene company juvenile lead, on mouth harp. And thus we had a jolly musical hour's worth of what the university fellows call synergy. The foot-stomping din woke the dead in the next county.

**March 28, 1884.** The BEACON is most pleased to have helped solve a delicate problem faced of late by several shops along our commercial corridor. Each proprietor reported receiving visits from Mr. Dog wherein our friend behaved keenly inquisitive but appeared to have no interest in shopping. At least once, we understand, Dog grew agitated when pressed to explain his business and the scene became tense.

Dog is an expressive chap in his way but far from articulate, as we've come to know.

We undertook an innocent main street stroll with him and quickly got to the bottom of the problem. It seems the prominent COME IN placards in the windows of Rhine Bros. Dry Goods, Mrs. Oldham's Millinery and Quinn Hardware were having awkward consequences. Dog saw these friendly welcomes as exhortations, nay, commands, and was simply doing as he was told; coming in. Guest and merchant then eyed one another with mutual expectation and confusion. Your servant the BEACON editor was only too happy to explain the confusion to all parties and restore calm and serenity to the avenue. Furthermore our job printing shop has created handsome new shop signs reading ALL ARE WELCOME.

**March 6, 1885.** Mr. Josiah Burden and the good Mrs. Burden, finally wearying of country life, have let their farm and taken Preacher White's old house up on Black Hawk's north end. The Virginia grandson little Jimmy, now a strapping teen, is to be a town boy now.

**May 15, 1885.** Marek the Shimerda lad made another of his town visits with his family last Saturday. Having caused no significant difficulty for his mother and brother the previous week, he was rewarded with one of his regular shifts on the Hudson block jobsite with brickman Dog. We have never seen the like. Neither rough-hewn young man has a word for the other but as they work in near synchrony, we witness brotherhood. Or so this old newspaperman believes, having watched this pair for many months now.

**Sept. 4, 1885.** Mrs. Blaze has moved into the Touzalin block and has her mammoth stock of millinery goods neatly arranged, the whole presenting a most inviting appearance, while the location is one of the most convenient in the city.

**Dec. 11, 1885.** As our building spree of the last several years appears to be drawing to a close, we remain confident that Black Hawk City will get to the promised land of steady growth and prosperity, even without the crazy racket known as a boom. We find ourself saddened however that we must soon bid farewell to the stalwart Dog who has put so much into the red brick face of our city. Never one to share his thoughts, Dog let slip his plans to move on when he asked Mrs.

Gardener if he might leave a valise with her at the Boys' Home for a time.

**Jan. 8, 1886.** The BEACON must again raise its hands in horror over the fact that houses of prostitution are allowed to run in full blasé in Black Hawk without an effort to abolish them. The city council should see to it that an ordinance is promulgated in strong enough terms to put a veto to this unholy traffic.

**March 12, 1886.** Black Hawk leavetakings this week: anticipated but no less affecting for that. The westbound train last Tuesday morning carried away three of our county's most unlikely desperados. The Burdens' erstwhile hired men Fuchs and Marpole, whose positions sadly ended when the Burdens moved into town, are off to make their fortunes in the Colorado silver mines. The same train carried away the honorable Dog, our taciturn friend, for parts and adventures unknown. Not one of the westbound men appeared comfortable at the fuss being made over them. Mrs. Burden exacted a promise from Otto Fuchs to look after Jake Marpole, and Mrs. Gardener of the Boys' Home made the same fervent request with respect to Dog. We wish them all the very best and we hope against hope that Fuchs can keep his word. As the train faded from sight, all eyes on the depot platform were damp; even, your editor avows, the BEACON's own.

**April 2, 1886.** All persons knowing themselves indebted to me by Note or Book account will call immediately and settle the same, as I design closing out my stock of general merchandise at the earliest day possible. Hiram Baumgartner.

**July 30, 1886.** Mrs. Mollie Gardener has received a note from Dog, her longtime guest at the Boys' Home. Posted from Melrose out in Hawthorne county, he reports himself passably well though far removed from the loved habitation, and only middling successful in finding work and shelter and sustenance. He reckoned he was headed for Conway, or perhaps Carrisbrook where he had a lead on some brickwork but he shared no forwarding address.

**Aug. 6, 1886.** Word along the streetcar line has it that young Sylvester Lovett sustained



nigh-on mortal injury last Saturday evening on his extremely roundabout way home from the dance tent by way of Mrs. Thomas' dress shop. After accompanying Miss Lingard to her gate, wholly against her will as we suspect, and attempting to linger there, our dashing Syl required such vigorous encouragement to be on his way as provided by a sudden turn in the weather and by the merry band of country domestics who happened on the scene. Anonymous members of this sorority report that Syl's homeward peregrinations included a stop for shelter from the rain in the bosky Cutter environs, where calamity befell our lad: as he crouched under a cedar tree, attempting to stay dry and perhaps regain a modicum of sobriety, a china pitcher fell from the tree square onto his head. The pitcher did not survive the fall; the head is expected to, thanks to emergency care provided on the scene by Miss Lingard's loyal friends and later by one of our city's medical professionals.

Inquisitive Hawkers visiting the Black Hawk State Bank are requested not to inquire about the lovely crimson gash on Sylvester's forehead, imperfectly concealed by his eyeshade. Likewise we are asked not to speculate unduly on what the china pitcher was doing in the Cutter tree in the first place. Neighbors of that esteemed couple are said to have no curiosity on the latter mystery.

**March 11, 1887.** The Owl Club (Progressive Euchre Club that was) has been invited to find new quarters by the Masonic Hall, or start taking a more active role in tidying things up after its monthly bacchanals.

**Aug. 26, 1887.** A tramp, name unknown, died on Tuesday of injuries suffered in a threshing accident up in the Norwegian settlement. The grubby traveler had attempted to insinuate himself into a crew on the Iverson property and fell—unverified accounts say jumped—into the machine, where he met his end. An eyewitness claims to have heard him call out "America?!" prior to the event but could not make out the poor unfortunate's meaning.

**Sept. 16, 1887.** Without drugs! OSTEOPATHY is the science of drugless healing, a means of adjusting abnormal conditions of the body and restoring its functions. The diseases that can be cured by osteopathy include asthma, goitre, cattarrh, biliousness, baldness,

torpid liver, deafness, nervous prostration, etc. ANNA CLAUS LANGER, Diplomee in OSTEOPATHY has opened an office in the north rooms upstairs in the Flood Block. CONSULTATIONS FREE.

**Nov. 18, 1887.** Black Hawk ladies are heartbroken that a star in our fashion firmament will soon no longer be seen in these parts. Mrs. Thomas' Lena, lovely eldest daughter of our country neighbor Chris Lingard, will soon be hanging up her shingle on the Raleigh Block in Lincoln and dressing the fashionable ladies of that metropolis. At the head of the large crowd of family and friends seeing Miss Lingard off from the Burlington platform this week were her old friend Tony Shimerda and her best and only beau, her young brother Chris, lately grown as tall as a cottonwood.

**June 13, 1890.** Mrs. Josiah Burden, Emmeline to her many friends, tells the BEACON that her studious grandson Jim, Black Hawk's first Harvard man, is successfully nearing completion of his law studies back east. Young Mr. Burden has not been seen in our parts for several years now, despite his well-known profession of love for the place. The elder Burdens report that he is a fair correspondent.

**February 26, 1893.** Notes from way out west: None other than Tiny Soderball, once one of the loveliest lights in the dining room of Mrs. Gardener's establishment, is now well set up managing a lodging house of her very own, on the waterfront in Seattle. Two or three traveling men of our acquaintance have seen the place, have seen Tiny, and report that sailor trade or no, the place is entirely respectable. The BEACON watched the redoubtable Tiny in action on many an occasion and is quite certain these traveling men speak the truth.

**June 21, 1895.** It is with a heavy heavy heart that the BEACON must share a discovery made jointly by Mrs. Mollie Gardener, late of the Boys' Home Hotel, Miss Frances Harling, and your editor himself, with the indispensable assistance of Mrs. Lucille Powell of Dekalb, Illinois, who has been a recent visitor to Black Hawk on matters sadly related to this matter.

Readers with long memories will recall our dear old friend Dog the brickman, gone

from our company these many years. The oilcloth valise Dog left with Mrs. Gardener has remained safe in her care, long after all sense told her its owner would not return for it. When she left the hotel to new proprietors, the valise went with her to the new cottage that awaited her on Pine Avenue.

When the BEACON received an enigmatically worded inquiry from the esteemed Mrs. Powell upon her recent visit to our city, he introduced the two good ladies. After their long conversation to which the BEACON was not privy, spanning a day and the greater part of an evening, Dog's valise was opened at last. Save one or two slight objects, its material contents were of no note. But indeed the valise revealed a story.

Readers, Dog was Mrs. Powell's only son. And that he will always be, but he is with us no more. When the BEACON learned that one of the objects in Dog's valise was a sheaf of BEACON clippings, including "The Old Oaken Bucket," which in truth we have printed many many times, your editor reached out to Miss Harling. That lady and the BEACON have had numerous discussions through the years about a clipping just like this one, with this hoary verse, and its appearance in a long-forgotten news item from upcounty. Taking with us a tintype of a youthful Dog, supplied by Mrs. Powell, we visited the folks on the Iverson property and had our dark premonition realized. The "tramp" who died in 1887, possibly by suicide, carried a ragged clipping of this very lyric. He was our very own Dog.

"America!," the poor lost man had been heard to call out, or so we reported in our item of the time. Sven Iverson, one of the few folks still in the neighborhood who was on the scene that day, says otherwise. The lost, ill-fated, bedraggled Dog, having wandered back into territory he thought he knew, was calling out for his friend Marek.

He was Douglas James Powell, son of Mrs. Lucille Powell of Dekalb, Illinois and the late David Powell. Dog. He rests in an unmarked plot on the Iverson property. Our only hope is that his elderly mother may now find peace in the knowledge that her boy is beyond the troubles and cares of this earthly existence. We hope the same peace for our dear friend Mollie Gardener, who has, with Mrs. Powell's blessing, undertaken to move Dog's remains to the Gardener family plot in the Black Hawk cemetery. He is to have a small monument, made of red brick. ■



# Our Flowery Pagoda

Charmion Gustke and Laura Trigg Gilbert



Willa Cather's "first experience of New England country," Edith Lewis tells us in *Willa Cather Living*, occurred in 1917 when Cather was in the midst of writing *My Antonia*. She had spent the winter and spring concentrating on the novel and was in need of a getaway when the newly married Isabel McClung Hambourg and Jan Hambourg invited her to visit them in Jaffrey, New Hampshire. Eager to continue her work, Cather sought refuge in a writing tent set up by two Pittsburgh friends, Miss Hine and Miss Acheson, in a meadow at High Mowing. The half-mile walk from the Shattuck Inn, where Cather stayed, to the meadow was an "ideal arrangement," giving her two or three hours of uninterrupted writing time followed by a hike through the shady countryside.

Accompanying Cather on these outings was F. Schuyler Mathews's *Field Book of American Wild Flowers* (1902), which she carried with her on nature walks for over twenty years. In the margins of Cather's copy are her comments



# Jaffrey, 1917

High Mowing, low heat.  
This was a full summer  
blooming, moving  
I came here to write,  
to retreat in the shadow  
Monadnock made, edging slowly  
alongside the memories I sought.

Your love at once absent  
and near, tucked under my arm  
and creased in the pages  
I turned for you.

Crossing the field was my own adventure  
through flowers, wild and creeping  
the Indian Pipes and False Beechdrops  
cautiously waved me forward  
and called me back again.

I bequeathed them names and meaning  
more than Goldenrod or Marsh Marigold  
they were shelter, they were friends.

I was mourning.

So many colors, a purple-blue  
and a yellow cluster of  
variable hues  
Drawn to the zigzag leaves  
as much as the branches  
the foliage like willows  
gave life to the language  
that followed.

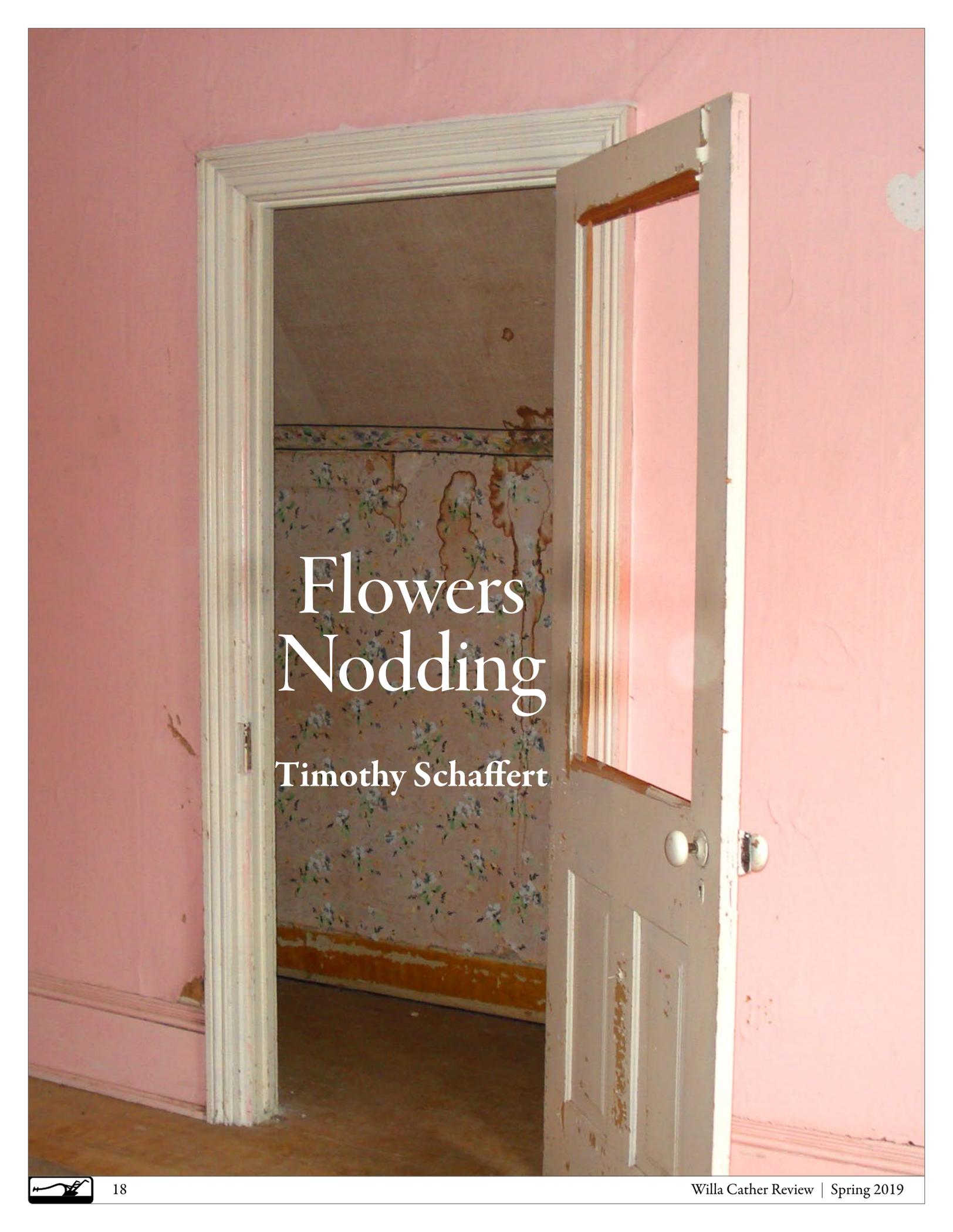
**Charmion Gustke**

about additional characteristics of the flowers in conjunction with the place, and occasionally, the date on which she made the encounter. This intertextuality, as the collage here suggests, not only expands Mathews's descriptions, but links the ecosphere of Jaffrey in a remarkable way to the environmental culture of *My Ántonia*. As Cather disclosed in a 1943 letter to Harrison Blaine, whose mother later purchased High Mowing, there is a "a very real connection between the book and the place" (as recorded in *The Selected Letters of Willa Cather*).

I visited the Harry Ransom Research Center in Austin, Texas in the spring of 2018 to examine Cather's copy of *Field Book of American Wild Flowers*, photographing the images in it to digitally create *Our Flowery Pagoda*.

C.G.





Flowers  
Nodding  
Timothy Schaffert

He'd been born fatherless and motherless, but somebody at some point blessed him with the name of King. Or cursed him, depending on how fickle you think fate is. He was kicked along, foster home to foster home, too hot to handle, a hot potato, a *wicked temper* they wrote on official forms of condemnation, in the codicils of abandonment.

King had smoked his teeth yellow by the time he was sixteen, but a pale-honey yellow, a pearlescent, faint, dandelion-wine yellow. It was round about then that he got taken in by Mrs. Shelby, just down the country mile from Mack's house, a widow dripping with turquoise and pewter, her hair a home-bottle shade of a sunburnt, rotting-on-the-vine, tomato red. Her husband had been near death for thirty years and he finally left her forty acres of pastureland, thistle-choked, with the thin vein of a dead creek at the dry-as-a-bone center of it all.

Mrs. Shelby still lived well off some magical settlement they got years before, some lawsuit-windfall from whatever chemical company stirred up the toxic dust-devil of poisoned dirt that slowed Mr. Shelby's blood to a practical standstill and sent him clutching at his bedcovers and sobbing himself to sleep every night for the rest of his life. Mr. Shelby kept a notebook of his heartbeats. At random times throughout the day, he'd set his stopwatch for one minute and note in the notebook one hatch-mark per thump. He'd compare and analyze, and wouldn't learn much of anything. Sometimes his heart beat slow, sometimes quick.

Mack didn't have a father, either, though he'd had one once, or so his mother told him. There were no pictures anywhere, not a single one, and nothing left of anything he'd ever touched. Mack's mom ("too young to know better," she said) threw everything she had of his in a chimney pit, under the guidance of a local witch who'd soaked the whole pile of Polaroids and love notes and sweat-stained T-shirts with a fierce squirt of charcoal lighter fluid, then struck a match and cast her voodoo.

The house Mack and his mother lived in wasn't theirs. The farm's owners had built a new house on the other end of their eighty acres, and they rented out the old farmhouse, an extravagant shack with two stories, every inch of it stifling hot in the summer months and bitingly cold in the winter ones. It had horror-house gables that came to a sharp point, accusing, scolding the sky, stirring up the circling ravens. The windows were partly pebbled glass that Mack would stare through as he lay in bed, comforted by the funhouse distortion, imagining the moon exploding slow.

Mack's mom had slept the hard sleep of the heavily drugged, a gentle coma coaxed along by a bedtime whiskey and sour, "my hot toddy," she called it, though she always drank it iced. Once she was knocked out, Mack could've shot the moon from the night sky and she'd do nothing but whimper and scratch the tickle of her nose. So when King ended up at Mrs. Shelby's, and Mack and King had some conversations about it at school, Mack started sneaking out regular, walking the half mile to King's porch door. For the first weeks of that summer before their senior year, Mack and King just stayed up late talking and playing Crazy Eights at the kitchen table



with a deck of cards that advertised an out-of-business filling station. But as the summer got hotter, King would sometimes take off his shirt to show Mack his new tattoos, and sometimes he wouldn't put his shirt back on.

Mrs. Shelby was a tattooist in town, on an old-timey town square, with all the latest in needle machines. She promised King she'd heal his rage by inking flowers across his shoulders and back, and it was working. Mack only ever knew King as gentle. "A peaceful garden," she said, though she did add a fat honeybee, in between his shoulder blades.

The field Mack crossed each night would bloom after dark with night-blooming jasmine. The scent reminded Mack of the carnival at the county fair, the hot sugar of freshly spun cotton candy. In the morning, the birds would wake Mack at King's house, and he'd walk back across the field. And the jasmine, once the sun came up, no longer smelled so sweet. It spoiled, in the daytime, when the blooms closed, to something somewhat sickly.

By the middle of summer, Mack and King were sleeping together on a mattress dragged out under the stars, under threadbare mosquito netting they'd prop up with a branch broken off a tree. Throughout July and August, Mack watched King's naked body bloom with blood-red roses, and soft, blood-tipped thorns, and the blunted teeth of snapdragons. The late-autumn sunflowers on his back were mangy and molting, with crinkled yellow petals. Mack memorized all of it, tracing his finger over every line of every blossom and stem of every new tattoo, because he was certain that, soon enough, King would start keeping his skin hidden from him. Mack knew that King would not only deny him his kisses, but he'd somehow try to take back all the ones he'd already given.

And Mack suspected right, as it turned out, but he didn't think of it as prediction. He didn't have to look into the future to see it stop. The end of it all was in every minute they were together. King always wanted Mack to start the kissing, but once Mack did, King made it seem like he was just trying to please. Just trying to be sweet. Kissing with pity. King would always be the one to pull his lips away, the one to end the kiss. Mack wanted to sometimes be the one to stop first, so King would know how it felt for a kiss to end too soon. But Mack never could turn his face away when there was still a kiss to be had.

Mrs. Shelby gave King a shoebox full of things that had belonged to her dead husband. "He would've been my father," King said, "if he'd lived," though Mrs. Shelby told us once that it was Mr. Shelby's death that inspired her to take King in. Mr. Shelby had to die for Mrs. Shelby to have a son.

In the backyard, on the mattress, both King and Mack naked, they sorted through the shoebox. They riffled through the pages of Mr. Shelby's book of heartbeats, hoping to intuit something from it. The cover was soft, a calfskin suede. The stopwatch was in the shoebox too. Mack put his fingertips to King's neck to feel for his pulse. He found it and counted the beats with just a cluck of

his tongue, as they both sat wordless, looking at each other's eyes. After, they thumbed through the notebook to find a day when King's number matched Mr. Shelby's.

From the shoebox they stole an old transistor radio that only got AM. They listened to it most every night. When King was able to tick the dial into just the right notch, he'd pick up the only all-night station. The station played country-western music from its earliest days, broadcast with static and buzz, lots of yodeling heartache and apology, or honkytonk swing. It comforted them both to hear the disc jockey's dull, thrumming voice pipe up with a line or two of news, or a farm report, someone else out there wide awake. There was something about his tone they liked especially when he gave the week's weather. The DJ seemed to like that part most himself, lending a hint of drama and pause even when talking about mild temperatures, clear skies, a slight chance of thunder.

Whenever King fussed with the radio dial, he lay on his stomach, propped up on his elbows, and Mack ran his fingers over his skin. King leaned into his touch, and sometimes he sighed. He sometimes leaned his cheek over to touch against Mack's hand when Mack's hand was on his shoulder or his neck.

Sometimes in the country, with the moon just a snippet of silver light, or clouded over entirely, you could feel all that vast nothingness, all those miles of pitch-black and dead-quiet, in the pit of your gut. Sometimes looking out at the night was like standing at an edge.

Mack suspected it'd end when summer did, these nights like this, but he was superstitious enough not to want to speculate much. But he couldn't help himself. He was desperate to know. He could hardly bear not knowing exactly how King might shut him out.

There'd be a night, Mack knew, when he'd head back home, the dark still candy-sweet, the blooms of the jasmine yet to close. In his kitchen he'd pour himself a tablespoon of his mother's whisky, just enough for her not to notice it gone, just so he'd feel its burn and tingle. He wanted to always, forever, until he was old, to know with every sip of whiskey this very pain of the nights growing longer, the dark seeping like spilled ink along the edges of daylight. With his every first sip of whiskey he'd feel that exact rush of love lost, and he'd count his heartbeats one by one.

But before any of that went away, Mack and King slept only a few hours every summer night and watched the birds every morning. A mother built her nest in the hinge of the porch's awning, and Mack and King would take their coffee strong and sit on the steps just beneath. Nothing much happened, but they were riveted by the sweetness of it. Every morning, a delicate celebration of life, watching that bird attend to her chicks, bringing them worms and grubs. The boys worried. They discussed all the possible tragedies. But every day, life went on for those helpless creatures in their house of sticks. The babies looked elderly, their blind eyes shut tight, their necks limp, their skin like it'd been plucked of feathers. Their beaks were often wide open, in a full-throated silence. ■



# Willa: Writing in the Wilderness

Cathy R. Schen

“Oh, better I like to work out-of-doors than in a house!”

*My Ántonia*

In the summer of 1917, Willa Cather’s old Pittsburgh friend, Isabelle McClung, invited Willa to escape the heat of New York City and join her in the rural town of Jaffrey, New Hampshire. Willa gratefully accepted the offer and in late summer traveled to Jaffrey. She took two attic rooms at the Shattuck Inn, a quiet boarding house with views of Mount Monadnock. The sloping roof of the rooms was reminiscent of the attic wing that Willa had claimed as her bedroom when she was a teenager in her childhood home in Nebraska. Two other Pittsburgh women had rented a white-clapboard house called High Mowing down the road from the inn. These women pitched Willa a tent on the lower slopes of their field and supplied a canvas chair and folding table. Every morning, Willa walked the mile from the inn to the white canvas tent, through the woods, over several stone walls, and into her neighbors’ pasture, carrying her pens, paper, and work-in-progress. It was here, surrounded by the quiet of meadows and forest, that Willa wrote Book II of *My Ántonia*.

In one of the most famous passages from *My Ántonia*, Jim, the narrator in the story, remembers his first morning at his grandparents’ home in Nebraska, having just arrived from Virginia after the death of his mother and father. The whole story of *My Ántonia* is cast as Jim’s story, his looking back from the vantage of adulthood to his childhood. The narrator brings us close to the level and particulars of the earth and engages our senses when Jim lies down outdoors. We imagine lying down with the narrator to feel the earth and to see it join the sky overhead. Heaven meets earth, with all its sublime overtones. With all this abundance of nature, it may take us a second reading to realize that this experience of transcendence in fact occurs in a garden, felt as wilderness, just as Willa’s tent was set in a pasture, even as it evoked a grander outdoors.

For Willa, this summer sojourn in Jaffrey was the first of many visits, later accompanied by her partner Edith Lewis,

during summer and autumn over a span of some twenty years. When Willa first arrived in 1917, her writing refuge, the tent in a field, took place in the larger context of wartime. A few months previously, when she was living in her apartment in New York City, the United States had declared war against Germany and entered World War I. Ordinary life for civilians grew bleak. Willa wrote to her sister Elsie describing the domestic hardships of her life at the Bank Street apartment in Greenwich Village:

The war has made everything so much more difficult, housekeeping and meeting ones bills,—and it has taken all the fun of work away, somehow. One can’t feel that writing books is very important. I am fairly stuck on the novel I wrote you about, and will either have to give it up or try it over again a new way.

Willa started *My Ántonia* and hoped to have it published by the fall of 1917. Unable to work productively in the city, she became increasingly frustrated as she fell behind her self-imposed schedule. She’d closed her study because of the city’s coal shortage and moved her work desk to the dining room, the only heated room in the apartment. She found herself increasingly distracted by domestic struggles and the dark atmosphere and privations of wartime. Thus, moving to a rural New Hampshire retreat during the summers of the war years gave her an escape from the oppression of war. It allowed her to get back to work on her novel.

During her first summer stay in Jaffrey, in September 1917, Willa learned that her cousin, Grosvenor Cather, had signed up with the American Expeditionary Force and sailed to France. Willa wrote a letter to her cousin’s mother, her aunt, praising Grosvenor’s courage in serving his country. In the same letter, she wrote her aunt, “I live at a comfortable hotel and have a little tent a mile away in the woods, where I go to work every morning.”



Putting herself out in a field in a canvas tent offers her readers the sense that Willa identified with the American soldiers. She found a way to be with them in sympathy and spirit.

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**“My feet remember . . .”**  
***My Ántonia***

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I fell in love with Willa Cather upon reading “Neighbour Rosicky,” one of the three stories included in *Obscure Destinies*. Rosicky is an old man. He is dying. A young woman named Polly sits by his bedside. She takes hold of his hand as he sleeps. The description of this hand conveys a physical intimacy that is perhaps one of the most tender couple of paragraphs in Cather’s writing. It’s also Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel—American style. The passage is all about holding on and letting go, about separating yet taking something essential from another person inside oneself. It’s about death and transcendence. It illuminates, I think, Cather’s desire to connect, not just to the landscape and the outdoors, as in the description of the natural landscape from *My Ántonia*, but also to individuals, especially those set aside by society as “other.” The hand is brown, not white, and “gypsy-like.” Raised in a conservative small town, Cather was drawn to those set

apart—the Bohemians of *My Ántonia*, the Danish girls in the laundry, the Swedes of *O Pioneers!*, the Mexicans of *The Song of the Lark*—all the newly arrived immigrants of the frontier. She empathized with the American soldiers of World War I and the trauma of their war experience.

So much of Cather’s work, for me, was about how to go home where you belong but you don’t fit in, about the need to leave home to fulfill one’s destiny.

Through Willa’s letters and the memoirs of Elizabeth Sergeant and Edith Lewis, I had learned that Willa summered at the Shattuck Inn in Jaffrey, New Hampshire, not far from my home in Massachusetts. I discovered that she was buried in Jaffrey as well. Why did she choose this New Hampshire town as her final resting place?

I traveled to Jaffrey to search for the Shattuck Inn and Willa’s grave. When I made my first visit, in 2014, I found what I *thought* was the Shattuck Inn, empty, abandoned, and for sale. A classic New England gray-clapboard building, it is the first dwelling one comes to on the country road leading down from Mount Monadnock. It had been on the market for over a year and the price was reduced to \$150,000, offered as a development opportunity deemed for luxury condominiums. As I walked around the back of the building,



I looked out onto the manicured lawns of the adjacent golf course. An outdoor ventilation fan whirred loudly across the way. The doors of the inn were bolted and nailed shut.

I crossed the street and found a grassy path adjacent to the parking lot that led into a scrubby, rough pasture. Could I retrace Willa's steps to High Mowing and its meadow where she wrote? One often comes upon old fieldstone walls and abandoned post roads when walking through the forests of New England. I headed along the path past a grove of birches and through a small field filled with goldenrod, yarrow and vetch. Instead of High Mowing, I emerged onto another section of the golf course. Across the green was a rim of forest. Watching for golfers, I ran across the green and into the forest. No path emerged amongst the pines and underbrush. The ground was moist and mossy, and I pushed ahead, cracking through dead and fallen branches, searching for a way through. I could find none. The undergrowth became increasingly dense. I was forced to retrace my steps, making a dash across the green to avoid golfers, who were just about to tee off.

I got in my car and drove along Route 124 to visit Willa's grave. She was buried in the Old Burying Ground, a small cemetery near what is officially known as Jaffrey Center. Her choice had surprised me when I first learned about it. She hadn't chosen New York City, where she'd lived for many years; or Grand Manan Island, off the coast of New Brunswick, Canada, where she'd purchased a cottage with Edith Lewis; or Red Cloud, Nebraska, where she'd grown up. What was it about *this* place that made her claim it as her last resting place? I had read that her partner, Edith Lewis, was buried next to her. What led the two of them to decide on this remote rural town away from family and friends where Willa was a summer visitor, even if over some twenty years? I needed to see it to find out. In addition to feeling curious and puzzled, I was also excited that Willa had chosen a land that was my home too; she felt closer to me physically as a consequence, someone whom I could visit by just taking an hour's drive.

The Old Burying Ground is nestled behind a cream-colored Meeting House and low stables, all exquisitely maintained, and shaded by tall maples. Looking up at those rugged, ancient trees, I remembered what Willa had to say in *My Antonia* about the existence of trees in Nebraska:

Trees were so rare in that country, and they had to make such a hard fight to grow, that we used to feel anxious about them, and visit them as if they were persons.

So, I thought to myself, she found herself a place that gave her the company of majestic trees. I walked through the graveyard, amongst the tombstones worn thin by time, their inscriptions weathered and rubbed off and indecipherable, or nearly so. They tilted sideways, old 1700 revolutionary war soldiers many of them, as if tired out and in need of this last rest. Small American flags waved softly next to many of them and gave color to the plain, gray slate stones. I soon came upon Willa's tombstone, tucked in the southwest corner of the graveyard, amongst this company of war veterans. Hers was a low solid slab of granite, unornamented except for her name, date of birth and death, and two simple inscriptions.

As I bent down to read them, I felt the country at my back with its long view that looked out over the forested landscape of New Hampshire and onto Mount Monadnock in the far distance. She'd given herself this: the company of soldiers, the shelter of trees, and a vista of a country landscape. Her life spanned two world wars and crossed over from one century, and one kind of world, to another. Perhaps she'd also given herself the comfort of resting where the sense of the past was undisturbed and held a sense of permanence and human dignity. On her gravestone was a collection of rocks, stones and shells, mementos placed in the Jewish tradition to honor the dead and mark one's visit.

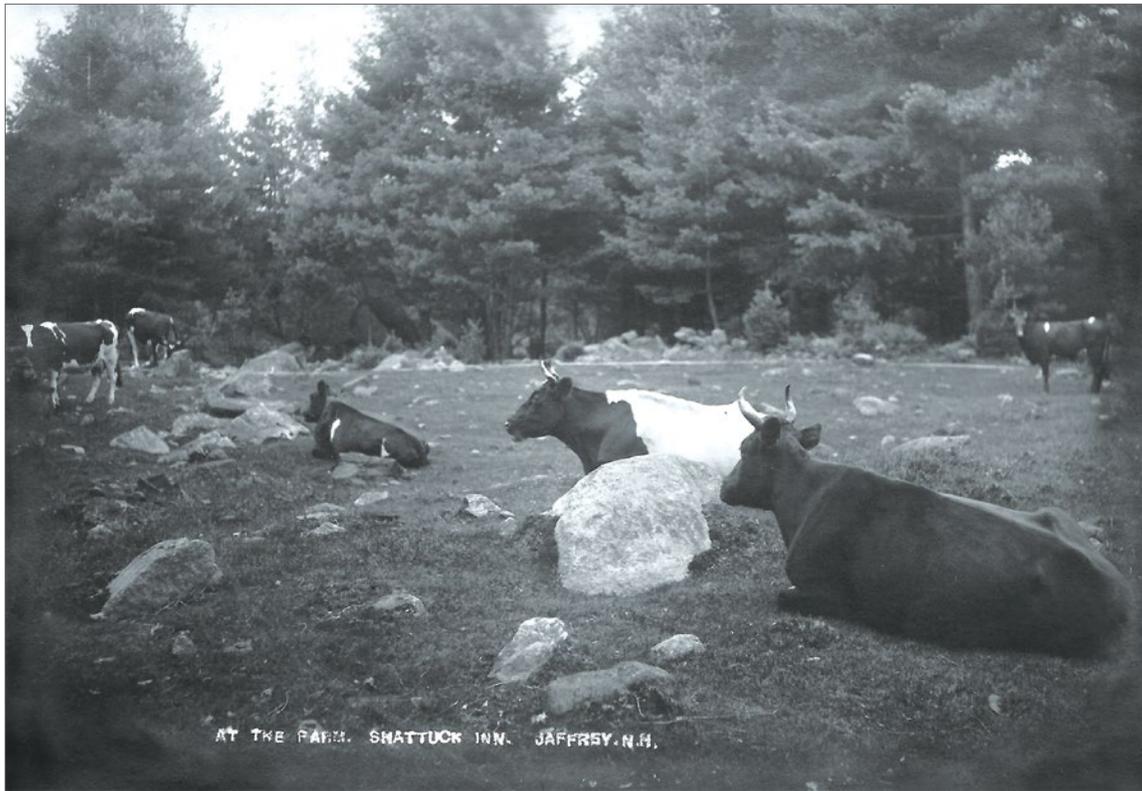
And what about love? Where was Edith Lewis, I wondered, who was presumably buried next to Willa? Edith had written *Willa Cather Living*, an elegant, respectful, emotionally reserved memoir of Willa after the writer's death and upon the encouragement of Willa's publishers. Fond of Edith as I'd become through my reading of her book, I was eager to find Edith's tombstone as well. Glancing about, at first I didn't see it. Then, looking down at the ground, I spotted it. It was a small flat rectangular stone, set like a stepping-stone, into the earth. When one considers the culture of this couple's time, this discreet placement seemed to me upon this first visit, still uninformed of rigorous Cather scholarship, to indicate how the old world culture—so confining, rigid, and prescriptive—necessitated keeping certain kinds of love hidden. Even Willa's private letters, now published, carry no indication of her innermost feelings of love or sexual desire. To the world back then, Cather and Lewis were two proper maiden ladies, and this graveyard positioning seemed to me at first to maintain propriety as much as it held a certain kind of mystery. Edith as Willa's helpmate.

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So, I thought to myself,  
she found herself a place  
that gave her the company  
of majestic trees.

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*Perhaps these placid denizens of the Shattuck Inn Farm reminded Cather of home.*

I left the cemetery and drove back down Route 124 toward Jaffrey proper. A road to the left beckoned me, shady with ferns and woods, off the main path of traffic. I turned down it and drove through a canopy of graceful trees lined by elegant 1800s country homes with glimpses of Mount Monadnock. To turn around I pulled into the driveway of a small modest cottage. The house was white clapboard with green trim and had an old cedar shingle roof and well-tended perennial gardens. The name of the house was painted on a rough wooden shingle nailed to a tree. It was familiar: High Mowing.

Willa sent the final portions of the completed manuscript of *My Antonia* to Houghton Mifflin in June 1918. She returned to her writing retreat in Jaffrey that summer. Edith Lewis describes sitting alongside Willa outdoors on some rocks as together they read the proofs of *My Antonia*. On July 2, 1918, Willa wrote her editor, Ferris Greenslet, that she was enclosing the proofs of cuts with instructions. In that same letter, Willa mentioned, almost as an aside, that her cousin, Grosvenor Cather, was killed in action on May 28, 1918:

Did you see what a splendid citation was given my cousin, Lieut. Grosvenor Cather, who was killed in action May 28th? He led the list of American officers in the first citations published.

Willa sounds a tin ear to the tragedy of her cousin's death. Her writer's sensitivity only shows up a year later when she starts work on

her World War I novel, *One of Ours*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize. The main character, Claude, is considered modeled after this Nebraska cousin killed in battle. Meanwhile, *My Antonia* was published to acclaim. It was particularly popular among American soldiers, many of whom wrote to Willa to tell her how meaningful her book was to them, especially when homesick amidst the misery of war. Just like Claude in *One of Ours*, many of these young men came from small country towns and farms and had never left home until they signed up to be soldiers and were shipped overseas. Willa

scrupulously answered each letter. The soldiers' letters gave her an initial entry into the experience of wartime that was impossible to imagine from the world of civilians—especially female civilians.

In order to write *One of Ours*, one of the first war novels written by a woman, a novel that contains vivid descriptions of trench warfare and gruesome details of the soldiers' experience in battle, Willa drew on her investigative journalism skills. She invited soldiers to her New York City apartment to interview them at length about their experiences. They came and talked with her. Frederick Sweeney, a doctor who had served in the U.S. Army Medical Corps, gave her his war diary through propitious circumstances. Willa had contracted influenza during the fall of 1919. Despite the cold and rainy weather, she had persisted in writing in her tent, working on what would eventually become *One of Ours*. A doctor was called. Dr. Sweeney, Willa learned, had served overseas in the war and kept a diary during that time. He lent it to her to read. Much of the content of this diary informed Book IV of *One of Ours*, "The Voyage of the *Anchises*."

By the time I returned to the Shattuck Inn a second time, in 2016, the building had been sold and the conversion to condo units under way. Gary, one of the builders, gave me a tour inside. He pointed out the stained glass windows, the claw-foot bathtubs and old steam radiators. We climbed the stairs to the third level—the attic units whose dormer windows still gave clear views of the hills and its distant mountain.



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## Epilogue

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Two years ago, as I looked out onto Mount Monadnock, I believed I saw the distant mountain through the eyes of Willa Cather. I believed I stood in the very rooms where she had stayed at the Shattuck Inn. The sense of kinship that arises between reader and author can stir a yearning to move beyond the two-dimensional page and further the intimacy found there. Many readers make pilgrimages and seek out the literal places where an author made her home in life—and in death. Willa Cather had become my imaginary companion. I, like many, had felt compelled to put myself in her geography, to find her in the world in which I live.

When, in the summer of 2018, I submitted my essay to the *Willa Cather Review*, its editor wrote back. There was a problem with my piece. The Shattuck Inn was demolished in 1996. I was shocked. The thesis of my essay crumbled. At first I didn't believe him. I didn't *want* to believe him. What then had been the building I had visited? As I moved into the world of possibilities (and the subjunctive tense), the editor suggested that the building I toured *might* have been the Annex. Up until that moment, I'd been unaware of the Annex, ignorant of the depth of Cather scholarship.

I visited Jaffrey a third time. I found the building on Dublin Road once again for sale, its renovation halted midway. A green and white Better Homes and Gardens real estate sign swung in the breeze. Through the windows, I saw piles of plasterboard scattered on the floor. A claw-foot bathtub stood abandoned in the middle of a downstairs room. All the doors were locked or nailed shut. This building matched the etching of the Annex depicted on the letterhead of the Shattuck Inn. It matched the old postcards and photographs found on Google Images. It too had a third floor with dormer windows that offered views of Mount Monadnock. It was, without question, the Annex—a part of the original Shattuck Inn. Was it possible that Willa Cather had stayed here rather than the main building?

I hunted for evidence. The golf pro at the Shattuck Golf course mentioned that Cather liked her privacy, but, he added, he thought the Annex was built later and intended for staff. At the Jaffrey Historical Society, its president pulled archival boxes from the shelves for me to peruse. I read that the Annex was built in 1912. Guests did stay there. So it was possible she'd stayed at the Annex even from her first 1917 visit. And then, in an article for the *Monadnock Home Companion*, I read that Cather stayed in third floor rooms next door to the room clerk and bellboy.

Aha! So perhaps she had purposefully chosen the Annex to be out of the way from guests coming and going and in keeping with her modesty and ease with the working class. It seemed *not impossible*. The historical society president said Cather didn't register at the Inn in order to avoid unwelcome visitors. Actually, the curator of the Melville Academy told me, she did register, but not until upon the verge of departure. A plaque to her hotel room, number 316, was now in the possession of the Austerman family, successors to Edmond Shattuck, the inn's original proprietor. Still, I thought, couldn't Room 316 have been in the Annex?

The morning ended. I was hungry. Despite a morning spent poring through newspaper clippings and riding a golf cart through the paths that had once held the trails of the Shattuck Inn, I hadn't come up with a definitive answer. I couldn't confirm that Cather stayed at the Annex and I couldn't prove she didn't. At first I just felt weary and frustrated. Then, I thought, how fitting of Willa Cather. I liked this about her. In so many ways she strove to keep her personal life private and deter unwelcome intruders. And while I knew this question mattered to Cather scholars, to what extent did it really matter to me? It struck me that buildings, those evidences of human civilization, are temporary. They hold the spirit and memory of their occupants, but we can't trust a building to last. The natural landscape too, in our era, has become increasingly fragile. But its mountains still lift out of the earth and offer an attitude of imperviousness to human destruction.

I paid my respects to Willa Cather by again visiting her grave. I'd learned that her gravesite had been modified since I last stopped by in 2016. Misunderstandings of subservience had ensued after Edith Lewis was buried and a flat marker placed *apparently* at the foot of Cather's headstone. Careful research illuminated that, in fact, the burial plot allowed only one headstone and that Lewis's flat marker was placed according to burial tradition at the foot of her body. Now, looking down, I saw two of these modest memorial stones—one with the name of Edith Lewis, the other, Willa Cather, each placed at the base of their respective graves. I could better envision these two women, life partners, resting where they belonged, side by side, in loving dignity and equality. ■

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*Thanks and appreciation go to Tony Haigh, golf pro at the Shattuck Golf Course, Bruce Hill, president of the Jaffrey Historical Society, and Ken Campbell, curator for the Melville Academy Museum.*



# Mister Shimerda's Soul

*a found poem*  
*from My Ántonia (Book I, Chapter XIV)*

It's so far to go  
Nebraska, Chicago, Baltimore  
across the great wintry ocean

Rest here, Mister Shimerda  
This warm kitchen  
under the ever-falling snow

I will remember your memories  
A fiddle scraped at a friend's wedding  
A white hart in a moonlit forest

I will walk so softly  
as the falling snow  
as the ever-falling snow

**Reid Mitchell**



# Seconds

Terese Svoboda

Seconds, or the surprise? She's his sister-in-law, she can baby him.

Of course, Dad says. Both.

More gravy appears, potatoes, peas and carrots, the surprise: poppyseed kolaches, sweet dirt on a bun is what his brother always called it.

She says she doesn't know what's keeping his brother, he hates cold food.

Dad moves the last of the gravy around so it streaks his plate. It's a warm Thanksgiving he says, as if that has something to do with his brother being a hour late.

She fills his glass with red until he says he had white. Then she doles out so much whipped cream he actually spoons it back.

Her daughter-in-law leaves the table to tend the baby on the living room floor.



The second cousin, really just somebody they scrounged up to make light talk, says in all the eating of seconds and drinking of thirds and the spooning of dessert, How has his treatment been going?

He was happy enough checking out his new ranch yesterday, says the near-silent son. Won a bet from me on how long it would take me to learn the new irrigation system.

They drink, they eat.

Can't say we didn't wait, says the wife, showing them a blackened sweet potato.

They file from the table to the TV. The dishes stay on the table. Don't do them, says Dad. It'll make him feel bad.

I don't mind, she says, not sitting down on the couch, veering back to the sink. Or you can do them later.

Dad likes that, the joke of him washing up. He asks the baby if she wants her toes eaten, and pulls at each digit to make her laugh. Her mother gathers her back when she kicks, but she writhes out of her arms for her daddy, who's searching the stations for football or parade.

Dad slow-foots it to the lounge. There's gravy on his white shirt and darkness across his face. He scratches the side of his nose after he's settled and points at the cabinet on the wall. Wasn't there something there?

The son sees the gap, the one empty rack. Sometimes he cleans it, he says.

His mother's in the kitchen, washing the pans, but listening. Water still running, she comes to the door.

Where? says her son, pointing at the rack.

She has no idea. The child cries and no one picks her up.

Dad says, Try the long barn.

The child hiccups her crying while the cousin says surely he's just driving around for air, a ride to calm him down for all the holiday celebrating or to see if a gate is shut—everything everyone's said twice already. Why that barn?

I don't know, says Dad. But don't you check, he says to the son when he goes for the coat closet. Call Pete to go with you.

The son is shaking now, a big-frame-shake that usually with him is a sign of anger but not now. You call Pete, he says, I'm going. He puts the keys in his pocket, skips the closet for the door.

No, says his mother, into the room in two steps. No, you don't.

Shit, says the son. It's Thanksgiving. He's supposed to—

Wait, says Dad. I hear something.

They listen to what? The car door of a neighbor, a little too much booze in the slam? Nothing. But in the interim Dad whips out his phone, he 911s.

As if such a call could solve something, the others listen. Of course 911 isn't local, no Pete they



can get reassurance from, just a recital of regulations: Missing Persons aren't missing for at least a day. No help at all.

She punches in numbers on her own phone. Her daughter-in-law passes her with the baby on the way to the kitchen, the baby tapping her arm, a comfort motion.

Pete says he'll come over, she says, he says he hasn't had enough turkey.

We won't see Pete for another hour, says the son still at the front door. Pete has money on the game.

I said it's important, says his mother when the son leans his head against the doorframe.

You don't want to go, says Dad in a voice that says he doesn't either.

You stay here, says the wife. Her daughter-in-law agrees, the baby sucking at her bottle, she forbids him.

Did he take his pills today? the son asks. Now plaid-coated, he's the image of his father, just about as wrinkled, and just as stubborn.

Of course, says his mother.

But did he swallow them?

How can I tell? She turns to face the kitchen door, she just turns.

Dad closes his eyes. Wait, he says.

His son jiggles the keys, he paces.

It's about two minutes later that Pete's car pulls up and Dad pumps the lounge upright. Of course they all hope it's not Pete. That would mean what they sense could be true. The son runs to the door and out to where the two of them, Pete and the son, talk and then leave without a Hello or anything to anybody else.

Dad plays with the baby, a peekaboo that she likes, then cries about, Dad's peek is too shrill and his mother too desperate for calm. She should take the baby home but she can't.

The dishes are done.

A car parks in the drive just ten minutes later, and all of them inside are out on the carport coatless. The son says Pete's called the coroner, the son says he didn't go in but when he enters the living room, dropping the keys while trying to repocket them, his face isn't his father's anymore, it's bent, it's creased and drained. He's seen what he's seen.

Mom, says the son. Mom.

She has backed up back into the house and is crossing one arm over her chest, then the next, and the sound she makes wakes up the baby. If you'd only—sooner. Just a second—

After holding his mother and then holding his wife, he says to Dad, How did you know?

Dad says he guessed. He liked that long barn. Sooner or later, he says. He had it in him.

The baby reaches for her father and he takes her just as his wife moves away. Together they almost drop her. ■



# A Middle School Book Report

In the desert, it takes imagination  
to feel prairie grass  
waving at your knees

especially when sitting in class,  
a century removed from a plow  
or the idea of plow

It's easier to conjure threats of drought  
and rattles coiled behind the cholla,  
or the sidelong joy of slipping out a starry window  
to kick up the country dust, but

this is not a story—it's a map  
adventurous in the commonplace

where predators spew "moral maxims"  
and the wolves feast on wedded bliss, the X  
—the treasure—is a grandmother

short on teeth, stoking a waggish smile,  
she out-Tom-Sawyers Tom Sawyer  
and still has supper ready—and hot—  
for her giggling brood, how

we might someday stand  
where she is, aproned and laughing

**Gail Wade**



# Another Evening on the Farm

Gina M. Barlean





I mowed today in 90-degree temperatures with humidity. The heat has soared these past weeks. Conditioned air in the house has been a blessing. The shades are drawn to keep out the heat, but before we settle in for the evening to watch some television, I open them, only to discover gray-green skies and cotton-snow racing horizontally across the freshly mowed grass.

I go outside to watch cotton and dust swirl in the farmyard and tree branches, bend and shake. On the front porch, the hanging ferns twist in the hearty winds—gales that act like ghosts, setting the porch swing and rocking chair in motion. Leaves hurtle through the air, and dirt barrels down the gravel road in a wall of dingy brown.

The horizon, dark, and gray-brown-green, displays occasional flashes of lightning. The wind keeps growing, the dirt blowing—and now farm cats are running fast across the gravel to find shelter. I catch sight of a deer bounding across the neighbor's field. She crosses the road in two leaps, then tears through our rows of beans. I can barely see her but feel her fright and flight.

Natural wonder surrounds us; the fine-tuned muscles of the deer, the power of wind, the threat of what might yet come, and worry cowers at the back of our minds.

Now the porch swing is at a full slant, and the rocking chair screeches across the porch. I go to run out and save the chair from falling off the porch, but the door handle rips from my grasp, my hair blows wildly about my face, and dirt pelts me. It's no small feat to pull the door shut. The chair will have to fend for itself. The planter by the front door blows over and spills dirt and flowers, but the tiny tragedy is quickly ignored, as a quarter mile away, the neighbor's powerline explodes. Our electricity blinks out. There goes the air conditioning.

Now rain speckles the pavement and icy wind seeps in around the cracks of the screen door. Hail is coming. The farmer beside me, and I, the farmer's wife, both hold our breath. Then what we dread arrives. Spatters of small pellets at first, then larger, steady and thick, until we can't even talk over the sound of rain-turned-ice bombarding our house, our sheds, our crops. Not that there's anything to say. It roars and tears the ferns, the bushes, the leaves on the trees, but those things don't matter. We're worrying about the young crops, so innocent and hopeful; they're taking a beating in the fields. That's farming. We sigh, and he says, "On the bright side, I never even unhitched the planter." This isn't our first rodeo, as they say. We take it in stride and light candles, then turn on the phone's hotspot. He reads to me about Wild Bill Hickok from an internet site he'd had open before the storm began. I lie down on the couch and fall asleep to candlelight flickering on the wall and the low raspy sounds of my husband's voice. ■



# Still Mine

Yes, she was beautiful.  
When love like that shines from the heavens,  
Constellations realign.  
I traced my future on her cheek,  
Like stars I'd never seen before.  
The child, she was perfect.  
The child she was mine.

A chance for something wonderful.  
The hope that I always longed for,  
But could never quite define.  
I felt the rumbling of the earth,  
Like a promise I had never heard before.  
Ántonia was perfect,  
Ántonia was mine.

The contents of my life,  
Are tucked away in tattered binding.  
Every word I ever wrote,  
Some dream I had unwinding.  
The story comes.  
The story goes.  
And everyone who reads it knows exactly what comes next.  
There's no way to translate this.  
The love I had,  
The plans we made,  
The loss of her,  
Into some page of written text.

Yes, she was beautiful.  
Don't tell me that there's a reason,  
My heart should somehow now resign.  
How will I keep her love alive?  
Now I'm dying to hold her like before.  
The child, she was perfect,  
The child she was mine.  
Ántonia, you're still mine.

**Becky Boesen**



# Up on Kite Cemetery Hill

Cassia Kite



Soundstitching 2018 | 12 X 12 inches | Thread and linen on canvas

“Soundstitching” is an interdisciplinary multimedia project that transforms color from a hand-stitched image into a musical composition that can be interpreted by a musician or performance artist.

“But when I strike the open plains, something happens.  
I’m home. I breathe differently. That love of great spaces, of rolling  
open country like the sea—it’s the grand passion of my life.  
I tried for years to get over it. I’ve stopped trying. It’s incurable.”

—WILLA CATHER



# Reading *My Ántonia*, Visiting a Memory

Max Frazier

I have a secret I keep from my hard-core Willa Cather friends. You see, I hang out with a lot of Cather people: scholars, foundation board members, all sorts of fans who love Cather's rich writing. They are as warm and wonderful as her writing. And just about all of them can give a precise account of the first time they read Cather. Listening to them describe the moment they fell in love with her writing feels like hearing couples recount advice for a long and happy marriage. I feel like a fraud, because I stumble when I try to answer their well-intentioned "How did you come to Cather?" Because how can there be a first time for something that was always a part of me?

My journey to knowing Cather included one of those western road trips where I took a right turn on I-70 coming out

of Colorado Springs. After a left and a right, followed by another left and a right, totaling more than six hours of driving and nearly four hundred miles, I found myself in the magical setting of so many Willa Cather novels: Red Cloud, Nebraska.

But how did I get there? In the five years before I took this pilgrimage, I read *My Ántonia* and most of Cather's other novels. I picked up *My Ántonia* as part of my reading for my doctoral work. Of course, I knew Willa Cather. All literary scholars do. I definitely read her in high school, right? Or pulled one of her books from the library? Maybe I found her in the short stories of my college American literature anthology that I read from cover to cover? My dissertation committee co-chair said I should pay attention to the autobiographical beginning of *My Ántonia* as part of my study about memory and the ways authors use memory for their own purposes in fiction. But I have had the uncanny sense that *My Ántonia* was already one of my memories. Or at least it felt full of people and events that were familiar to me.

Perhaps I can better explain what I mean by returning to my own childhood, to the source of my memories.

In the summer of 1976, when I was eight years old, we moved to Kettle Falls, Washington. At the time, I had no sense of where we had come from, only the hours in a beige Impala upholstered in Naugahyde seats slippery with our sweat. We passed miles of flat, desert-like country where a young girl could gallop alongside the car in her imagination. Breathing through my mouth to avoid the suffocating smell of the fake leather seats, I could picture my hands tangled in a rusty red mane. I would pretend to be on my pony, Dandy, the one we sold three years earlier when we moved. In my mind, he could keep pace with the 55-mph car, leaping culverts and fences. Somewhere in the back of my mind was *National Velvet* and Cowboy Sam. I was leaping the brush jumps and capturing the rustlers, the words of these stories intertwined with my rich pretend world.

## EASTER DRESSES AT LENA'S

The outdoors is calling us. The blue sky, the hot sun, the blossoms and the blades of grass are getting in their work and we are restive. The call of Spring sends the blood coursing through our veins and we want to drink in the air and sunshine and the odors of the field. Already we see the garden peeping from the bosom of Mother Earth. Already we scent the incense of the flower garden. Already the birds have charmed us with their morning class, and we are getting in tune with nature.

Easter is here—the last call for Spring. The dress you need for this glorious occasion you'll find at Lena Lingard, Ltd., which works to please you. Lena Lingard dresses are noted for the highest quality, perfect fit, materials and superb workmanship. She takes great pleasure in properly fitting you for this Easter.



Lena Lingard, Ltd.

"A DRESS YOU WILL BE PROUD TO POSSESS"  
Raleigh Block, O Street, Lincoln, Nebraska



That summer, we celebrated the American bicentennial on the shores of the Columbia River where I held my hands over our collie's ears, because Reno could barely endure the fireworks. While we waited for the house to become available, we camped as a family in a large canvas tent at a campground near the river. My brother, my sister, and I went a little wild, fishing, learning to skip rocks on the water's glassy surface, and exploring the trails.

Once my mother took me to the small brick building where she paid for our campsite. There she showed me a flowering bush. "This is honeysuckle," she told me, and she demonstrated how I could pull a flower and taste the sweet honey drip at the end. I kept going back to that site alone to lean on the bricks and bake in the perfumed air. Chipmunks squeaked warnings, darting behind rocks, and a hawk circled overhead. The July sun beat through the evergreen trees wafting butterscotch scents from the bark. The forest felt full of offerings like a bearded old friend of the family opening a palm with shiny-wrapped hard candy.

Years later, during one of my uncountable readings of *My Ántonia*, I was absorbing the sun with Jim Burden when he came to find happiness which was: "to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep." A whiff of honeysuckle came to mind at these words, resurfacing my solitary pine-forest days and mixing as memory with Jim's afternoon in Grandmother Burden's garden.

But as the new third-grader in town that year, I had no friends to share the sticky asphalt road patches and community pool with during that lazy, hot summer. After we moved into the house with the gigantic backyard full of fruit trees and blackberry vines, an urban Cuzak orchard, I learned the ninety-degree turns and maybe three blocks that led me to the town library. The outside was tan vertical siding with stone veneer, capturing the burnt rusts and grays of the surrounding landscape. When I stepped out of the hot summer sun, the cool dark interior was both a respite and an adventure. Of course it had that heady smell, a combination of musty books and furniture polish, that still makes me feel as if the world is there for my taking. I would step in a few feet and turn right into the adolescent section. First, I would brush my fingers against the soft cloth bindings in shades of browns, greens, and reds. No card catalog for this kid, I knew what section of the library had the best stories. Eyeing the gold lettering, sometimes accented with decorations down the spines, I knew a good book by its cover.

There I would retrieve thick tomes, by my eight-year-old's standard, about Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, and Johnny Appleseed. I remember being spellbound by the story of Helen Keller. That same year, our grandmother bought us the nine-

volume set of *The Little House* books by Laura Ingalls Wilder. I read them all within a matter of weeks. I can't be sure, but maybe even then I found a volume of Cather's prose in the library's inviting rows. Was it 1976 when I first read Cather?

My books provided a lot of evidence to back up my growing suspicion of who I really was. Before we moved into town, we lived in the woods by the river. We had driven across great flat expanses in eastern Washington to arrive at this new home. Everything about Laura's experiences in the woods and on the prairies, as well as about the foot journeys of Daniel Boone and Johnny Appleseed, made sense in context of my own experience. They just confirmed what I was coming to know: I was a pioneer.

In our town, the mercantile store had bolts of cloth just a few aisles over from the paint and screwdrivers. We could buy Pop Rocks at the front counter and hold them on our tongues until it

## "MUSIC" IN LINCOLN

**GOOD music is not welcom in this western city. The people prefer cheap, hummable tunes to music that excites the noblest emotions. While we are all capable of cultivating a sufficient appreciation of the musical arts, the coarse barbarians of this city are content with "Ta Ra Ra Boom De Ay" and other vaudevillian rubbish as their only muscal nourishments.**

**THE saying, "there is no accounting for tastes," contains rather more falshood than truth. Taste is very largely accounted for by habit. The child whose musical experience is limited to trashy songs accompanied by an ill-tuned instrument cannot be expected to appreciate fine music artistically rendered. Shumann's "Advice to Young Musicians" should be in the hands, heads and hearts of all Lincoln's chidren, but it is as unknown to most of them as is any but the basest popular "music" performed incompetently.**

**THIS humble region needs musical uplift more than most. The poorer that a man is, and the more he is the slave of toil, the more needful it is that he should find diversion and refreshment for his weary spirit. Music, the most seductive and purest of all pleasures, is calculated more than all to exercise a benificial influence over the popular heart. True music, the solace and joy of noble people everywhere, languishes unheard in Lincoln.**

**-- Mr. Florian Ordinsky**

*Above and on the previous page: two of Colonel Raleigh's tenants make the pages of the Lincoln Union Leader (as imagined by Todd Richardson).*



felt like our mouths would explode. When I read about the store where Emil met Marie in *O Pioneers!* or Duckford's dry-goods store in *My Antonia*, this shop with its creaking wooden floors and dusty bins of screws was the kind of place I pictured. I was living the wild west, just with cars.

My mom knew we were pioneers too. She took my sister and me back to the bolts of cloth in the mercantile store. There, we picked out the material for our prairie dresses and bonnets. My sister chose a red calico with tiny yellow, blue, and white flowers. Mine was brown, sporting small white flowers with yellow centers. My third-grade class photo shows me in two pigtails and the dress with soft lace trimming the neck. Just like Laura, my mouth is full of teeth too big for my face and my bonnet hangs down my back. That summer, we would write letters to our grandmother that our mom helped us address. Then we walked to the post office in our bare feet, holding out a sticky dime and three pennies for the stamp. Ducking behind the shield of my bonnet, now on my head, made it easier for me to hand over the fistful of change.

I was a pioneer without a horse to ride those days. I missed my pony, Dandy. Because he was small, I named him after a baby horse in my very favorite stories as a five-year-old, *Cowboy Sam* by Edna Walker Chandler. A couple of houses earlier, we lived on a small farm outside of The Dalles, Oregon. We had chickens and sheep, a cow, and we kept two horses and two ponies. On summer days, Mom would help boost my sister and me up on the horses, Sugar and Brandy, and we would play frontier explorer. We had to stay on them, lying back on their sun-warmed rumps to pretend we were sleeping overnight, because we were too short to get back on by ourselves. The horses would sweat in the warm afternoons and their short hairs would stick to us, a unique prickling itch that formed a ring of dirt where our bare legs met the horses' hides. Later, in Kettle Falls, I was itching to return to those bareback rides wearing my calico dress and bonnet because I knew that, as a frontierswoman, I should be practicing. As an adult, reading Willa Cather's accounts of riding her pony around the prairie to visit her Bohemian neighbors, I felt a kindred spirit.

Then the summer before fifth grade, we moved from Kettle Falls across the state. I knew this was my chance and I confirmed with my mom. We were moving West! Mom's attempts to explain to me that we already were West slipped right off me. I was living my frontier dream. When we arrived in what was nearly the rain forest of Grays Harbor County, I remember thinking that this thick undergrowth and house hemmed in by

trees didn't match my conception of "West." Still, we found the Timberland Regional Library in Montesano, and my mind could return to the wide-open prairies and long-distance treks of the pioneers. My grandparents bought out a window display of "Best of the West" action figures with horses and covered wagons and complementary Native American friends. With Johnny West, little Jane and all the horses: Thunderbolt, Buckskin, Smoke Cloud Pinto, and the little pony Pancho, I kept my pioneering ambitions alive. I formed the plastic wagon train across the

terrazzo-pebbled concrete of our back porch, the hinged heads turned and looking at the outlaws galloping up on them. I would fill the buckboard with ripped-up grass to act as straw where little Johnny would unwittingly act out

Jim Burden's journey from the train to his grandparents' farm. No wonder, when the time came, his feelings were familiar: "I had the feeling that the world was left behind, that we had got over the edge of it, and were outside man's jurisdiction . . . this was the complete dome of heaven, all there was of it."

I outgrew the action figures about the time I got a horse of my own again, and we had a succession of horses until I graduated from high school. My world was bound up in riding and reading. I found myself majoring in English in my college undergraduate work. Surely I encountered "Neighbour Rosicky" along the way? When I would drive my truck and trailer across Kansas to a horse show in Missouri, I would hold my breath against the manure fertilizer and breathe out the words I still believe today: "It's so beautiful."

In 2005, I wrote a conference paper on *Death Comes for the Archbishop*, which I read at the International Cather Seminar held at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. That conference was my first encounter with the people whose genuine affection for Cather is infectious in all the best ways. In the archives, while I turned the pages of Cather's European scrapbook with trembling hands, Bob Thacker walked up and introduced himself to me, encouraging me in my Cather studies. He seemed to me an academic version of Bob Dylan and I was a singular fan.

"Did you make it to Red Cloud?" When I shook my head in answer to his question, he added, "That's the best part, you have to make it to Red Cloud." If a renowned Cather scholar told me I needed to make it to Red Cloud, I would make it to Red Cloud.

When I returned to my home in Maryland, I searched for the Willa Cather Foundation (in those days, the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Education Foundation) on our feeble internet and found that it was located in Cather's hometown of Red Cloud. As I clicked through the photos from the conference,

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### I was living the wild west, just with cars.

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waiting through the minutes for each one to load, I froze over a luscious shot of people at cellar doors. Zooming in, I realized that this was the very “fruit cave” where *Antonia*’s children had poured out into the Nebraska sunlight, “a veritable explosion of life.” I vowed right then I would travel West. I would make it to Red Cloud. How could I know, hunched before my computer near the Chesapeake Bay, that traveling into the heart of Nebraska would be a form of homecoming?

When she wrote in the first edition of *My Antonia* that Jim Burden and the author sat in an observation car while “the train flashed through never-ending miles of ripe wheat, by country towns and bright-flowered pastures and oak groves wilting in the sun,” my brain settled into her words as if they were familiar patterns; as if it was finding its way back home. Even though Cather insists that “no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it,” it never occurred to me that I *didn’t* grow up in a little prairie town. In fact, in the interiority of my imagination, I had.

Each move through the novel: Jim’s snowed-in blizzard, the picnic with the hired girls, his opening vista when he studied at college, felt more like a reminder of stories I already knew than a new reading experience. When I arrived at those last words of *My Antonia* where Jim describes how he “had the sense of coming home to [himself], and of having found out what a little circle man’s experience is,” I had that same feeling. I suspect Cather intended for us to agree with her. It seemed as if I had just read a fresh and life-changing book about the experiences I had built over a lifetime. The buffalo-hide prairie grass and the characters picking elderblow on the Republican river felt as if they were a part of my “precious . . . incommunicable past.”

I had to keep reading more of Willa Cather. Like a person with amnesia being granted a detailed history of my past, I devoured *The Song of the Lark*, *O Pioneers!*, and *Death Comes for the Archbishop*.

Years later I began that nearly four-hundred-mile pilgrimage to Red Cloud. I took I-70 to Colby, Kansas, where I would take my few turns until I ended up on Highway 281—the turns were easy to miss with the hours stretching between them. Once I left the freeway and started touring the two-lane roads, I soaked in the landscape around me with Barbara Caruso narrating *The Song of the Lark* on audiobook.

What was surely once tall-grass prairie now was neatly squared fields of early corn, silvery wheat, and pastures. I had to navigate

around lumbering tractors. I would roll down my window and breathe in the tilled earth or small farm lot manure. With the sun finally drifting south and me turning north, I could drink in the watery colors of green breaking through muted winter. I spotted every chubby shedding horse and all the calves bucking their way beside their mommas.

Finally, passing the sign for the geographic center of the contiguous United States, I traveled nearly twenty more miles before I found myself crossing the Republican River, noting the sand bars that had featured in so many of Cather’s works. By this time, I had also read *One of Ours*, *Lucy Gayheart*, and *A Lost Lady*. When I spotted the sign featuring the iconic plow modeled after the scene from *My Antonia*, I felt the thrill of recognition and sat up straighter, brushing popcorn crumbs off my wilted clothes. My tires hit the brick streets of Red Cloud and I felt goosebumps as if I had rolled out of the present and into one of Cather’s novels.

Over the next few days of the 2009 Spring Conference where we talked about food in Willa Cather and ate homemade kolaches, I had the feeling that I wasn’t seeing Red Cloud for the first time.

When I stood in the doorway of Cather’s attic bedroom in her childhood home, admiring the original wallpaper and the floor-to-ceiling window, I had the sense I was simply remembering the room in person because Cather described it in detail in *The Song of the Lark*. When I drove out to see the historic Starke Round Barn, the mill where Claude visited Enid in *One of Ours* was right across the highway. Perhaps it was a surprise in location, but it appeared just as it should be from the novel. All week I felt as if I was rounding corners and coming face-to-face with old friends. I imagined the dancing tent on the edge of town from *My Antonia* and wondered how far Jim drove the hired team to reach her farm.

When we finally drove the fourteen miles out to the Pavelka Farmstead on another brilliant, sunny Nebraska day, the sense of reliving memories faltered. All throughout town, the sites seemed the same as I envisioned them, as if they had emerged from the novels and remained almost untouched in the present day. The farmstead was different. Pulling up to the whitewashed building, I looked around for the voluptuous orchards with gooseberry and currant bushes between the rows. At that time, the state historical society kept the house and its budget was growing ever tighter. Fruit trees have relatively short lives and the house was surrounded by neatly mowed grass.

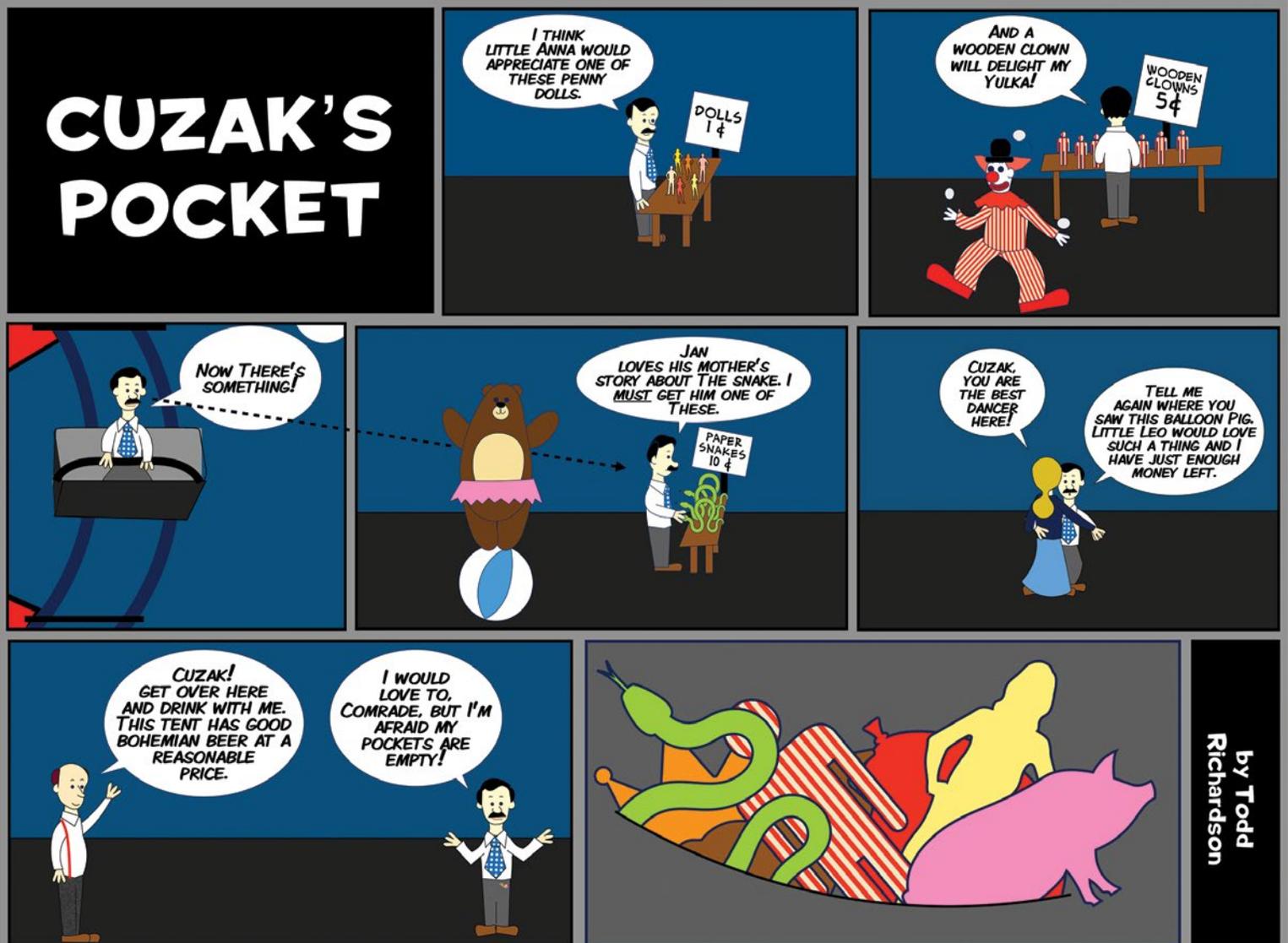
**My tires hit the brick streets of Red Cloud and I felt goosebumps as if I had rolled out of the present and into one of Cather’s novels.**



Still, standing near the front door and taking in the skyline to the south, foregrounded by the doors to the iconic cellar, I could appreciate Jim's sentiment about the loneliness of the farm-boy in the evening "and the world so far away." Picturing *Antonia's* children pouring out of the cellar came as easy as memory.

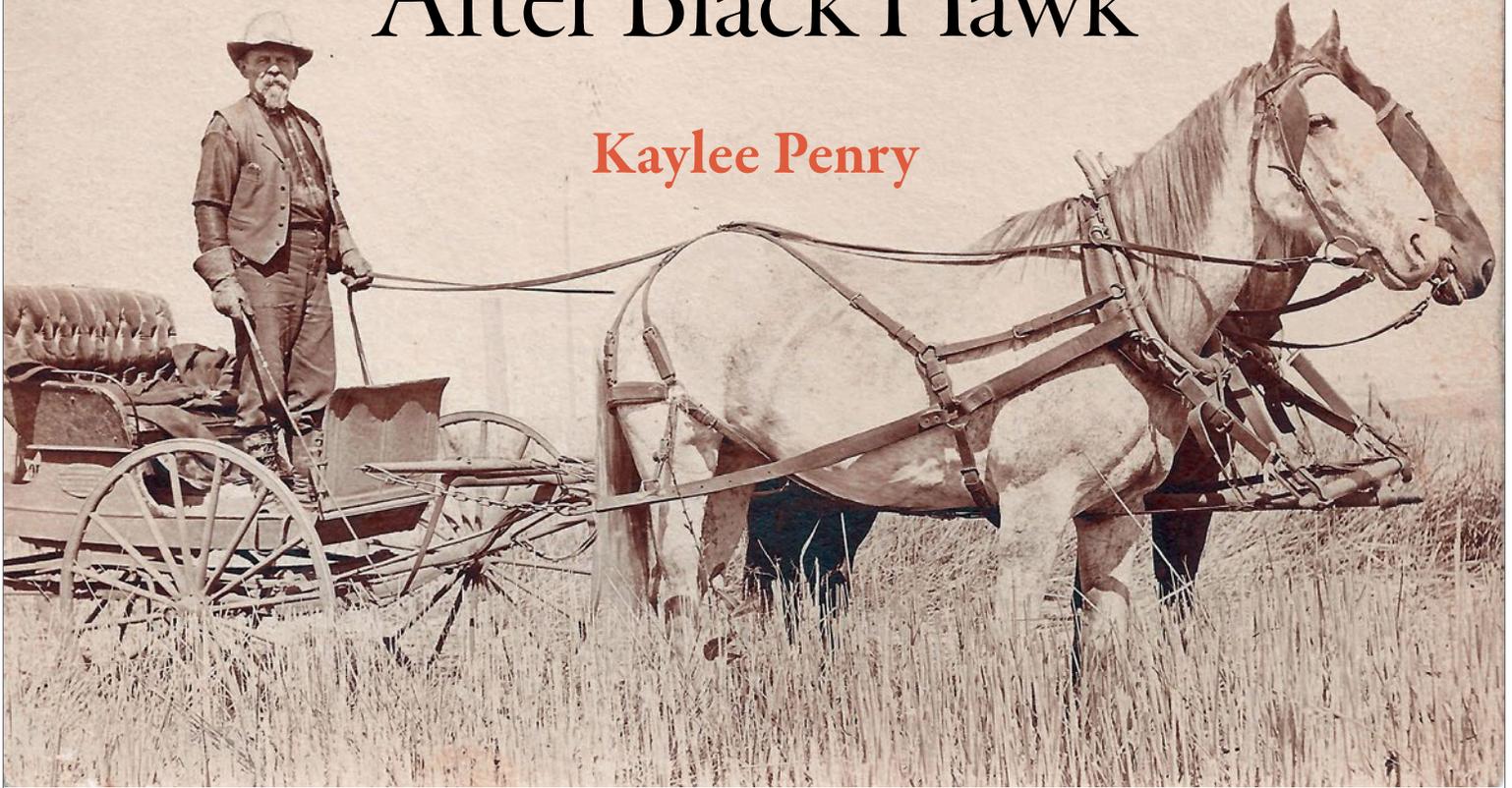
When I drove south away from Red Cloud that weekend and rolled up the hill opposite the Republican River, I had the sense of rising up out of a dream. On this perfectly clear day, I was leaving behind an enchanted land; an Avalon where the magic of Cather's words lives on just beyond the periphery of my sight. I fought the urge to turn around and plant myself at the childhood home where I felt almost certain that, if I waited long enough, Jim Burden would make his way back to his grandparents' house from the Harlings' front door. In my myriad visits since then, I still feel as if I'm slipping into a land out of time where Cather's descriptions can emerge as rough brick under my hands and creaking porches under my feet.

My secret is that I can't remember the first time I read Cather. I remember only a feeling of reentering my memories when I read *My Antonia* in 2004. What I can say is that all of her stories have become memories for me. That, after repeated readings, their narratives have spun into my recollections and become a part of my being. The grasses and trees, animals and people, who populated Willa Cather's mind and found their way onto her pages are every blade of grass and tree, every animal and person that I've imagined. I suspect that's what makes her so universally appealing. *My Antonia* and all of Cather's words have become a part of my own "precious . . . incommunicable past." ■



# After Black Hawk

Kaylee Penry



Three weeks after we arrived in Montana I realized we had made a mistake. Jake and I worked day and night in the mines testing our luck, hoping to find what we came west to do. During the day, the echoes from other miners filled our ears and distracted us from our mission. The dust stung our nostrils until they throbbed, and only then would we step outside to take a break. We would sit on a wobbly mound of rocks and soak up the late-August sunlight. The pine trees seemed to be suffering from the rays just as I was. I imagined sweat dripping down from their needles just as I wiped the dampness from my own forehead.

Jake found a stick and started drawing in the dirt with it. I couldn't make out what he was engraving in the grainy earth, and he didn't seem to know either. I looked up at him and I realized that he had been staring at me with a serious look on his face, probably for a while now. "Do you miss it? As much as I do?" Jake asked. I couldn't bring myself to admit defeat, so I shook my head and locked my eyes to the ground. "Not just Nebraska and the farm, but Jim too," Jake said. "Even *Ántonia* was all right to be around." I couldn't help but agree with him. The whole time we'd been gone all I could think about was everyone we spent our days with in Black Hawk.

"I think about it sometimes but we're here now and we can't look back. We can never look back." I knew that Jake didn't like what I had to say but we needed to get back to work, digging for



silver that we would never find. Once the sun went down it got chillier and the sound of other miners would be exchanged with crickets chirping at the moonlight. Mosquitos constantly swarmed and attacked our bodies. The pinching tickle is what kept me awake during the dreadful nights. I liked working during the day because it was easier to see what we were doing, but Jake insisted on staying after everyone else left so that if we found something, there was no way anyone could take it from us.

Looking back on it now, we were doing nothing but wasting our time.

After we accepted defeat, we moved into the city to try to find steady paying jobs. I started working as a cabinetmaker again because there was always something to do between building and repairing woodwork for the wealthier families in town. Jake found a job at the general store down the street from where we lived. We both left work around the same time but Jake occasionally worked later than I did because he was the only reliable employee. I would stop by to chat with him on my way home and oftentimes the manager's daughter would be there as well. Her name was Jamie and her laugh lit up the whole room. She had long brown hair that ran all the way to her knees but it was well kept. Jamie had the most unique sense of humor, and she didn't stare or recoil at the sight of my ear. Her eyes were green, the kind of green that peeks out of the last bit of snow just before spring, the green that goes into apple pies to make them so sweet you wonder how you could ever have lived without tasting it, the green that flows in the sea seeming to have no purpose yet affects everything around it. I had never thought of a woman the way I thought of Jamie. I thought I could see myself with her for the rest of my life. Every day after work I would rush to the general store hoping to see her there.

"She's not here today, sorry bud," Jake said from behind the counter with a look of sympathy. He knew that I looked forward to seeing her. She must have had something really important to do because she came here so much and it seemed as if she enjoyed talking to me. I dragged myself home with no real ambition or hope for the lonely and dull evening that awaited me. I would normally plop down on the layer of dust on my bed and stare at the cracks in the ceiling so that my mind could focus on itself. I would think about life in Austria and wonder what my old mother was doing and if she ever thought about me too. Sometimes thoughts of the Burdens would come into my head. Other times I would think about Antonia, but mostly at times like this I would think about Mr. Shimerda. He didn't deserve to die. He was a decent man with a generous heart that missed his home. I always felt sympathy for him being dragged to a foreign place that he never wanted to go to, even if it might mean a better life for his children. But he left his children behind. He denied them the love and support of their father. He shouldn't have done it. But he did. He never did any wrong in his life but he still ended up dead and that's one of the reasons I knew it was time to leave. I didn't want to die after living a life filled with reminders of what happened to Mr. Shimerda and his family. His passing helped me realize that there's more to life than this farm and this town, and that I needed to



move on. Not progressing further would have driven me into the ground next to that unfortunate man. As I imagined my feet dragging through the dirt, I looked up to see a familiar face at my front door. I was so shocked that I couldn't bring the thoughts in my head to come out of my mouth until after Jamie had started talking to me.

"Jake told me where you guys live and said that you wanted to see me," she said. Her cheeks were bright red and her hands were tucked tight into her pockets. The minutes passed like seconds as we sat in the kitchen talking about our lives. She stayed home to help take care of her younger siblings all day and took any chance she could get to go into town and socialize. Her father was a wealthy man that used most of his money to gamble and was almost never home, leaving his wife and oldest daughter to take care of the many young ones. I told her about life in Austria and Nebraska, about Jake, and about cabinetmaking. We sat talking in the kitchen until Jake came home, later than usual.

Jake came to a halt and looked at us triumphantly before asking, "So are you staying for dinner?" She nodded and giggled—I could tell she was embarrassed. The three of us sat at the dinner table and ate sweet corn and mashed potatoes courtesy of Jake. We talked, laughed, and sat in awkward silence. I found myself staring aimlessly towards Jamie and I started to think about home. I thought about my mother, knowing that she was thinking of me too. I thought about the Shimerdas and wondered where they were and what they were doing. I also thought about Jim Burden. He was a good kid with a kind heart, and I hoped that he was doing something that made him a better person, and that he was doing all right. I snapped back into focus when I gazed into her beautiful green eyes and I felt like I was the happiest I could ever be. After a while she said that it was time for her to leave. I had never felt so disappointed to see someone go and right then I decided that I never wanted her to leave me again.

Jamie and I grew closer over the next few years and decided that we wanted to be together. We never got married though because we didn't deem it necessary. We were hesitant about that early on because she was so much younger than me. We found a big house in the country to start our family together, with Jake by our side. He would live with us and grow crops to sell in town to people who were unable to grow their own. He helped us raise our children like they were his own, and although he has never found love, his heart is full of his many friendships and the connection he has with our children. We may not have found what we were looking for when we moved here from Black Hawk, but what we found was worth more than any amount of silver we could have found in those mines. ■



# MY *Á*ntonia

**Nadine Lavagnino**

A Loving Reader of the Book by this Name

I call her “*MY Ántonia*,” because it is she I admire and wish to be like in my life. To me, *Ántonia* is a heroine. She is not just Jim Burden’s, the narrator of the book, her father’s nor her husband’s *Ántonia*. *She is also mine*.

*Ántonia* bubbles over with excitement for life. She has an innate curiosity and a strong desire to learn. She learns English, having come to America from Bohemia, housekeeping skills such as cooking, cleaning, canning, and working the land with plow and animals to produce and harvest profitable crops.

*Ántonia* has the personality I wish to emulate in my life. The excitement in her makes her beautiful, just as I want people to see the same in me. While dressing only in the one outfit she owns as a young girl and wears through all seasons until her early teen years—a thin cotton dress—she is not concerned with being too poor to buy another. On the other hand, I spend money or already own multiple choices of clothes for each season. I own more than one pair of shoes, while *Ántonia* wears her father’s old boots in the fields, without complaining about the way they look or feel. Amazon, the mega instant online shopping center, allows me to purchase unlimited amounts of clothing and accessories with a click of a button on my cell phone or computer. Inside stores, with a swipe of a credit card, I can buy whatever I want and pay this “borrowed” money back, with interest, at a later date. *Ántonia* is naturally beautiful despite her modest clothing and does not bother with these petty concerns. Her life is simple.

*Ántonia* works hard outside on the farm, despite the extreme heat in the summer or freezing cold in the winter when she wears her father’s old fur cap for warmth. In comparison, I work indoors at a desk job with air conditioning in the summer and heat in the winter. I also have paid vacation days, holidays and sick days. I

am covered by a union to work and be paid with representation. Reading about *Ántonia* and the admiration I have for her, I have nothing to complain about concerning my job. *Ántonia* works hard physically from sun up to sun down. She is not lazy nor complains about the workload. It is work she has to do without the freedom of choice.

Her skin is brown from the sun and working the land. She is healthy and strong, not applying sunscreen to her face and body as I do, to protect against sun damage, melanoma, and early aging of my skin. Even though sunscreen was not available in her lifetime, *Ántonia* rarely wears a hat to protect her skin. I know women who go to tanning booths, lie in the sun or go on vacation to sunbathe around a pool with tropical drinks brought to them, trying for that browned skin or tan that *Ántonia* achieves naturally. Women today, myself included, use or have tried, bronzing makeup powders to create the appearance of golden dimensions to our faces. *Ántonia* does not need this. She even has a natural deep red coloring on her cheeks, while I use makeup

blush to achieve this look. *Ántonia*’s eyes are big and brown. She does not need to use mascara and an eyelash curler as I do. Some women wear colored contact lenses to change the natural color of their eyes. Many women today have “eye work” done, facelifts or Botox injections in attempts to erase signs of aging.

I have had facials to improve my skin. *Ántonia* concerns herself with living and loving life.

*Ántonia* does not constantly worry about her looks or how she will come across in a cell phone “selfie” photo. These photos are often cropped and altered to make ourselves look better, thinner and more “perfect.” Although there were no cell phones during her life, I am sure *Ántonia* would be too busy to bother

***Ántonia* is unaware  
of the beauty surrounding  
her presence.**



with constant photos of herself. I exercise at a fitness center to stay in shape. *Ántonia* works all year round outdoors, has muscles and is strong and fit from this work, while I am consistently worried about my weight.

*Ántonia*'s brown hair is naturally curly, while I use shampoos, conditioners, styling products and a curling iron to get my hair to look curly like hers! As she ages, the sun "grizzled" her hair a little, as Jim, the narrator and *Ántonia*'s friend, writes. I spend money to get my hair styled regularly and have deep moisturizing treatments. Add in the manicures and pedicures I periodically receive and I can see how these things would not feel like necessities to *Ántonia*. She can pay attention to beauty details, yet her hard work keeps her too busy. She is an absolute natural.

While wanting to continue her education, *Ántonia* is unable to do so because she has to work to support her family as a daughter and later as a wife. Today I hear of parents who, upon a child's birth, get their child placed on a list to get into the most expensive and prestigious preschool and kindergarten. It is as if the better the education starting as a young child, the more earnings as an adult, and that will ultimately guarantee happiness. *Ántonia* is happy without this.

*Ántonia* is unaware of the beauty surrounding her presence. She is brave and has strength of character. She has that wonderful thing called inner strength that not all people possess. When pregnant, not letting anyone know when it was time for the birth, she puts the cattle into the corral, goes into the house, closes her bedroom door and gives birth to her baby by herself, without making a sound. Today we have sterile hospitals for birthing, drugs for pain, and most women do make noise during labor. *Ántonia* is dignified and independent. Because of this, I admire her even more.

She finds happiness as an adult too, even though she is poor financially. She marries, has many children, works the difficult land and encourages her husband to do so too. In addition, she cans and preserves food for the winter to feed her family. *Ántonia*, her husband, and children are very close and truly love one another. For this reason, I do not believe she considers herself "poor" as others may describe her. No government handouts for *Ántonia*, as a girl or mother. When first arriving in America and not knowing the language, her family was given a terrible deal for bad land, scrawny animals and a horrible place to build a home, costing them practically all the money they had. Jim Burden's family does help, though, with donations of food and necessities.

Today, many people need assistance. But I sometimes see people abuse the government programs set up for the poor.

*Ántonia* makes the best of everything. She has a deep commitment to family and friends and finds happiness, despite being poor. In comparison, I find myself feeling down and overwhelmed when money is tight, credit card bills are high, having family out of state and not making enough time with girlfriends, despite having a terrific and loving husband. *Ántonia* adores the closeness of those she loves, and neither worry nor fear, stops her excitement and positive attitude toward life.

Many of *Ántonia*'s teeth rot and fall out as she ages. I see my dentist several times a year for a deep cleaning, I brush and floss my teeth daily and even whiten my teeth. How I admire *Ántonia* for smiling wide and laughing out loud, despite the loss of her teeth. I care so much about superficial things, yet strive to be as happy and genuine as *Ántonia*.

There is a strong spirituality that exists in *Ántonia*. Her fullness of life, electrifying excitement, and her enthusiasm for learning about everything, makes others want to be around her. *Ántonia* is never too old to run and greet her loved ones when she sees them. As a young girl, she runs into her father's arms when he approaches. In later years, she runs to greet her husband and oldest son, as they ride back to the house from being away. Her positivity and joy is infectious.

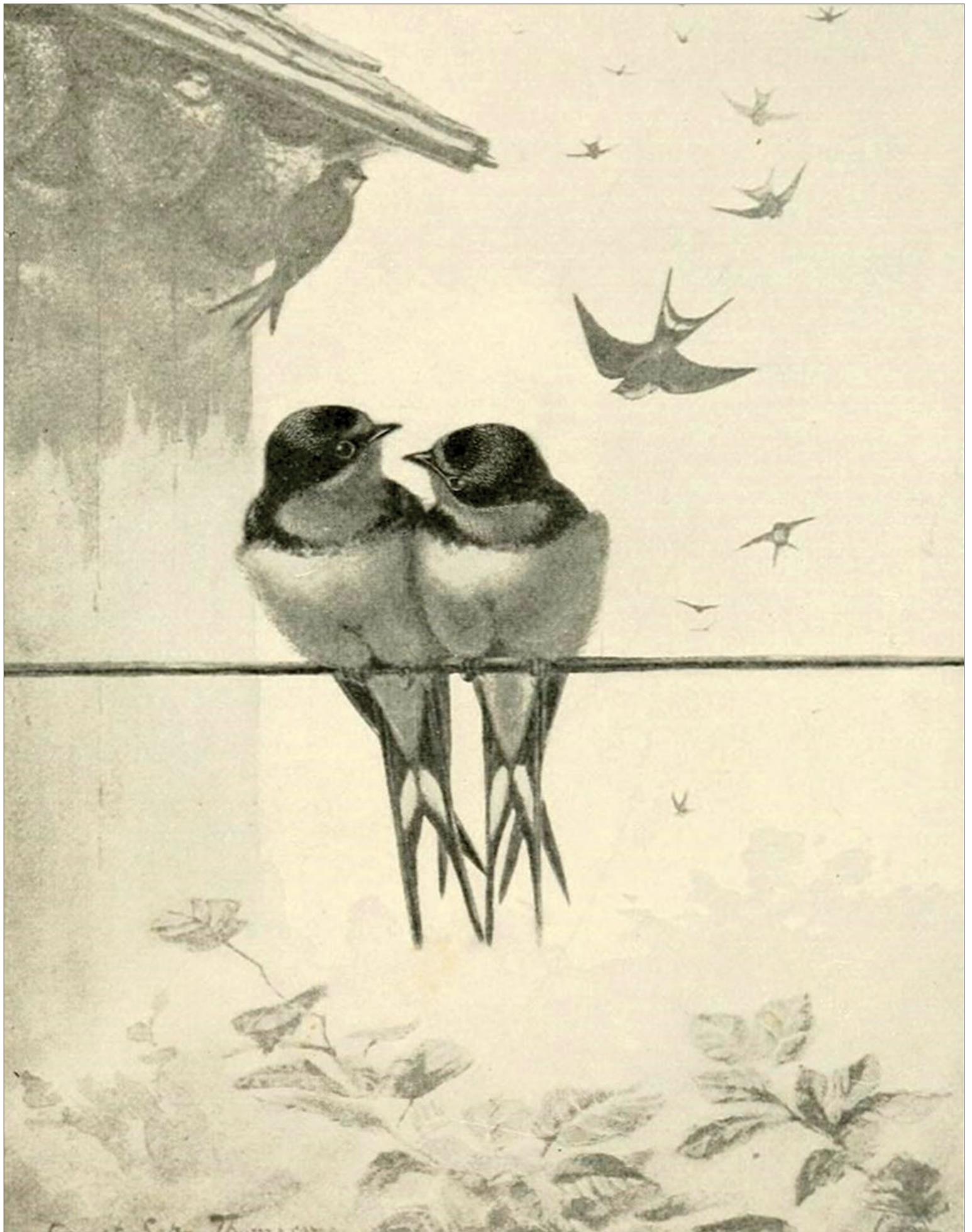
What she possesses in life is the fulfillment of the Spirit. Every one of us has this Spirit, yet often it is not acknowledged or realized. *Ántonia* has this without needing to step foot in a church. It is the Love she has within her that flourishes. Love she exudes. Love she gives to another. Love that makes her my heroine. Even though she is a character in a book, *Ántonia* is real to me. I cannot imagine my life without having met *Ántonia* in the pages of Willa Cather's novel, one I read over and over again. *Ántonia* inspires me. By knowing her, as much as a reader can know a character in a book, I want to live a big life even in a little space; to go places without leaving the small space of home, all to find happiness. It is from this, a love in my heart that grows stronger with every meeting of her in the pages of my favorite book, I too can call my heroine, "*MY Ántonia*." ■

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# The Fledglings

**K. E. Butler**

The swallows arrived one warm day when buds swelled and greenness carpeted the ground. The woman, in the barn pouring grain into the feed manger, felt a ripple of disturbance in the air, and ducked just in time to dodge a chattering pair of iridescent blue-black missiles.

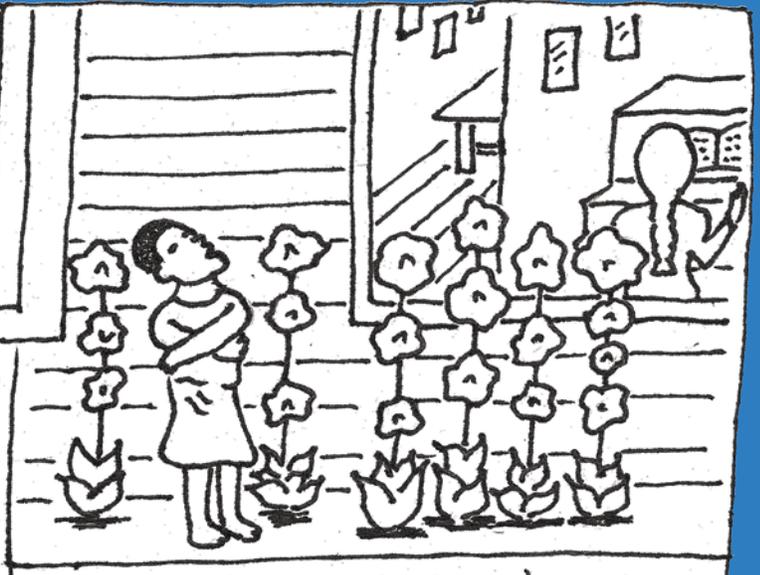
Each day as she milked, the pair labored too; the male layering mud like a potter, his mate bringing soft shreds of baler twine and horsehair, until one day, a cup-shaped nest sat on the ledge. The woman climbed a stepladder and found five brown and white speckled eggs.

Milking was pleasant with the swallows swooping in and out, and a satisfying fullness kindled inside the woman as she watched the nest in anticipation. One day, five tiny bald heads rested on its edge. She climbed up and a choir of staccato chirps greeted her. Each day she checked the youngsters. Steely blue-grey feathers replaced downy fluff, and cinnamon-colored throats crowned the rim of the nest. She knew the nestlings would fledge soon, and joy filled her heart at the thought of them returning each night, bellies full of leafhoppers.

One evening after milking the first fledgling swooped down and sat on the gate. It turned, looked at the woman, then lifted off and was gone. One by one the others followed. The woman was proud. She waited for their return; she missed the bustle of activity. But they didn't come back. She felt a small hollow in her heart.

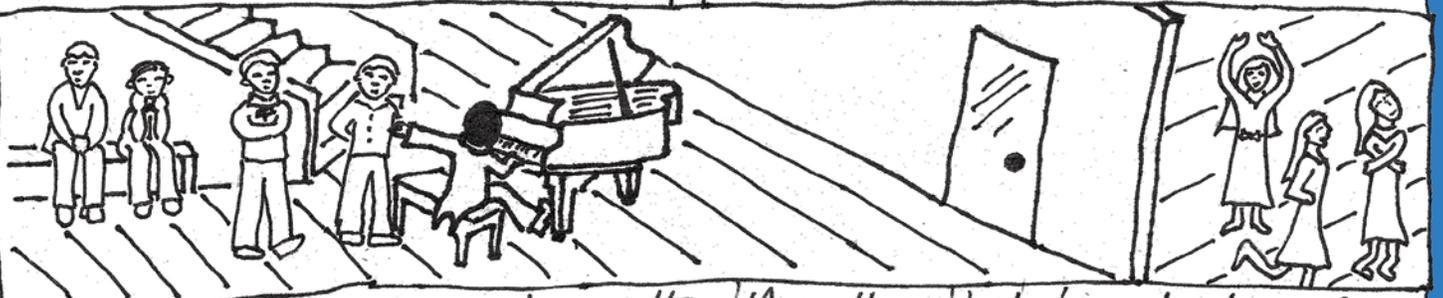
The next day, she finished milking and turned around to see her oldest son waiting. He had his arm around a girl, and a duffel bag at his feet. ■





THERE in the sheltered draw-bottom the wind did not blow very hard, but I could hear it singing its humming tune upon the level...

IF Miss D'Arnavault stopped practicing... she saw this hideous little pickaninny, dressed in an old piece of sacking... between the hollyhock rows... wearing an expression of idiotic rapture.



IN the middle of a crashing waltz d'Arnavault suddenly began to play softly, and, turning to one of the men who stood behind him, whispered, 'Somebody dancing in there... I hear little feet, - girls, I 'spect.'



I soon learned that if I... found Mrs. Harling at the piano, I must sit down and wait quietly.

LEO, with a good deal of fussing, got out his violin. It was old Mr. Shimerda's instrument.

TONY made a warm nest for him in her hands... Presently he began to sing for us - a thin, rusty little chirp.

# Beautiful Talk

Musical Moments in *My Ántonia*

## Elizabeth Wells

My five-year-old daughter loves to draw, and even though I've had little experience with drawing (I'm better playing music), she often asks me to draw with her to pass the time, and among her favorite things to draw are comic strips. When I drew this piece, I was working at a breakneck pace on my dissertation, and consequently I often was too worn out mentally in the evenings to read, but also too stimulated to simply watch TV or go to bed. To relax at night, I started drawing comic strips for myself, and being so immersed in Cather's writing during the day, I found myself wanting to draw scenes from her novel. Since I play the piano, I started first by thinking of all of the scenes that show music—Blind d'Arnault's childhood and tour, Mrs. Harling at her piano, little Leo playing Mr. Shimerda's instrument. But as I thought more and more about the idea of music in the novel, I discovered how deeply music runs through many parts of the novel, from Jim listening to the wind in the garden, to the grasshopper's rusty chirp. Some of these thematic connections surfaced when I was first planning what to draw, but what I noticed when I actually began to draw was quite remarkable. Would I ever have noted, for instance, that there are rows of teetering hollyhocks in both d'Arnault's garden and in Ántonia's? Or would I have seen that Mrs. Harling and d'Arnault were friends, or wondered what that friendship actually looked like? As I drew each of these musical moments, I thought about all of the ways that the "beautiful talk" of Cather's novel comes through so differently according to how the scenes appear next to one another—what Cather herself called "juxtaposition." For me, these juxtaposed moments perform a theme and variations upon the meanings in Cather's novel, with images that repeat and shift according to their new surroundings, connecting desire with beauty in one place, with loss and vulnerability in another. ■



# The Land Gets in You

## Thoughts of a Conservationist

In a short time my former colleagues will say “Now, what was her name?” It doesn’t matter now that I followed every computer step – it matters: did I answer my calling – did I follow Jesus’s dreams for me . . .

But my legacy lives on – in my work with the farmers, the ranchers and the acreage owners of this wide land – the Great Plains . . . the impact I had when working side by side with my land users – It lives on in their lives and their efforts . . . doing for them what I would do for myself and my family . . .

I watched the vast, native grass pastures wave in the southeastern wind – telling me it’s going to rain . . .

I smelled the fresh-cut alfalfa, ready to windrow . . . watched rain make the difference in a successful native grass planting . . .

I knew the baby red fox kits who played in front of their den . . . and loping river otters running in shallow pools . . .

I heard and saw western meadowlarks sing on a fence post . . .

Barn swallows confused my open pickup window for a place to make a mud nest . . .

I planted new windbreaks reaching for the sunlight to protect their inner occupants and their cattle . . .

I wrote directions for green covers growing on fields for three of the four seasons . . .

I watched baby badgers run across a minimum maintenance road and big brown thrashers dash from plum thicket to plum thicket and prairie chicken who boomed on a lek . . .

I walked along streams – in the woods and riparian edge . . . up onto a baby fawn, curled up as his mother told him to – waiting – as she watches – unseen . . . startled: she snorts . . . twins run opposite directions to a pre-appointed patch . . .

I breathed the absolutely fresh air . . . stood in a big whirlwind – my papers flying across the field . . .

I wondered at the empty, abandon farmsteads – longing to know their story in the weathered wood of tumbled-down barns and houses and cellars . . . stanchions and mangers rubbed smooth . . . oiled by hide and fur . . .

I loved to see and hear the clank clank whiiiiirl – clank clank whiiiiirl – clank clank whiiiiirl of a windmill on a windy day – pouring life-giving water into a cow tank where minnows mysteriously showed up . . .



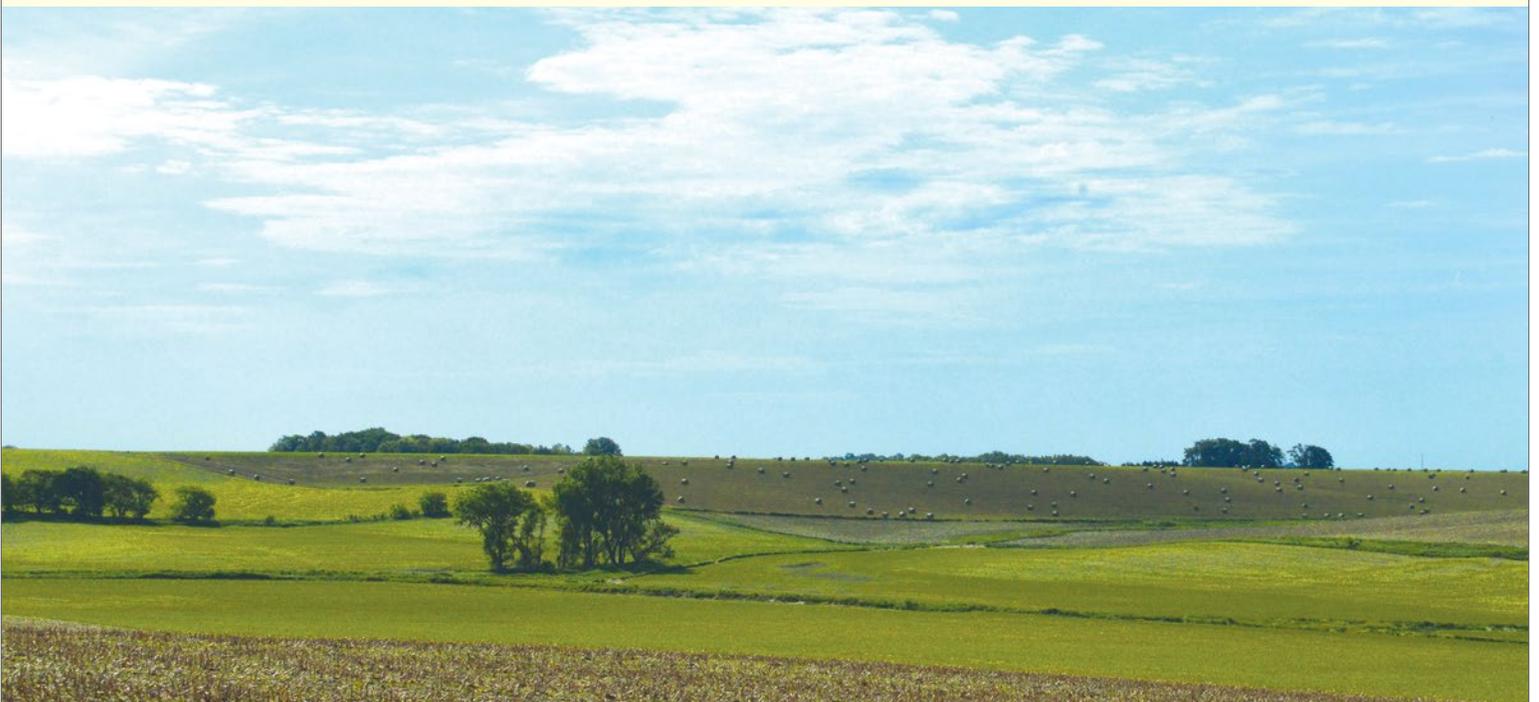
I nearly touched the azure sky, clouds like marshmallow cream . . . the storehouses of snow . . . rolling thunderheads . . .

For what I was able to help with . . . and pray for . . . and hope . . .

In every thought of my parents' and grandparents' values and work ethic carrying on in my grandchildren; in every tree that was planted and replanted; every windbreak that was renovated and did not lose its entire life before being rejuvenated; in every soil particle that stayed in place instead of ending in the Mississippi Delta – 45 miles from the former shore; in every microscopic soil fungi, soil microbe, earthworm and arthropod; in every season: having a living root and healthier soil; in every pasture whose grass is vibrant and the sustainability is marching forward; in every animal: cow, chicken, horse, sheep and wild creature that live better because of soil, forbs and grass improved; in every flame of fire that had a purpose; in every native and honeybee and butterfly that has more pollen to use; in every pasture and watercourse without invasive species; in every sandhill and whooping crane and blue-winged teal that land along the Central Flyway; in the fresh water the animals drink whether they be wildlife or domestic; in every drop of water from the underground sea named the Ogallala Aquifer – that was spared or used wisely; in every child who knows more about the Creation around them; in the answered and unanswered prayer with and for my farmers – for their families, their livelihood, their crops and efforts in conservation – not preservation, but in good, wise use; in the hope of growing their own tasty food and knowing where it comes from – when they feed the world; in every young farmer and rancher that is striving for their future as a steward of the land; in every farm and ranch family that has achieved and is still achieving their dreams of a wonderful, free life on the farm – likely a generational treasure being passed down from weathered hands: There, there is my memory – there is my work's legacy – being the Caretaker of God's creation – His earth.

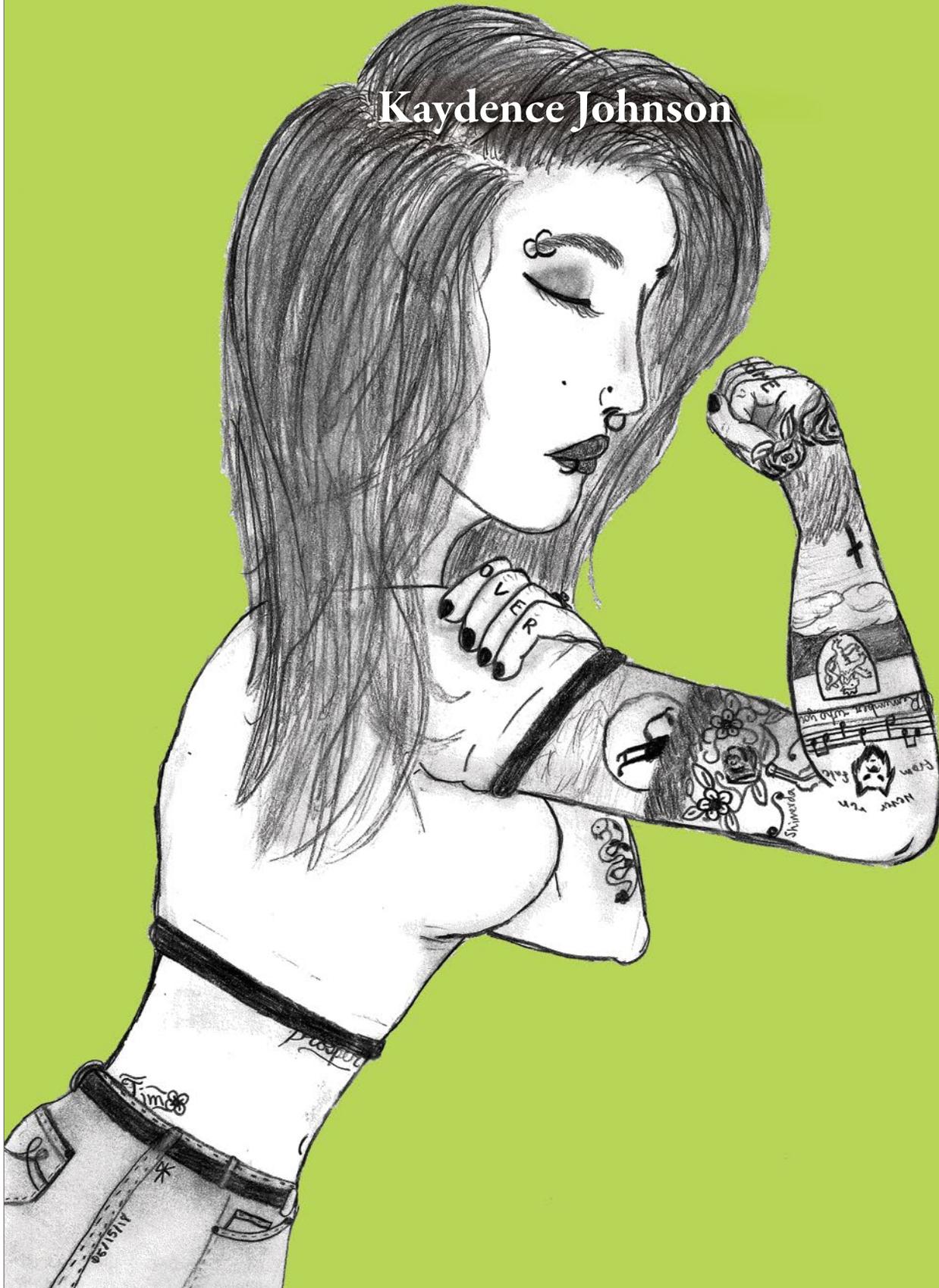
My satisfaction lies within His Glory.

**Beth Hiatt**



# Antonia

Kaydence Johnson



## Her tattoos tell her life story.

The drawing shows the *Ántonia* I saw in the book, a modern take on the *Ántonia* we all learned to love. She is a strong and independent young woman who rarely takes no for an answer. If she were an actual person in the modern world, she might be covered in tattoos and piercings. These are a way to express her inner rebel and prove that she is in charge of her own life.

### Roses and a Cross

At the bottom of her sleeve tattoo is the scene of her father's death—a stormy sky casting a shadow on the prairie grass beneath, with a cross standing solemnly in the untamed grass. This is the resting place of her poor father who fell to suicide. Beneath this scene: roses that embody *Ántonia* herself . . . a delicate flower yet covered with thorns.

### “Overcome”

Letters on her knuckles spell out “overcome,” four letters on each hand. Throughout her life, *Ántonia* is faced with daunting challenges that she must overcome. She keeps her chin up through all of them. These challenges just prove her strength and make her a better woman in the end.

### The Bohemian Flag

Farther up the sleeve is the Bohemian flag. *Ántonia* immigrated to America from Bohemia and still holds the country dear to her heart. Her father loved his country with every ounce in his body—it ultimately broke him to leave it. This flag appears right next to her father's burial scene. Above the flag is a quote: “Remember who you are.” This reminds *Ántonia* never to forget who she is and never to forget her country or her father.

### Notes

Just above the quote is a strand of musical notes. Her father loved to play the violin and she loved to hear the violin. Music was a huge part of her life. She loved dancing—dancing even influenced some of the later events in her life.

### The Fate of Wolves

Another important moment in her life is when the Russian Peter and Pavel tell the story of the wolves. Long story short, the duo was being chased by wolves while driving a team of horses and a carriage. In the carriage was a bride and groom and, knowing that none of them would survive, the duo threw the bride and groom to the wolves. This saved Peter and Pavel from the wolves. Right below her elbow, *Ántonia* has a tattoo of a wolf. Around the wolf are the words, “You can't run from fate.” She cannot run from what she is destined to be.

### The Violin

Above the wolf tattoo is another reference to her father with a tattoo of a violin surrounded by flowers. This is a depiction of her father's love for violin and the flowers are included to honor his death.

### The Plow

The last section of the sleeve tattoo is the image of the plow, nestled in the untamed red grass of the prairie. As *Ántonia* and her childhood friend Jim Burden and their friends are sitting on a hill watching the sun go down, they see the plow across the endless sea of grass. The plow was perfectly framed in the setting sun only for a moment before it disappeared into darkness. This is an important scene in Willa Cather's story that shows how a person grows. The scene of the plow sends a deeper message to the readers. We are here, on this earth, for only a short amount of time (as the plow was only visible for a short amount of time). In the time we have, we are meant to leave a lasting impression on the earth we leave (as the plow left an impression on the characters). Then we die. And if we do not leave that impression, no one will remember us. This is why the plow is the biggest and most important part of her tattoo.

### The Snake

*Ántonia* has several other tattoos scattered over her body. On her opposite arm is a depiction of a rattlesnake—the snake that Jim Burden killed when they were both children. This very event is what caused *Ántonia* to see Jim as more her equal. She decided to get a tattoo of it to remember the life that she used to have and the fun she had with Jim.

### “Prosper”

On her ribcage is a word in cursive writing: prosper. As with her knuckle tattoos, the word prosper means a lot to the modern *Ántonia*. Through the hard times she went through, *Ántonia* prospered. The tattoo reminds her of the sacrifices she made and that through it all, and through whatever else is to come, she must prosper.

### Tramp Stamp

What rebellious, edgy, typical teenage girl is complete without a tramp stamp? The name “Jim” is surrounded by flowers. *Ántonia* always had a kind of infatuation for Jim, even though she eventually settled down with another man. She wanted to remember Jim and this was just the way to do it.

Every detail in the drawing is there for a reason. Nothing was by accident. I drew my version of *Ántonia* in a similar position to “Rosie the Riveter,” who was a huge symbol for empowering women. Rosie was a very strong and independent working woman, even though she was only make-believe, and never let a man show her up. *Ántonia* is similar to Rosie in this way. This is why I posed her like the famous posters of Rosie the Riveter, to express her inner rebel and her inner strength. This is my own *Ántonia* and my depiction of her in the modern world. ■



# Finding Antonia

Zak Zarben

Moving back home seemed like a defeat at twenty-two years old. My parents had often encouraged me to move back to settle down; you know, get a job at a factory, get married, start having kids. This was the only kind of encouragement I would ever hear from them. This is what they knew. I tolerated the beckoning somewhat but it got under my skin.

I always felt there was something great headed my way. But what was it? Deflecting suggestions or ideas from family members of how I should live my life became my mainstay for the next two years. This mind, *my mind* was staying open 24/7 for this great thing heading my way; this *great influence*. I had no idea what it was going to be. I just knew life was going to be lived in a spectacular way. A crazy thought, really.

Anxiety has always been sky-high for me and I've always explained anxiety like it was a heavy blanket or quilt I had to carry with me every day, draped over my head. I often felt like I lived in a fishbowl, completely disconnected from the world around me. It always felt like a heavy weight I had to carry around every second of almost every day, except while walking around the farm at Grandma's. The weight of the blanket wore me out and prevented much social development; it was like having a plow in the ground while trying to run; a lot of effort but no furrow.

The program played on Nebraska Public Television. It was about an author: a turn-of-the-century author from a small town in Nebraska near the Kansas border. The story of her life caught my eye and began to spin thoughts in my head. *What is this!*

The feeling I had was like a puppy's first time playing on a snow-covered lawn; the dog didn't know what the snow was, just that the snow was a new world.

This author wrote several novels relating to life in Nebraska when the state was first being settled. The land and the buildings she wrote about so long ago were still intact and could be visited. There was an organization established and a museum in this small Nebraska town. It didn't take me long to decide; I'm going.

The drive to Red Cloud took about two hours from eastern Nebraska. This trip would be the best tank of gas ever put in one of my vehicles: still is to this day. It allowed me to see how one could take parts of her or his early life and create a great work of art, or in her case many great works of art. The works of art could then become part of Nebraska history and American history. Greatness.

The everyday normal facts, figures, people, buildings, landscapes, and whatever else, could be used to *create* that "something great" in one's life. You didn't wait for it to come along, you made it happen.

This is different from all the activities we become good at early in life, from grade school all the way through high school and college. Every year the activities, like sports, would come around at certain times of the year and we participated and tried to win; the activity was based on a schedule according to seasons, or time.

In sports, my whole family was very good at everything we did. We excelled every year at these activities that were just there for us to become good at; they came *to* us. But this program on NET showed me greatness after my life in high school sports; I *must go there*.

The first visit to Red Cloud was a partial visit to the places and buildings she wrote about, but it was just enough. Walking into the museum and looking at the articles, walking into the gift shop and theater, buying a book recommended by one of the staff as "if you're going to read one book, read this one," her personal favorite. The small town, the bricked streets, the main intersection . . . add that to what this lady accomplished. *This was inspiring*.

On the visit I drove past the house she grew up in and then I parked at the Memorial Prairie looking out over the rolling hills of red grass. Then I drove north to the farmhouse with the fruit cellar. I walked around the yard, spent time at the barn,



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I must find my own  
Red Cloud; my own  
works of art.

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letting the greatness brush over me and through me; there was no tarp or heavy blanket here, the anxiety, *it* was gone! *There were possibilities!* The idea of creating my life and creating every fixture of it was exciting to think about. This woman did it! I can do it too! I must find my own Red Cloud; my own works of art.

The visit lasted most of the day and was a significant influence in my life. After returning to eastern Nebraska, when I read the book I purchased, a new experience happened to me. Musically, there were only a few influences in my life at this point. Most of us kids played some kind of instrument in grade school when we were young; I played through my freshman year. Another influence was an uncle who played the accordion and fiddle at Grandma's house occasionally. And another influence was my former girlfriend's father; the man I thought was going to become my father-in-law.

His hobby was working with stained glass, and no, he didn't play a thing or even write literature, but he had something he always said. He kind of said it to himself, with a chuckled look. He always said "I should have been a songwriter. I could do that!" This was in reference to some of the repetitive lyrics of '80s pop music his daughters played.

He knew these songwriters made lots of money even though some of the lyrics were very simple. He could do it. He was a banker and did stained-glass as a hobby. But he knew he could do it! This was always interesting to me because he was a smart man, someone worth listening to.

When I read the book, about twenty songs played in my mind.

I could hear every one.

But no one in my family had done this, written a song, to my knowledge. I didn't know a thing about writing songs! Writing a song? A songwriter? Was this the big, great thing headed my way? I didn't know.

So I bought my first guitar and a dial-a-chord chart, and tried to learn guitar. But writing songs is not easily achieved without the personal influence to songwriting. There was no YouTube yet! It's going to take a while to learn this stuff! Maybe I should just work toward an engineering career for now? I asked myself, should I put the project on hold? ■

## FINDING ÁNTONIA

It's been a while but I can see  
Long brown arms threshin' wheat  
Wondering, what it'd be  
If I had only shown my love . . . for

*My Ántonia*

*My good friend from long ago*

*My Ántonia*

*World can learn from what you show*

Throw by throw, all day long  
Casting out, a sea of wheat  
At the end, long day be  
Knowing what the earth will grow . . . for

*My Ántonia*

*My good friend from long ago*

*My Ántonia*

*World can learn from what you show*

It's good to see, results you earn  
Every day, hard at work . . . like

*My Ántonia*

*My good friend from long ago*

*My Ántonia*

*World can learn from what you show*

Zak Zarben, 2012





# Nia's Destiny

Mardra Sikora

The noise of the clamoring crowd stole whatever words my mother whispered on the platform. Although twelve years old, nearly a man, I clung to her like a newborn child and cried. She shoved two food packets into my pockets, turned me around by my shoulders, and said, “Alright Jim. It’s time.”

She guided me forward through the throngs of the others boarding the transport from the Cutter Colony. I crammed myself into the car, still being pushed and pulled, but no longer by my mother’s hands. I don’t know when she let go, only that I stood alone between hundreds of strangers. I wished for the knowledge of what my mother whispered in those last moments, imagining her wisdom would comfort and strengthen me, and without which, I would remain forever frightened and weak.

The first two nights I slept standing. In Cutter Colony I was accustomed to crowds, now I undertook the long journey to the Middle Country to live with my grandmother. Over the years, Mother pointed to the lush, green images, sometimes shown in advertisements on the walls. She spoke of her youth in a land where there was room to move and to breathe. Yet, as people exited the transport along the way, my anxiety filled in the spaces. Where was I headed that humanity dare not continue? The transport passed over and through abandoned cities; shells of skylines dotted the horizon, until there were no more colonies, full or empty, and very few passengers remained.

The trip took several nights. I arrived in Middle Country wearing my only pair of ragged and grimy jeans, weak from hunger and apprehension. I, and a small pack of others descended the platform. I touched my wristtab and a tiny gleam wavered a moment, then pointed me to my destination.

I shuffled along the pocked, uneven path lit by the night sky. Careful to watch my step, in order to avoid a hole that could surely cause a twisted ankle or fall. Yet still impressed at the sheer immensity of the night sky. Taught of both stars and heaven, but never before seeing either with my own eyes, the net of lights caused both wariness and wonder.

In the classroom, I said the prayers taught in school and supplicated gratitude alongside the other children. However, once school ended, I never felt inclined to add to the volumes clamoring into the ether. How could a god, or whoever listened, discriminate my pleas from any others? And certainly, I had seen no evidence of an answered request or reward.

That night I knew I would not pray before this wide-open sky, either. This time because I feared that my whispers wouldn't be lost at all, but rather heard clearly among this still and barren landscape.

When I appeared at Grandmother's door, I was embraced in a desperate and bittersweet grip. Tears ran down her face while she wiped the grime from mine.

"Come in," she said.

# # #

Nia travelled with the pack who arrived the same night as I, yet she seemed to already know much more about our surroundings and how to survive them. She sensed this immediately and though only a few years older, took me into her care. I wouldn't say, however, that she took me into her confidence. She asked far more of me and where I came than she shared about her own journey and past.

Nia's father sat at the most enviable of places, a desk in the corner of the room. He scribbled what, I did not know, plans or pasts. Her sharp-tongued mother resembled a broomstick in bristle, business, and stature, still, I envied Nia for having her parents near her.

"Why did you come away alone?" Nia asked.

"I had no choice. Mother sent me."

"Why? Were you very bad?"

"I don't think so." We sat on a ledge along an abandoned retainer wall.

Nia kicked pebbles of asphalt with her toes, barely but able to reach the ground better than I. Green residue of the painted earth covered the bottom lining of her skirt. She asked me to tell her of the colony.

"Factories fill every space not partitioned for living quarters. Neon signs and screens line the building tops and moving posters cover the alley walls where we line up to receive the gifts of water and food packets. Conveyers move us deep into the ground or into building tops, but the view was the same everywhere, the slate concrete of the interior or gray sky of the exterior cut through with the lights of the ever-moving signs and commands."



“How did you come there?”

“I was born there. My parents were both drafted into Cutter’s Service.”

Nia nodded. “The Cutter Colony supplies many . . .”

“We pledged gratitude for our nourishment, exercise, peace, and our very lives.” Even as the words forced their way from my lips, perhaps from habit, I did not believe it. “There were also radiant towers on the hill, not the brash neon of the colony, but colors that could only be seen occasionally, when the gray lifted from the hill. Trucks full of rewards passed through and out of the colony gates, headed for those hills, I supposed.” Telling Nia of the hills outside of the colony and the precious cargo sent to them, caused my mind to buzz with unallowed questions. Even here, in the desolate Middle Country miles away from the forced pledges of my childhood, I dared not speak those thoughts out loud.

The clouds above appeared to build and crawl one upon the other, stacking into one tower. They darkened around the edges and moved toward us. It was two weeks since I had arrived and I continued to gaze at the endless sky. The clouds were both closing in and yet also reaching out. Beckoned to approach, I started walking west, darting my eyes to each nuance, wondering of this strange urge to run toward it as it lowered, as if the clouds came nearer in order to gather me. Nia also stood but gazed straight up as the atmosphere strangely stilled.

Then, in what felt like a blink, the sky turned green.

“Run, Jim!” Nia screamed and pointed to a tunnel just to our north.

I ran. The thumping of Nia’s boots closed in behind me, clarifying the urgency. She caught me up at the tunnel’s entrance and pushed, I hit the ground and she threw her own body over mine.

In only a moment the roar of wind and debris echoed over and around the tunnel, then a pounding, a thunder of metal to metal as I never imagined.

I closed my eyes from the rushing dust. I couldn’t even think through the bedlam in my head and the screaming. Was there screaming? Was I screaming?

As quick as it came, it stopped. My arm burned from my wrist vibrating, an alarm had been going off for . . . how long? I hit my wrist to the floor, triggering the ack button. *When did the alarm sound*, I tried to figure. Surely not before I was already in the tunnel and the roaring drown everything else out.

Nia’s breathing was now the loudest sound. She rolled off of me and I rolled to my back and stared at the concrete above us. “What was that?” I panted like I had run for miles.

“Pavel’s storm,” she answered.

“What?”

“Death rains from the sky. The drones fly in during the cloud cover and shower bullets . . . to thin the population.”

“How did you know . . . ?”

“I have been warned of the green sky. Foretelling the laser lights before they come through the clouds.”

My mother used to tell me that every moment of true living comes because of sacrifice. Either for another or from another. My heart pounded. Nia's warning and the slate cement above us saved me. In those dark moments of understanding life and mortality, I also realized with dread what I dared not accept before: my mother bartered her own life for mine. She had cut a deal. She explained my rations would always be worth more than my work, and also negotiated to limit her own lifetime requirements. In this way, she arranged for my release to the Middle Country. A place she remembered as green and open. Yet, she would surely die exhausted and hungry, as her sacrifice for me. In that, she chose of her own will, the value of her life. She did not know the land was painted or that the sky rained metal. I marveled and mourned her sacrifice.

My wristtab buzzed again as the sunlight broke through cracks in the clouds. The text read: "Prayers to the families caught in today's disaster in the Middle Country. If you are innocent of gluttony and of use to the land, you should come into the sun to be counted. You have no reason to fear."

Nia also wore a wristtab. It remained still. We crawled from the tunnel and each headed home.

# # #

Tent prisons filled with enemies of the colonies and Pavel's dissenters dotted the countryside. Each compound kept prisoners contained with barbed wire and camouflaged from international patrol cameras.

News agencies described the Middle Country as beautiful but uninhabitable. After all, there were no rations distributed, so obviously, no human could survive.

Grandmother lived in the time before the drought, but not before the warning signs of what the Middle Country was to become. First, they drafted away the healthiest workers, then they starved the earth until it gave little more than gravel. By the time the Pavels began outsourcing food production to a combination of faraway corporations and laboratories, the crop dusters were already repurposed for spraying the land green. Finally, the drought fueled the propaganda machine, furthering the cause for limited rations and clamoring for increased gratitude for the efficient and generous colony leaders.

Grandmother secretly saved stashes of seeds, planning for the day when her children would return, or maybe even when the world started over. Her garden shrunk, commonly scavenged. So, she found hidden and dangerous places to plant instead, attempting to continue cultivating seeds, more fervently than the roots and leaves themselves.

But seeds can only grow when there is still life in both them and the land.

Grandmother told me of her varied garden hiding spots. It's not easy planting secret gardens since life needs both water and light. "Look again, boy!" She begged me as I used a small spade to dig into the hard land, mostly gravel. Even with fewer scavengers these days, those who did wander were more desperate, so we went out at dusk or dawn in order to make a quick retreat into shadows.

"In these times, nearly every morsel is either stolen or lost." She told me, "every bite we find or create, it is never our own without a fight."



# # #

When Nia's father shot himself, the few neighbors praised his courage.

Nia did not. She told me of what some folk had said to her and her brother as she kicked up the green dust along the path, "He believed it selfish to live. I say it's selfish to die!"

"I suppose the truth lies between the two."

"The truth lies," she repeated, "yes."

I wanted to soothe her but couldn't find the right words. I recalled the posters which lined the walls of the colony: "Your moral duty is to lighten the load. Dispose of what you cannot carry." Speculation of undocumented rewards for mercenaries who eliminated the weakest came in whispers among the workers. There was, after all, only so much to divide among us.

Another poster that haunted me showed two men, one clearly weak of body and one clearly strong. "Should your children be denied rations because of those who are unable? Cutter Colony believes in supporting YOU, the strong and worthy." Being thin as a rail and likely to trip over my own words when frightened, I felt starkly alike to the weaker body. On the days I gathered the rations, I pushed past that poster with haste.

# # #

A line of chains clamored along the transport rails, never stopping and never ending. Sometimes we saw the prisoners who were secured to the moving chains. We stayed back when they went by, leaving the mystery of how the attachment functioned unknown. It seemed a hidden cuff, under their skin perhaps. Or by some kind of electric binding. What was certain: the chain never let go. Some prisoners along the line carried tools to mend the tracks; some looked nearly dead from exhaustion and elements. Where along the line the restraints released the body, we didn't know that either.

Grandmother warned, "Don't get near them, the chains can catch you. They bite and wrap. If they grab a hold, into your skin, you'll be pulled along the tracks to the prison camp, in whatever shape you arrive."

I told Nia, "The hill by the tracks, I think grandmother planted there."

"Has she told you?"

"No, she is too afraid for me. But . . . scavengers wouldn't dare dig there and the prisoners can't stop long enough to dig the roots." Nia and I decided to try.

I suspected a spot just over the crest, which received a good dose of sunlight during the first half of the day, yet hidden enough when planting, or digging. A place where one could still hear any activity from the tracks, in order to give time and warning to scoot away before any person, or machine, came over the hill.

Nia and I set out at twilight with small tools hidden in my pockets. Following what we knew of the schedule of the prisoners and the transport lines, although not perfect or regular, our guess was I'd have a few hours to check the ground. Nia stood at the top of the hill as the lookout. I patted the earth and dug into spots that felt . . . real. Softer areas that told of water



coming through the earth and not killed dead from the paint and drought. When my back ached from the bending and crawling, I sat back for a moment and looked west. Nia and I both faced the setting sun. Her skirt blew in the breeze and she stood with her arms crossed. I wondered if this sky looked the same in my grandmother's youth, full of orange and red, lingering over us, across time and into oblivion. I wondered what Nia pondered as she looked straight into the never-ending horizon. After all this time, we were still watchers and tillers, at the mercy of the sky and the earth.

I returned to my task, I inched along on my fours and found another soft place, yielding easily to my small spade. For a moment I heard nothing but my own breathing and felt my blood pulsing life through me when I reached into moist land. For the first time, I felt cool and gritty dirt under my fingernails. I concentrated upon this area until interrupted by Nia's scream.

I bolted up.

"Jim!" She yelled, "The chain!"

It had hold of her skirt, moving slowly but threatening to pull her along. I swear it stretched from the rails and reached out for her legs, crawling to her skin. I pulled out my knife as I rushed to her. I used my right hand to cut through her skirt and my left to push her away from the track. When she fell back, she used her arms and legs to scoot further away, crawling like a backwards insect. I half ran, half fell, after her. The chains rattled along slowly, taking the evidence of our struggle with them.

"Oh, Jim . . ." Nia rasped, "It tangled and I . . . couldn't even move. I couldn't even think." We each panted as we lay there. "It was my destiny to save you once, Jim, for now you have saved me." She said, in that quiet voice saved for moments when she became both older and younger than me, full of wisdom, fear, and wonder.

We heard a transport approach, the machine engine now in the distance soon coming. We ran back to the patch of ground I worked, I grabbed my spade and Nia scooped green dust to cover the real earth I found. We shuffled our feet over the land then ran home with Nia's skirt in shreds and two roots in my pouch.

# # #

The factories of the colonies counted on the primal, animal instinct to stay alive. This allowed for low rations, enough for folk to slog through, but too little to encourage thought or even energy to play or dream. Boredom appeased with a constant, murmuring, clamor and work that allowed just enough sleep to work another day. The Cutters kept the factories running based on the evidence that dying is not as easy as it looks.

They didn't count on hope.

Neither did we.

We didn't dare. ■



# Portraits Inspired by *My Ántonia*

**Lyn Fenwick**



## **Jim**

Jim was only ten years old when he came to Nebraska, and because he narrates his own story, he offers little description of himself. But in the novel's introduction, when his old friend challenges Jim to write about *Ántonia*, she describes Jim's "fresh color and sandy hair and quick-changing blue eyes," and how he "rumpled his hair with a quick, excited gesture, which with him often announces a new determination." In his recounted memory of the night he arrived, he wrote that "I don't think I was homesick," but admitted the confusion of this strange new land. "Between that earth and that sky I felt erased, blotted out. I did not say my prayers that night: here, I felt, what would be."

I represent Jim soon after his arrival, assuming the same sandy hair, blue eyes, and fresh color. But I also wanted to depict the uncertainty he faced.

## **Ántonia**

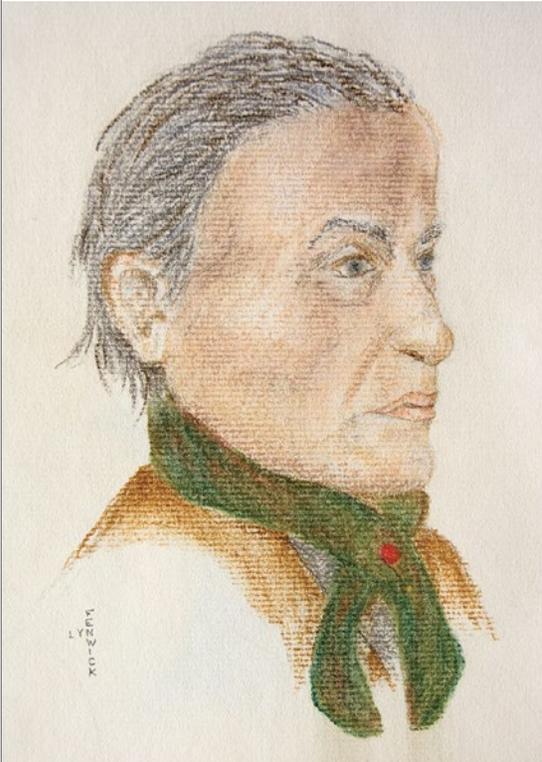
Jim first sees *Ántonia* on the train to Black Hawk, but when the conductor suggests that he approach her, Jim is too shy. Their first real meeting is a Sunday morning when Jim and his Grandmother take food to welcome the Shimerdas to the neighborhood. Jim identifies *Ántonia* as "a girl of fourteen," and although the entire family is introduced, it is *Ántonia*



that impresses Jim. “I remembered what the conductor had said about her eyes. They were big and warm and full of light, like the sun shining on brown pools in the wood. Her skin was brown, too, and in her cheeks she had a glow of rich, dark colour. Her brown hair was curly and wild-looking.”

These details provide a clear image of *Ántonia*, but I did some research about what she might have been wearing. Although she was older than Jim, I only wanted to hint at that age difference and to depict her as a young teenager, very slender, perhaps

from a poor diet. I found a period painting of a much younger Bavarian girl, and I borrowed the idea of a bright-colored scarf tied on the girl’s head in a failed attempt to contain her wildly curly brown hair. It seemed a perfect way to depict *Ántonia*, although older girls in the reference photographs I studied usually covered their heads more completely. I wanted to convey *Ántonia*’s eager curiosity and brave spirit.



### Mr. Shimerda

*Ántonia*’s father is described in great detail when he joins the visitors that Sunday. “He wore no hat, and his thick, iron-grey hair was brushed straight back from his forehead. It was so long that it bushed out behind his ears, and made him look like the old portraits I remembered in Virginia. He was tall and slender, and his thin shoulders stooped. . . .

I noticed how white and well-shaped his own hands were. They looked calm, somehow, and skilled. His eyes were melancholy, and were set back deep under his brow. His face was ruggedly formed, but it looked like ashes—like something from which all the warmth and light had died out. Everything about this old man was in keeping with his dignified manner. He was neatly dressed. Under his coat he wore a knitted grey vest, and instead of a collar, a silk scarf of a dark bronze-green, carefully crossed and held together by a red coral pin.”

Jim provides a clear image of Mr. Shimerda, and I knew how I wanted to picture him. He was poor and disheartened, yet he presented himself in an almost aristocratic way. Although he had found the courage to make a fresh start in America, he was defeated by the language, customs, and dishonesty he encountered. He was becoming a ghost, ash-like. Jim calls him an old man, yet Mr. Shimerda may have been aged by disappointment rather than years, for he had young children. The only bright thing about him is his red coral pin—an important symbol in the depiction of Mr. Shimerda.

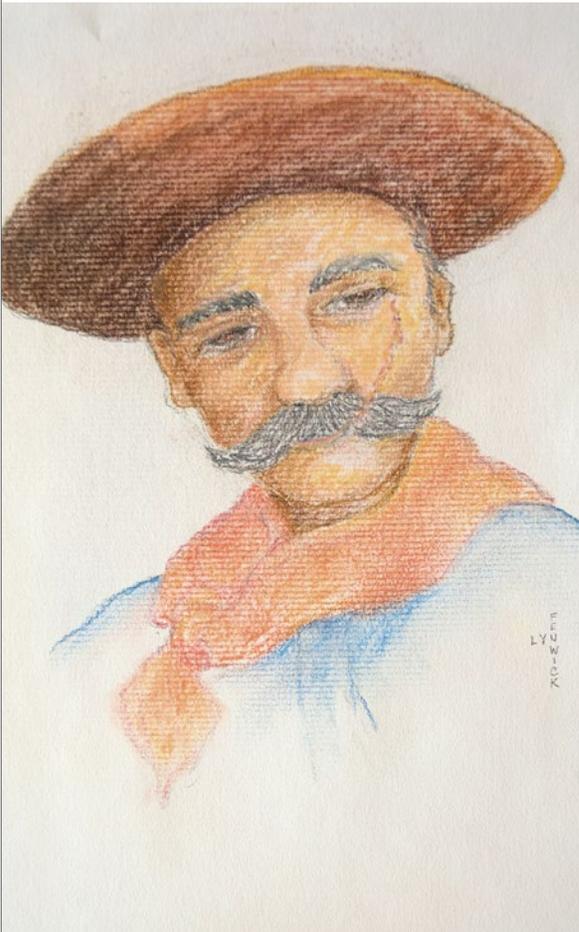


Mr. Shimerda's portrait needed to include the feeling Jim describes of old portraits, the elements of antiquity and death—his melancholy eyes and ashen complexion with all warmth and light gone. But the red coral pin had to be featured too, even if it would stand out harshly in my ghost-like portrait.

Red is symbolic of many things, even contradictory things. It means courage, and Mr. Shimerda had been courageous in bringing his family to a new and strange place. It means longing, and he certainly longed for his disappeared past. It means love, which Jim saw in Mr. Shimerda's affection for *Ántonia*.

But the complicated nature of red can be seen in its depiction of both cupid and the devil; the blood of Christ and Hell. For Mr. Shimerda, the color can also symbolize death and danger. Financial difficulty is symbolized by red—red ink and being in the red. A red rose symbolizes love and romance, but a red rose with thorns symbolizes the cruelty of love. Mr. Shimerda's red coral is mounted on a pin, making it even more readily associated with the thorns of a rose. Red can be associated with dishonesty and untruthfulness, a warning of the deceptions imposed upon Mr. Shimerda in New York and by a fellow countryman, *Krajiek*, when he finally reached Nebraska.

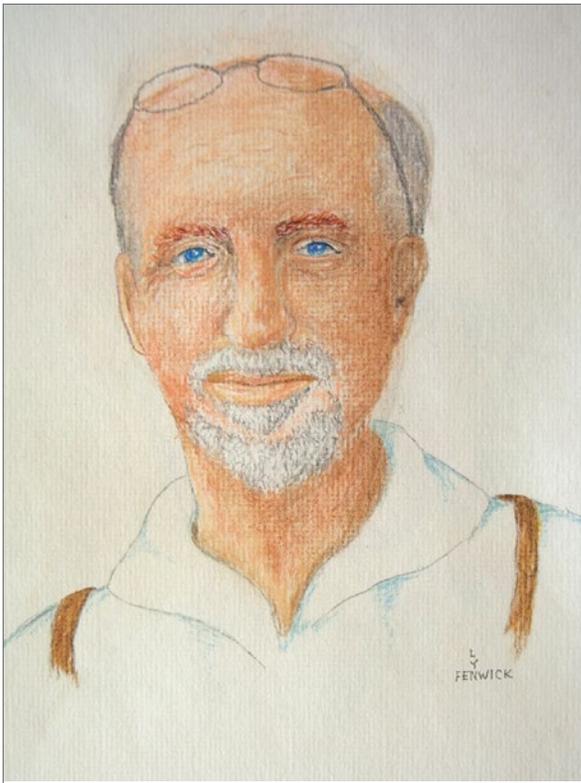
Including the strong color of his coral pin into the otherwise gray portrait of Mr. Shimerda is a challenging task for an artist, but it had to be done.



## Otto Fuchs

Jim gave me many details for Otto, like someone who “might have stepped out of the pages of ‘Jesse James.’ He wore a sombrero hat, with a wide leather band and a bright buckle, and the ends of his mustache were twisted up stiffly, like little horns. He looked lively and ferocious, I thought, and as if he had a history. A long scar ran across one cheek and drew the corner of his mouth up in a sinister curl. The top of his left ear was gone, and his skin was brown as an Indian's. Surely this was the face of a desperado.” I appreciated learning that “he was a rather slight man, quick and wiry, and light on his feet.” His age isn't specified, but his story made me believe he was no longer a young man.

I researched old photographs of cowboys and was surprised to see how popular sombreros were, not always the cowboy hats we picture. There were various styles of sombreros, and the one I chose for Otto did not allow me to include the hat band, but I liked the way it shows off Otto's interesting face. Since old photographs often show some sort of bandana or scarf, I added one for Otto. But the most essential details were his scar, his damaged ear, and his mustache. I gave him the brown skin Jim described (although Otto was Austrian), and added a little gray to his hair.



## Grandfather

Jim described his grandfather in detail—both his appearance and demeanor: “. . . he kissed me and spoke kindly to me, but he was not demonstrative. I felt at once his deliberateness and personal dignity, and was a little in awe of him. The thing one immediately noticed about him was his beautiful, crinkly, snow-white beard. I once heard a missionary say it was like the beard of an Arabian sheik. His bald crown only made it more impressive. Grandfather’s eyes were not at all like those of an old man; they were bright blue, and had a fresh, frosty sparkle. . . . He had a delicate skin, easily roughened by sun and wind. When he was a young man his hair and beard were red; his eyebrows were still coppery.” Later on Jim mentions Grandfather’s “silver-rimmed spectacles.”

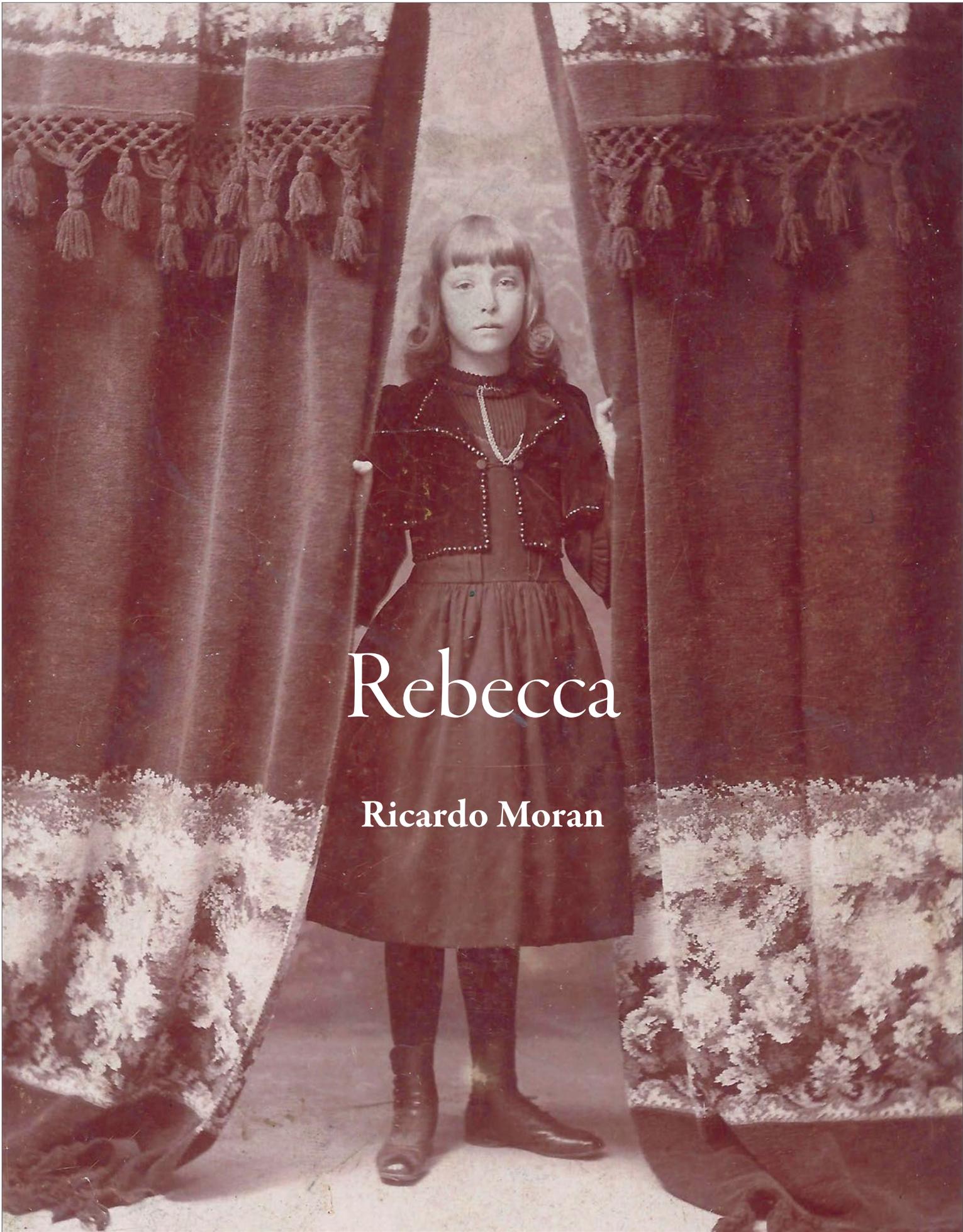
With this wealth of information, I used images of sheiks as my reference for Grandfather, and my husband’s once red hair and sensitive skin were my reference for skin tone and eyebrows. The bright blue eyes were essential, and I researched images of Southern farmers to determine how to dress him. I found they were partial to white shirts, presumably because of the hot climate, and I liked the look of one farmer’s narrow suspenders with his white work shirt. The last detail was the spectacles atop his head, since he only wore them for reading.

## Grandmother

When Jim awakens his first morning on the Nebraska farm, he sees “a tall woman, with wrinkled brown skin and black hair.” She is “spare . . . a little stooped.” When Jim and his grandmother go to the garden, Jim describes her with “a sunbonnet on her head, a grain-sack in her hand,” and armed with “a stout hickory cane, tipped with copper, which hung by a leather thong from her belt.”

I wanted to depict her in a sunbonnet, with “her head thrust forward,” as Jim described—“as if she were looking at something, or listening to something, far away.” The sunbonnet detail told me that she tried to protect her skin, so I chose not to make much of Jim’s reference to her “wrinkled brown skin.” I also assumed that she was not elderly, since she still had black hair. Sunbonnets are not particularly flattering, but pioneer women made it a point to wear one when they worked outside, and most were homemade. I fancied Grandmother’s sunbonnet in a print fabric reminiscent of the era, with a bit of handwork around the edges.





# Rebecca

Ricardo Moran

In the quiet of the warm night, Rebecca had finally found the courage to leave. She stared at the aged reflection in her bedroom mirror, powdering her face to erase the years. The pinup of Dorothy Grable eyeing her. Would she follow through this time? She picked up Sally's old suitcase and crept downstairs.

The train that had once whistled into the town of Woodlow and the trolley that had jostled through the downtown had stopped running years ago. The vaudeville music from the theatre and the conversations of shoppers from the bustling businesses that once ricocheted upstairs into Rebecca's apartment were a distant memory.

Standing on the stoop to her apartment Rebecca looked at the empty brick streets. Her turquoise satin shoes made a sharp cutting sound on the sidewalk. She paused in front of the theatre where her best friend Sally had sung her first concert, the cheers filling the auditorium. Now no one sat there. In the darkness no one celebrated, except for Rebecca. She looked up at the barricaded windows experiencing that same night from long ago.

But Rebecca was determined to leave this time.

She continued beyond the street lamps that marked the end of the business district, heading to the city park. There the cottonwoods stood tall. Rebecca admired their sturdy trunks and strong branches dripping with blossoms, listening to the rustling of leaves and watching the tufts of pollen escaping into the dark sky.

The park sat in silence. It would not reveal its secrets to anyone, not even to Rebecca. Rebecca gently swayed on the swing. After a while she placed her foot on the gravel to stop the motion. The scratching of the earth left a sprinkling of dust on her shoes. She held the cold chains and looked up at the night sky. It was filled with stars, like many jewels stitched on dark cloth. The image reminded her of a dress she saw in a magazine, once when she was a young woman. Only city girls, flappers as they called them back then, wore such garments. After all these years, the thought still made her uneasy and jealous since she knew that some of those girls had been from little towns like hers. That they had escaped long ago and made a new life, a new identity for themselves.

Her mother had warned her that the city was noisy and filthy, and worse, it lacked a heart. Rebecca imagined its swarms of inhabitants moving endlessly in an unbroken pace without any time to visit or to tell secrets. But the city also offered freedom from the prying eyes of a small town, thought Rebecca. There was an allure to staying out all night dancing and drinking, a mass of unfamiliar faces and speaking to unfamiliar men and women in a cacophony of smoke, alcohol, and sweat. The chandelier glass that hung from her apartment floor lamp was a whisper of life in that world. One that was sophisticated. One that brushed up against Sally's world and possibly surrounded it. Sally was always the brave one and as soon as they graduated from high school, she left for Chicago.

"I am terrified of moving away, but I am even more scared of what will happen to me if I stay," Sally had confessed as she folded her clothing and placed it in her suitcase. Rebecca sat in the corner, looking out the window at the trees that stood guard over the street. She didn't tell Sally that she didn't want her to leave. That she wanted them to continue to be best friends taking their walks



on Main Street and having lunch under the trees surrounding the courthouse. She knew that once Sally moved away she would come back a different person. That the city lights of Chicago and its allure of the grand parties would change her forever.

Sally gave her a hug and whispered, "Come with me."

Rebecca pulled away. "I can't. My mother needs me."



It had been ten years since that conversation and now on the day of her mother's funeral, Rebecca sat on the porch of her childhood home on the outskirts of town, ruminating over what had happened, her eyes fixed on the fields of wheat stretching into the horizon. She could not be blamed for her mother's death, could she? When the doctor told her it was a heart attack, he eyed her for a reaction. Rebecca sat still, clutching her hands. "I don't know, doctor. She said to mix her medicine in her food. I thought everything was fine and then she fainted and I called you."

Sally quietly listened. Her black dress fluttered in the wind and her dark eye shadow and sequined handbag made her feel out of place.

Staring into the distance, Sally asked, "Come to Chicago with me?"

Rebecca shook her head. "It will be hard enough moving to an apartment in town, but how can I ever live in a big city?"

Sally linked her fingers together with Rebecca's. Her gaze moved upward and locked onto her profile, the graceful nose, her eyes were beautiful even when they were filled with tears. The cottonwoods rustled as bits of pollen flew into the air and Rebecca looked up, holding onto Sally's hand.

"If only I had the courage to leave, to be glamorous like you, Sally. To just be someone else."

Rebecca glanced down at the trampled summer grasses around her feet. "Do you have gentleman callers now?" Rebecca avoided Sally's gaze as she posed the question.

"Well, from time to time I do. But so will you, Rebecca."

"I'd prefer to call on you, Sally. I could never care for anyone as I do for you."

Sally turned to her. "That's beautiful. You still hold a childlike love between us. I used to feel that way. And you will outgrow it when you move to the city."

"Used to?" Rebecca asked.

"Why, yes. You can't expect for us to live and grow old together. It's just not done."

"But, it's how I feel about you."

"I'm sorry, but I don't feel that way, Rebecca. Not anymore."

That afternoon Sally abandoned her old suitcase and belongings and left Woodlow for the last time. They were memories of a life she no longer recognized. And with her singing career soaring on the club circuit in Chicago, there wasn't a place for someone like Rebecca.



Rebecca grieved over that distant day. Sally's rejection had wounded her. Sometimes she would spend days in bed. Her chest heaving as the sadness gripped and marched across her body. "Why am I like this?" Rebecca would sob, covering her eyes from the sunlight flooding her room. Then in the next moment, her eyes would dart around the room as if someone or something were coming to get her, to take her away to a place much worse than this. Much worse than the sadness.

It seemed that there was nothing remarkable about Rebecca. It hurt every day to walk or talk or think. The overwhelming sorrow paralyzed her to where she couldn't raise her head, her eyes fixed on the ground. To say hello strained her energy and she wished that everything was different. That if she were brave and courageous, the pain would go away. That Sally would love her; that her mother had not died, that she could be someone else, somewhere else.

She grabbed the metal bar on the headboard and grunted as she struggled to sit up. Last year was not this hard, she thought. She turned and stretched her arms toward the floor and tumbled onto its cold wood planks. With her ear on the floorboards she strained to listen. There were times she would visit downstairs with the shopkeeper, Elise, who talked about the latest trends in hat wear. Rebecca made a purchase every few months as a gesture of goodwill and as a desire to keep up with the latest fashions. "I wonder who is visiting Elise today?"

The shop had closed twenty years ago.



"Business has not been good for a couple of years" said Elise as she locked up the store for the last time. Rebecca, wearing a new spring line hat accentuated with blue feathers and mesh visor at a drastically discounted price, stood watching.

"San Francisco has the latest fashions. I intend to make a go of it there." She stopped and looked at Rebecca with her slim figure and her new hat that made her seem out of place in their tiny town. Rebecca didn't know that this would be the last time they would see each other.

"Make sure to go somewhere and show off that hat," admonished Elise. "And I don't mean walking down the street. I mean go up to Lincoln or Omaha. Or go to Chicago. The years are passing you by and you're wasting your life here." The bus pulled in and Elise dragged her suitcase across the street. Taking her seat by the window, she yelled, "Do something with your life, Rebecca!"

Rebecca watched as the bus carried Elise into the distance. Strolling north on Main Street, she paused in front of the library and wondered if she should go in and debut her new hat? Maybe she could sit and read the newspaper and pretend she was in Omaha or even Chicago? Maybe someone would come in for a visit? She took hold of the railing but quickly removed her hand and stepped back, eyeing the limestone monolith with foreboding and unease.



She turned and darted past the high school to the edge of town, where her pace slowed as she trekked the hilly gravel roads. The feathers adorning her new hat quivered in the breeze. Rebecca climbed the gentle hills, watching the prairie grasses move like ocean waves. The only sound came from the crunching noise of the gravel, the soles of her shoes compacting it.

A farmer in a wagon approached and asked if she was okay, if she needed a ride into town.

“No, thank you” she replied. “Just on the way to church.”

He tipped his hat and went on his way, his horses walking at a steady clip.

Rebecca continued for several miles. The rolling hills with their billowing grasses reminded her of the school dances, where Sally’s dress twirled throughout the night. In the distance she could see the tired church, its Sunday best patched and faded. When she reached the building she saw how the overgrown grasses covered the front steps. She waded through them to sit on the uppermost landing.

She searched her handbag and pulled out the monogrammed handkerchief Sally had given her. Sally hadn’t wanted it. It had been a gift from a wealthy gentleman Sally knew in Chicago. He followed her singing career and offered the handkerchief to her one night as a sign of his commitment. Sally accepted the handkerchief, blew her nose in it and was trotted away by a female companion who wanted to introduce her to one of the city’s many playboys. When Rebecca asked if they were to be married, Sally rolled her eyes. “The city is full of men who say they want a commitment but really want to just have a good time. Don’t believe everything you hear, Rebecca.”

Rebecca gently blotted her forehead and cheeks. The warm summer air and the long walk had covered her face with a gentle layer of perspiration. She turned to look at the church. Its walls creaked and its paint was chipped in many places. Wood barricaded the windows that once allowed light to illuminate the dark little chamber. The tall prairie grasses overpowered the church, making it look like it sprung from the fields. Rebecca pushed the wobbly door open and sat in the last pew. The dust made her cough. Small specks of light freckled the floor.

Her mother had attended church every Sunday before she became ill. The country church suited her best where the Bible tended to skew to a more conservative interpretation. Rebecca would accompany her to the service and they would always take their seats in the last pew. There were only ten rows and a scattering of parishioners, but her mother insisted on sitting closest to the door. “We have to avoid the rush, Rebecca,” she would say. Once outside, however, her mother would linger and catch up on the latest news. Did she hear about the people in that wretched book? Or the family who sent their son with a “predisposition” to a mental institution? According to her mother, the scandals of fallen Christians were the best. Tales of out-of-wedlock births and adultery rumors helped keep the coffers a quarter full every Sunday.

Rebecca sat there waiting to show off her new hat to a congregation that would never show, hadn’t shown for several years. She looked down the road to the left and then to the right. The sounds of the horses trotting, the small wagons dotting the landscape never came. “Well, shit,” Rebecca mumbled when the overhead sun signaled it was noon. “Maybe I have

the wrong day.” Rebecca lingered on her walk back to town, wondering why no one could be bothered to be good Christians.

In her apartment she curled up in the chair her mother had once kept on the porch. She pulled an old blanket over her and it ran like a river of cotton that cascaded to the floor. She felt comfort in it, but it also felt like a restraint, a way to feel safe, as if it was convincing her that it’s best to stay in the same place. That her place was here, in this town, watching life pass her by.

Rebecca took a magazine from the end table and placed it on her lap. She slid her hand over the front cover, tracing the image of Clara Bow. She was starring in the new motion picture, *Wings*, with a recently discovered actor, Gary Cooper. Rebecca looked out the window and wondered what it was like to be in a movie, to be worldly and sophisticated. To be held, loved, and adored. What if she could be Clara? What if she could be the nurse volunteering with the Red Cross, helping the troops? That would be a change, wouldn’t it? That would make a difference.

Rebecca never thought she made much of a difference. She worked as a clerk at the town pharmacy and had cared for her mother. She was a good Christian and went to church even though no one else bothered to show up, including the minister. It was unfortunate, thought Rebecca, that not even religious leaders could be counted on to uphold the Sabbath. She had worn her new hat to prove that she was still capable of taking care of herself. She was not what the townsfolk had made her out to be, those whispers as she walked along, the stares from some of the women.



As she sat on that little swing, in that little park, in that little town, Rebecca studied the many stars stitched in the night sky, and remembered it all. The eyeliner accentuated her features and the eye shadow softened her stare, while the blush gave her a youthful innocence. She reached into her sequined handbag and opened a small bottle. With a gentle drink from her mother’s flask, she swallowed the handful of pills.

Clutching Sally’s old suitcase she walked slowly to the train depot, stumbling ever more along the way. When she reached the wood bench on the platform, she applied the lipstick from Sally’s old purse. The color burst forth a deep red like a strawberry sliced open. And it was there that Rebecca sat alone. Every so often she looked to the darkness for signs of the rumbling machine that would take her away. The sadness no longer gripped or marched across her body. And as the drowsiness settled in she closed her eyes, humming the tune of Alice Faye’s song, “You’ll Never Know.” Her breath slowed and softened to a whisper. And she smiled when she heard the train whistle in the distance and opened her eyes a bit to see the headlight approaching. The smell of burning coal growing stronger, the machine rolling forward.

And so Rebecca knew that her destination was near. That this machine would carry her to a new town, to a new place where she could be courageous, where she could be glamorous, where she could be someone else. ■



# Antonia and the Farm Boys

Will Fellows

I first connected with Willa Cather in the early 1980s in the Finger Lakes region of New York. It was a typical midwinter day in that place—a damp, chill stillness under a low ceiling of gray clouds. My partner and I had recently moved to New York from Wisconsin and on this weekend of dull wintry limbo I was casting about for something good to read. My partner pulled from the shelf the paperback of *My Antonia* which he had read in college. He handed it to me, said I should give it a try, I might like it. The book proved to be deeply engaging, moving, inspiring.

Many who are captivated by their first reading of Cather are moved to read more of her literary works. It was a little different for me. After being swept off my feet by *My Antonia* I found myself intrigued by the author, hungry to know more about Cather, to explore the terrain of the life of this artist who was, like Antonia, a strong and decidedly unconventional woman.

This was about thirty-five years ago, so the array of biographies and other published works about Cather was much less extensive than it is now. I eagerly sought out what there was and delighted in the major biographies by Woodress, O'Brien, and Lee as they appeared in the late 1980s. And there was Bohlke's *Willa Cather in Person*, Cather speaking about her life, times, and works. Given the longstanding legal ban on publishing any verbatim text from Cather's letters, Bohlke's volume was a delight for me, a Cather fan with an attraction to autobiographical oral history.

There's one piece in Bohlke's book which I found especially compelling. Cather was in her late forties when she was the focus of an interview-based profile published in the *Omaha World-Herald* in 1921. In this piece, "How Willa Cather Found Herself," the author reflects on her years in Boston and New York City, her many trips back to Nebraska through those years, and what compelled her to write her first novel set in Nebraska.

There I was on the Atlantic coast among dear and helpful friends and surrounded by the great masters and teachers with all their tradition of learning and culture,

and yet I was always being pulled back into Nebraska. Whenever I crossed the Missouri river coming into Nebraska the very smell of the soil tore me to pieces. I could not decide which was the real and which the fake "me." I almost decided to settle down on a quarter section of land and let my writing go. My deepest affection was not for the other people and the other places I had been writing about. I loved the country where I had been a kid, where they still called me "Willie" Cather.

I knew every farm, every tree, every field in the region around my home, and they all called out to me. . . . I had searched for books telling about the beauty of the country I loved, its romance, and heroism and strength and courage of its people that had been plowed into the very furrows of its soil, and I did not find them. And so I wrote *O Pioneers!*.

About five years into my relationship with Cather, the seed of my own writing career was planted. It was 1987, I was living in Madison, Wisconsin, and George Stambolian, editor of the *Men on Men* series of gay fiction anthologies, was in town to give a talk on the state of gay literature in the U.S. During the Q&A period I lamented how seldom rural experience was represented in gay literature, and asked Stambolian why he thought this was so. I have no memory of his response, but that April evening represented a significant beginning for me.

I grew up milking cows and baling hay on the family farm in Wisconsin. By the time I was born, the farm had been home to five generations of my dad's family. I enjoyed a secure, happy childhood and developed a strong sense of connection and continuity in that place. Then I went off to college, figured out that I was gay, was soon venturing into my first relationship, and my life became decidedly more urban. Though my years in cities have been variously fulfilling, it has sometimes been a struggle to integrate the sensibilities and values of my rural heritage and those of my urban, gay identity.





from Karl. Then he said, “What about something that’s more closely related to your own life experience?” I laughed and said sarcastically, “You mean, like, a book about gay men who grew up on farms?” He smiled, didn’t laugh, and replied, “Well, what about that?” Very soon I began the interview-based research that led to my first book, *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*.

Before Cather “hit the home pasture” with *O Pioneers!*, she had written short stories related to pioneer life in Nebraska. According to her early biographer E. K. Brown’s introduction to *Willa Cather: A Critical Biography* (1953, completed by Leon Edel), her response to her homelands in these works was one of “almost unmitigated hate and fear. . . . In her early stories . . . she rendered what was hard and bleak and cruel in the state’s way of life—the collapse, for instance, of minds and bodies in the struggle with the land, the pressure of convention in the village, the imperviousness to art. . . .” Her reaction was said to be in “opposition to forces that seemed to her monstrously strong and a threat to her differentness, to the core of what she felt herself to be. To look at Nebraska otherwise, to contemplate it with some objectivity and appreciation, Willa Cather needed to go away for a long time and to achieve success.”

As freedom and distance changed Cather’s perspective on her Nebraska homeland, these conditions were important for many of the men whose stories appear in *Farm Boys*. This is not to say that all of these men were inclined, as Cather apparently was, to look back on their childhoods objectively and with appreciation. Their recollections and assessments range from the sentimental to the severe. But, like Cather, many of these men brought to their life stories the unique perspective of individuals who had gone from being misfits in their rural communities to being misfits in the more urban communities they had come to call home.

Being introduced to *My Ántonia* when I was a young man was a great gift, the effects of which continue to enrich my life. Getting to know Cather helped me find my way to my own home pasture—a place where I could, with some confidence, “write the truth and let them take it or leave it.” ■

Sarah Orne Jewett had a profound influence on Cather’s creative sensibilities when Cather was in her mid-thirties. Jewett said Cather should “write it as it is, don’t try to make it like this or that. You can’t do it in anybody else’s way—you will have to make a way of your own. If the way happens to be new, don’t let that frighten you. . . . Write the truth, and let them take it or leave it” (as recorded in Bohlke’s *Willa Cather in Person*).

I too was in my mid-thirties when my come-to-Jewett moment arrived. Having lunch at a Madison restaurant with my friend Karl Wolter—a gay man a generation older than I—I told him that I was thinking about venturing into a book-length writing project, a work of nonfiction centered on some aspect of gay history. I mentioned a few possible topics, none of which elicited much enthusiasm

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# Dude's Life

**Abbie Harlow**

My favorite thing about Dude was his reliability. Each afternoon I retrieved him from his pasture and every time he willingly obliged. He didn't come when I called or prance with excitement, but, when I approached the fence, he lifted his head from the tall grass and watched me. Some days he walked toward me slowly, still chewing his last bite. On other days, I had to walk out and meet him where he stood patiently. He never attempted to evade me, and, in his wise age, he knew better than to play inevitably futile games of chase. No, Dude was reliable. Whenever I was ready to start the day he was there, ready and waiting. I owe that pony everything. Without Dude, my time with *Ántonia* would have been severely limited.

Maybe his interest in work could be traced to his elusive pedigree. The man that sold Dude to Otto Fuchs claimed the horse was part Arabian. While the oldest breed in the world, it was an unlikely mix to find in nineteenth century Nebraska. Based off Dude's short size, just over fourteen hands high, qualifying him as a pony by only an inch, and by his deep red coat, he was more likely a Morgan mixed with a spattering of other breeds. Dude was essentially a mongrel but that never stopped the pony from proving himself. His pedigree never mattered. I didn't care where he came from because he made his way to me and he was crucial to my time in Nebraska and to my relationship with *Ántonia*.

My first autumn in the prairie, Otto introduced me to the pony. He taught me how to ride, how to lasso, and how to understand Dude as a tool but also as a living creature with a mind and a personality. Otto worked with the pony before he presented Dude to me to ensure that the animal would not display any negative quirks with a ten-year-old on his back. After this trial, Otto proclaimed that Dude was the "perfect gentleman." The pony would not buck, bite, or bolt. His good behavior is partially due to his previous life that Otto explained to me. The fifteen-year-old had spent his peak work years in the West pulling stagecoaches. He spent time in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming. While he still knew how to drive, he seemed far happier with young children riding him across sloping grass hills. Otto gave me an idea of what Dude's previous life may have been like, but I know very little about his world.

Just as Otto had described when he first introduced me to Dude, the pony was a perfect gentleman. Wise and confident from years of experience, more than willing to placate a few young children if it meant a grassy pasture at night and no more stagecoaches or Wyoming blizzards. Nevertheless, Dude had a mind of his own. Whether it was fearlessness or simple stupidity, Dude would walk headfirst toward any coyotes or predatory noise, yet I never felt afraid on his back. While Dude might not have been as skittish as most horses, he was aware of true dangers and I knew he wouldn't let anything terrible happen. I could tell he saw the dangers before him. When the tall grass ahead of us rustled or a howl echoed down the hill, Dude would pause, perk his ears up, and scan the horizon. He wouldn't completely freeze or try to run away, he would just lift his head high as if he wanted to appear taller. He kept his senses focused for any danger, but he never let fear chase him away. That is, unless it involved rattlesnakes. Dude might have been brave, but he wasn't stupid.



For much of that first year, I spent every day with Dude. While foremost he was my transportation, he was also my companion. Twice a week Dude and I travelled six miles to the post office to deliver and collect the mail. I served as the house messenger, riding Dude for miles to our neighbors to deliver messages, borrow goods, return tools, or just watch the wildflowers pass beside Dude's hooves. Few fences blocked our way across the prairie that first year. We could travel in any direction we wanted free of any sign of other people and completely alone for miles. On Dude's back, him and I saw the same long grassy horizon turn from green to yellow to white and back again. We looked up at the same branches of each scarce tree and down at the plentiful prairie dog holes. We watched the same Nebraska country through very different eyes.

At fifteen, Dude was getting old when he first came to me, but he was as hardy as ponies come. He survived the same harsh winters, blazing summers, and times of scarce food as we did. He never had trouble with lameness or colic or other illnesses that often sent working horses to an early grave. Dude remained with the Widow Steavens at my grandparents' homestead when we moved into town, and, while I was reminded of him each time our country neighbors visited our new home and rested their horses in our barn, my life had changed with our move. Unlike my first three years in Nebraska, I spent more of my days inside either at school or attending to guests. When I travelled, I walked or rode in a wagon. When I left Black Hawk for Lincoln, Dude was still at the homestead with the Widow Steavens and her brother. He spent his later years peacefully wandering the pasture, eating the abundant grass, rolling in mud, and lazily approaching the fence whenever someone walked up. The old pony was twenty-three by then. His overworked joints were no longer up for the strain of the running errands across miles of packed dirt and I was too preoccupied with my future to consider my childhood companion.

I'm not sure exactly when Dude died. When I visited my grandparents after graduating from Lincoln I rode out to the old homestead. Much had changed along the Black Hawk Road from town, pastures were filled in with wooden houses, fences, and trees. I could still recognize the landscape, however, and I felt at home until I reached the homestead. Something looked wrong at the house. I waited silently on the muddy road contemplating whether the place had truly changed or if my vision of this previous life was all that had altered. I'm ashamed to admit it took me nearly a full hour to realize what was missing. Looking toward the horizon of light green and yellow dotted with the blue and purple of spring wildflowers I realized there was no red in the field. No calm pony quietly chewing and watching me. Dude hadn't made it through the last winter, Mrs. Steavens informed me. He wasn't sick but one cold night he laid down and never stood back up.

The loss of Dude brought me back to that first unparalleled autumn when the empty prairie lay before me and I had a lifetime to explore it. In my memory, the days blur together into scenes of Dude's pounding hooves on packed dirt, the feel of the wind running over his head onto my face and Antonia's firm grip on my shirt to avoid falling as the pony charged toward the distant horizon. I didn't realize it then, but those two were the best friends I could have ever found. They made the life before me seem brighter than I could have imagined. The young girl that made me feel like I could go and succeed anywhere I wanted and the little red pony that could take me there. ■

A photograph of a sunset over a field. The sun is a bright orange-red disk on the horizon, with a gradient of colors from orange to blue in the sky. The foreground is a dark, grassy field.

# A Sunset Observed

A solemn hush  
hovers in the heavens,  
and in the west a scarlet sky  
ushers in the night.

Gathering day to his breast,  
the flaming sun  
sinks into tomorrow,  
leaving behind an afterglow  
of promise.

**JoAnna O'Keefe**



# Indelible Moments

## Michelle Oppenheimer

When I think of Willa Cather's *My Ántonia*, images come to mind full blown, like old familiar photographs: Jim Burden peering over the side of the wagon for his first glimpse of the prairie; Ántonia breathless, exclaiming, "Maybe I be the kind of girl you like better; now I come to town"; reading *My Ántonia* for the first time and later walking the streets of Red Cloud nearly a century after its publication; the moments the book itself informed and enriched my experience.

*My Ántonia* has long teased my mind, having first read it in a PhD program in American Civilization at Brown University in the 1970s, having taught it for years as a high school English teacher at an alternative high school in the San Francisco Bay Area, but most poignantly, after a 4,500-mile road trip in celebration of my graduation from the Bennington Writing Seminars with an MFA in Writing and Literature in 2013.

I remember that first fall in graduate school in Providence in 1978, curled up in a colleague's dark third-floor Waterman Street apartment, our fingers marking passages as we read through the long afternoon, looking up and asking how she responded to the Russians Peter and Pavel "who had fed the bride to the wolves." As horrifying as that passage is, I could not imagine skipping it, as she recommended!

As the semester wrapped up, I found myself thinking about the landscape of *My Ántonia*. I had by then lived in five states on the Eastern Seaboard but was unfamiliar with the Great Plains states. In January of 1979, I wanted to understand Jim Burden and Ántonia Shimerda's experience. So began my misadventure of driving cross country, Providence, Rhode Island, to Eugene, Oregon, during Wintersession, needing to get away from the cloistered halls of the university. My travelling companion was a man who had been raised in western Canada, on the northern

Great Plains in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, with whom I was in love at the time. We found ourselves caught in a blizzard outside Davenport, Iowa, huddled for days in a crowded truck stop, alternately reading while downing too many cups of coffee in the overheated diner or camped out in his cramped truck's cab. Later, his truck broke down in Shelby, Iowa, a town that boasted little more than a grain silo and a motel with a cozy restaurant. For a week I read Willa Cather's prairie novels, understanding the harsh winter of the prairie states in a newly visceral way, donning layers of winter clothing to walk the short distance to the diner, to walk across the snow-laden fields, out and back, for a change of venue, and ultimately, flying back to Providence from Omaha, after a kindly Iowan offered to drive me the forty miles to the airport.

As a high school English teacher, I teach *My Ántonia* each year, and never fail to find myself taken by Willa Cather's love of the land and its inhabitants. It is Jim Burden's passionate and curious nature and his attachment to Ántonia that resonate. Whether we read it as a tale of the passion of a young boy for his equally fervent immigrant neighbor and

their shared pasts, a nostalgic return to an earlier, perhaps idyllic time, or the unrequited love of Willa Cather for Anna Sadilek, my students and I engage in excited discussions about the epigraph: "*Optima dies . . . prima fugit*," the nature of friendship, love, the immigrant experience in America, memory, and Willa Cather's remarkable gift for capturing it all on the page.

In 2013, in celebration of the completion of my most recent degree, my life companion and I took three weeks off and embarked on a 4,500-mile road trip. We left Silicon Valley and headed to our first destination: St. Paul Lutheran Church in Elk Point, South Dakota, to attend the celebration of the anniversary of the church Michael's family was instrumental in

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founding; a marker on the site of the church reads: “Site of the First Norwegian Church in the Dakota Territory 1868–1938.” From there we traveled to the town where Michael had spent his adolescence. York, Nebraska is, like many Nebraska towns, a town of homes with spacious front lawns, family ties, local gossip, and brick streets.

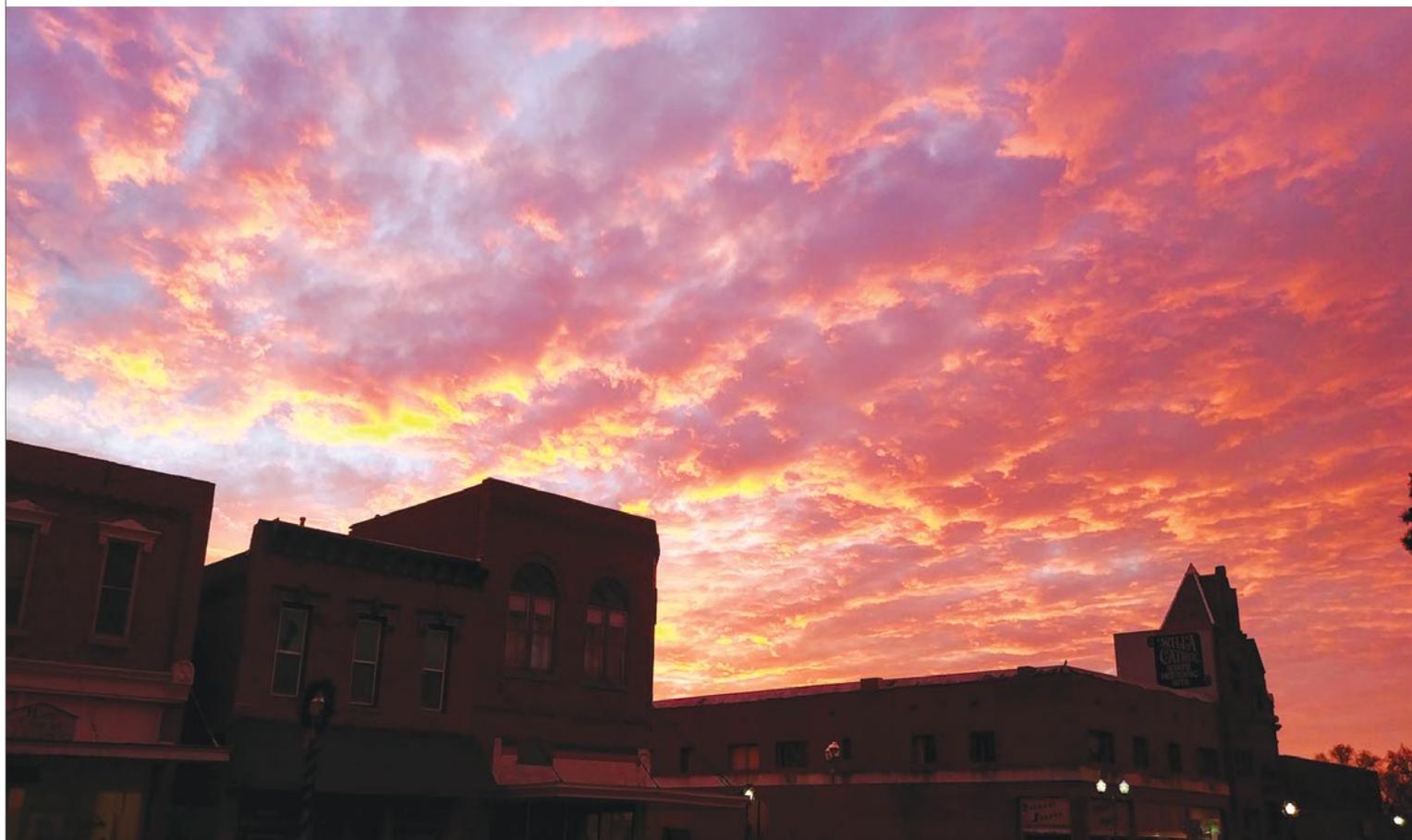
Red Cloud beckoned, being only a few hours’ drive away and I longed to walk the streets Willa Cather (and Jim Burden and the hired girls) had walked. Leaving York, we drove due south along U.S. 81 and west along U.S. 136, arriving at the town of Red Cloud in the early afternoon. We toured Willa Cather’s childhood home, lingering to look at the carefully laid dining room table, the spatterware wash basins, the embroidered friendship quilt. The docent was kind enough to let me lean into the attic room Willa once claimed for her own and photograph the wallpaper she described in *The Song of the Lark*: “Thea and Tillie papered the room, walls and ceiling in the same paper, small red and brown roses on a yellowish ground.”

But the highlight of the trip and my experience of *My Antonia* was still to come. I love reading, the feel of a book in my hands, its heft, the texture of the pages, the author’s words painting pictures in my mind’s eye. Michael is, however, more visual, more aural,

than I. As we were leaving what was then called the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial and Educational Foundation Bookstore and Art Gallery, he suggested I choose an audio book to accompany us on our road trip. And, of course, I chose my favorite of Willa Cather’s novels, *My Antonia*.

Now, when I teach the novel, I share my experience with my students, showing them the photographs I took of our trip, those I took as Michael drove, leaning into the windshield, out the passenger window, breathing the scent of sun-warmed earth. The now-changed landscape flowed past as I recalled Jim Burden’s first experience of the prairie, aware that this stunning vista was no longer merely “the material out of which countries are made,” but a well-populated land, rich in its past, aware of its inviting present and alive to future possibilities.

I know my photographs cannot do justice to that indelible moment of driving through Nebraska to the tune of Willa Cather’s words. It reinforced my appreciation of her artistry, the gift she offers us in capturing a time and place we can only revisit through her eyes, like “the talking tree of the fairy tale; legends and stories nestled like birds in its branches.” I was at that moment entirely happy, experiencing the Nebraska landscape, heading west after having trod at last in Willa Cather’s footsteps. ■



*Sunrise in Red Cloud.*



# The Fallow Heart

I tucked my heart into the prairie  
and left it all alone.

Beneath a crooked cowpath  
I am never far from home.

The cows sold off one windy day,  
my battered quilt unraveled.  
Piece by piece of withered wheat  
no shattered stalks to graze.

A quiet spot off Highway 2,  
they slip below the earth  
corrosive and bent in a mechanical slumber.  
My farm lay down to die.

My heart, I will not let it rust  
or grind my homesick bones to dust.  
The wind will blow away the night  
and the meadowlark will sing in flight.

**Rachel Oakman**



## Contributors to this Issue

**G. M. (Gina) Barlean** is a proud member of the Nebraska Writers Guild, which was founded in 1925 and included among its charter members such inspirational Nebraska authors as Bess Streeter Aldrich, Mari Sandoz, Louise Pound, Dorothy Canfield Fisher, John G. Neihardt, and Willa Cather. G. M. has independently published many works of fiction, all set, at least in part, in Nebraska.

**Becky Boesen** is a Nebraska-based playwright and lyricist whose work includes *Snowcatcher* (2017) and *Puddin' and the Grumble* (2016), both commissioned to shed light on issues pertaining to underserved children in the heartland. She frequently collaborates with composer David von Kampen. Their musical *Catherland*, from which her poem in this issue is excerpted, is a tribute to the works of Willa Cather. After a staged reading at the Red Cloud Opera House, the work was presented in select Nebraska towns as part of the Lied Center for Performing Arts' "Arts Across Nebraska" program as well as at the Shelterbelt Theatre in Omaha and the TADA Theatre in Lincoln.

**J. E. Brenton** is a writer and reporter and great grandchild of Lawrence Brenton, a long-time journalist who once worked alongside Willa Cather at the *Home Monthly* in Pittsburgh.

**K. E. Butler** is a livestock producer and teacher in Carroll County, Maryland. She and her husband have four grown children. For fun she drives a team of heritage breed oxen.

**Will Fellows**, a longtime member of the Willa Cather Foundation, lives in Milwaukee with his husband, Bronze Quinton. He is the author of three books, from University of Wisconsin Press, exploring gay men's lives: *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*; *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture*; and *Gay Bar: The Fabulous, True Story of a Daring Woman and Her Boys in the 1950s*.

**Lyn Fenwick** received her JD from Baylor University School of Law and has been a practicing attorney, schoolteacher, writer, and artist. She is currently working on a manuscript titled "Prairie Bachelor: The Story of a Homesteader and the Populist Movement." As an artist and lover of the visual arts, she has been a juried member of the Southeastern Pastel Society and the Portrait Society of Atlanta, as well as a docent at the Dallas Museum of Art. Lyn's love of Willa Cather began at the age of eleven, when she first read *My Antonia*.

**Max Frazier** is a retired senior military faculty/associate professor from the U.S. Air Force Academy, now pursuing her MFA in writing from the Bennington Writing Seminars low-residency program. When not writing she teaches graduate courses online with Southern New Hampshire University and volunteers in Rocky Mountain National Park. She is a member of the Board of Governors of the Willa Cather Foundation.

**Laura Trigg Gilbert** is an artist and maker of magical realities in collaborative storytelling, strategic branding, typography, calligraphy, and quirky doodles. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where she works in the music industry as a designer and paralegal.

**Charmion Gustke**, assistant professor of English at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, has published numerous essays on Cather and is currently working on a larger project examining Cather's fiction in relation to the rise of the American class system. As an advocate for sustainable food practices and environmental justice, she also explores a range of ecological concerns. Her latest essay, "Stop the Machine: Civil Disobedience and Maria Alyokhina's *Riot Days*," appears in the Winter 2018 edition of the *Concord Saunterer*.

**Nathaniel Lee Hansen** is the author of the poetry collection *Your Twenty-First Century Prayer Life* (Cascade Books, 2018) and the poetry chapbook *Four Seasons West of the 95th Meridian* (Spoon River Poetry Press, 2014). His short-story collection, *Measuring Time and Other Stories*, will be published in August 2019 by Wiseblood Books.

**Abbie Harlow** is a PhD student in history at Arizona State University and a native Nebraskan. She studies the historical use of burros, mules, and horses in the American West.

**Beth Hiatt**. As a farm girl from northeast Nebraska, Beth worked the land and cared for livestock alongside her family. Chores played a bigger role in shaping her future than she realized at the time. Now as a retired conservationist and wife, mother, and grandmother, she is homing in on what is important: relationships and conveying what she learned.

**Kaydence Johnson** is a fifteen-year-old ninth grader at Payson High School in Payson, Arizona. She first read *My Antonia* in her eighth grade English class. She was inspired to portray her own version of *Antonia* as a rebellious teenager of this day and age.

**Cassia Kite** was born in Auburn, Nebraska and currently lives in Sarasota, Florida. She earned a BFA in painting and sculpture and a BS in art education from Northwest Missouri State University, and an MEd in curriculum and instruction from the University of Florida. She has collaboratively produced works for chamber ensemble and dancers based on her hand-stitched works and been featured as a composer and visual artist in music festivals, museums and universities. Her work premiered at KANEKO in Omaha, Nebraska in July 2017.

**Nadine Lavagnino** is a midwestern woman, now living in the big city of Chicago, who always has a book in her hand. "No Nooks or Kindles for me!"

**Reid Mitchell** is a New Orleanian teaching in China. More specifically he is a scholar in Jiangsu Province's 100 Foreign Talents Program, and professor of English at Yancheng Teachers University. He is also Consulting Editor of *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*. His poems have appeared in *Cha*, *Asia Literary Review* and elsewhere, and his collection *Sell Your Bones* is just out from PalmArt Press of Berlin. Back in the 20th century, he published the novel *A Man Under Authority*.

**Ricardo Moran** is a fiction writer and a big fan of Willa Cather. Life on the U.S.–Mexico border and the landscapes of Nebraska provide the inspiration for many of his stories. He lives in San Diego with his husband.

**Rachel Oakman** grew up on a farm near Maywood, Nebraska and loved everything about life on the farm. "I especially enjoy watching my children explore the wonders of the prairie."

**JoAnna O'Keefe** has been writing poetry for forty years. She is the author of *Embraced: Love Poems*, *Morning's Light: Poems from my Journal*, the inspirational book *Come to the Garden: An Invitation to Serenity*, and others. JoAnna lives in Omaha, Nebraska with her husband Jack.

**Michelle Oppenheimer** grew up in New York City and currently lives in the San Francisco Bay Area where she teaches English at an independent high school. She holds an MFA from the Bennington Writing Seminars and an MA in American Studies from Brown University. Her work has appeared in the *Bennington Review*, *Enizagam*, *Four Chambers*, and on *The Manifest-Station*.

**Charles Peek**. Followers of things Cather know Chuck Peek for his years on the Cather Foundation Board, homilies at Spring Conferences, papers at International Seminars, and the occasional poems that have graced some of our significant occasions. *The Review* is honored to have another poem for the coda of our hundredth anniversary of *My Antonia* celebration.

**Kaylee Penry** was born and raised in Papillion, Nebraska. She is a student at the University of Nebraska Omaha.

**Todd Richardson** is an associate professor in the Goodrich Scholarship Program at the University of Nebraska Omaha, which provides full tuition scholarships to high-achieving students with financial need. His essays and articles have appeared in a variety of publications, including the *Journal of American Folklore* and *The Writer's Chronicle*. He is a co-author of *Implied Nowhere: Absence in Folklore Studies*, forthcoming from University of Mississippi Press.

**Timothy Schaffert** is Director of Creative Writing and Susan J. Rosowski Associate Professor of English at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. His novels include *The Swan Gondola* (Riverhead/Penguin), an Oprah.com Book of the Week.

**Cathy Schen** is a Boston-area psychiatrist and assistant professor at Harvard Medical School. She is interested in the sense of place and published "Going Back to Denmark: Landscape and Memory" in *Pangyrus*. She has published in



## Contributors to this Issue *continued*

the *Harvard Review of Psychiatry*, *Psychodynamic Psychiatry*, and *Psychiatric Times* on topics including race in supervision, the ethics of writing and videotaping patients, transferring psychotherapy patients, the restorative aspects of farming, and mothers who leave their children behind.

**Mardra Sikora** is an author and speaker from Omaha, Nebraska who uses both fiction and nonfiction to advocate for and with her adult son, Marcus. Author of "Essay: Arguing Eugenics" and *The Future and Other Twists*, she is co-author of *The Parent's Guide to Down Syndrome*. Her work has appeared in numerous anthologies and websites including the *Huffington Post* and can be found online at mardrasikora.com.

**Terese Svoboda** is a Guggenheim recipient and author of eighteen books of fiction, poetry, memoir and biography, two chapbooks, and a book of translations from the Nuer. *Great American Desert*, a book of stories, has just been published by Mad Creek Books, an imprint of Ohio State University Press.

**Gail Wade** is a middle school teacher in Payson, Arizona. His poems have been published in various journals over the years.

**Elizabeth Wells** earned her PhD in English in December 2018 from Louisiana State University. She is currently a Fisher Center Fellow and writing instructor at Hobart and William Smith Colleges in Geneva, New York, where she researches representations of disability in novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

**Antonia Welsch** is an aspiring writer living in Minneapolis, Minnesota with her husband and young son. She has written about a variety of topics including her journey to and through motherhood. Her work has appeared most recently in *Motherly* and *Ferine Magazine*. Find more at iamantonia.com.

**Zak Zarben** grew up on a farm near Columbus, Nebraska among eight kids. He considers himself a middle-middle child, sandwiched between two brothers, one a year older and one a year younger. A songwriter and painter and poet and writer and inventor and engineer, he is the author of a memoir titled *Trees Grow*. Zak has a bachelor's degree from Tennessee Tech University.

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# Willa Cather REVIEW

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Ashley Olson, Executive Director

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The *Willa Cather Review* welcomes scholarly essays, notes, news items, and letters. Scholarly essays should generally not exceed 5,000 words, although longer essays may be considered; they should be submitted in Microsoft Word as email attachments and should follow current MLA guidelines as articulated in the *MLA Handbook*.

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## Letter from the Executive Director

Ashley Olson

Willa Cather is said to have recalled to her lifelong friend Carrie Miner Sherwood that she felt she had made a real contribution to American letters with *My Ántonia*—that it was the best thing she had done. Whether or not Cather truly considered the novel her masterpiece is a matter of debate, but readers’ love and appreciation for *My Ántonia* was fully evident last year as we celebrated its publication centenary. Through exhibits, performances, conversation (and even a marathon reading!), we were fortunate to connect with thousands of enthusiastic readers—some who had only recently discovered the novel and others who come back to it time and time again.

A culmination of the celebration occurred recently, as we partnered with Lincoln’s Lied Center and its Arts Across Nebraska program for a statewide tour of Illusion Theater’s stage adaptation of *My Ántonia*. The production traveled across Nebraska, with stops in Lincoln, Kearney, Scottsbluff, and Red Cloud before returning to Minneapolis. Student matinees and evening productions were patronized by thousands and a collaboration with the University of Nebraska–Lincoln provided

an anniversary edition of the novel to those in attendance. In essence, *Ántonia* was in high demand.

It’s safe to say that *Ántonia*’s ongoing influence is on full display like never before within this issue. In 1937, Cather wrote to her former publisher, Ferris Greenslet, of Houghton Mifflin, to respond to his inquiry about introducing a newly illustrated edition of *My Ántonia*. Cather writes, “Why can’t we let *Ántonia* alone? She has gone her own way quietly and with some dignity, and neither you nor I have reason to complain of her behavior. She wasn’t played up in the first place, and surely a coming-out party, after twenty years, would be a little funny. I think it would be all wrong to dress her up and push her.”

Sincere apologies to Willa Cather for spending the last year “pushing” *My Ántonia*. In our defense, she didn’t need dressing up for the party. The novel itself is powerful—a product of its time that has stood the test of time. *My Ántonia* is a book that speaks to people of all ages and walks of life—one that touches the soul and inspires creativity. As we conclude the festivities commemorating the novel’s publication centenary, I’d offer a final call to action. Consider ways that you could share Cather’s work with those around you. Pass along a copy of the novel to a friend or colleague, read it with your book club, or introduce it to your students. They’ll be grateful you did.



## Letter from the President

Marion A. Arneson

Have you ever experienced something so memorable that you thought to yourself, “How could it get any better than this?” That’s how the members of the Willa Cather Foundation, including myself, feel about recent events and the exciting outlook for the future of Willa Cather’s legacy.

Early this year, approximately eight thousand Cather-related items were returned “back home” through deaccession of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection from History Nebraska. Our National Willa Cather Center now holds the largest collection of Cather artifacts in the world. The transfer also includes six structures: Willa Cather’s Childhood Home, the *Ántonia* (Pavelka) Farmstead, Farmers and Merchants Bank, Grace Episcopal Church, St. Juliana Falconieri Catholic Church, and the Burlington Depot. These properties—along with other local Cather sites—comprise the largest single collection of buildings devoted to an American author. You’re invited to join us May 30–June 1, 2019 at our Spring Conference in Red Cloud for a special homecoming celebration and the opportunity to view a selection of these new holdings.

The 2019 International Willa Cather Seminar, June 17–21, 2019, returns to Cather’s first home in Frederick County, Virginia, where her family had settled in the 1730s. Hosted at Shenandoah University in Winchester, the seminar hopes to unsettle our perceptions of Cather through attention to the early influences, differences, and dislocations that marked Cather’s life and works. There is something for everyone at the seminar, for scholars and non-scholars alike, including tours of area Cather sites, the Museum of the Shenandoah Valley to view Cather exhibit and quilts, the National Museum of African American History and Culture and the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

The Willa Cather Foundation recognizes the importance of preserving and protecting Willa Cather’s legacy. Now that the State of Nebraska has transferred these collections and properties back to us, it is our responsibility to preserve and restore them for study and enjoyment. To help us address the complex needs of these expansive projects, we hope you’ll consider answering our call by making a multi-year pledge or joining our Cather Legacy Society by arranging a planned gift.

As I enter the second year of my presidency with the Willa Cather Foundation, I am both proud and passionate about the momentum that continues within the National Willa Cather Center, the Red Cloud community, and the enthusiastic support from members, visitors, and Cather enthusiasts. The best is yet to come!



# Welcome Home!

A significant event that occurred recently was History Nebraska's deaccession of the Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Collection to the National Willa Cather Center. Consisting of approximately eight thousand archival pieces and museum artifacts, much of the collection is made up of items that were donated by Cather family members and acquaintances in our early years and later gifted to the State of Nebraska with six historic properties, which have also recently been returned to Willa Cather Foundation ownership.

To satisfy your curiosity about what you might find in the WCPM Collection, we'll mention some of the earliest items donated that were highlighted in initial issues of the *Willa Cather Review* (known as the *Willa Cather Pioneer Memorial Newsletter* at the time). These donations included Willa Cather's high school diploma and other oddities such as the Cather family candle mold and leather cuffs belonging to Willa Cather's cousin, Kyd Clutter. Additional gems include about two hundred letters written by Cather to friends and family and approximately fifteen hundred photographs of Cather family members, early Red Cloud, and the Cather sites. Several of these notable objects are shown on these pages.

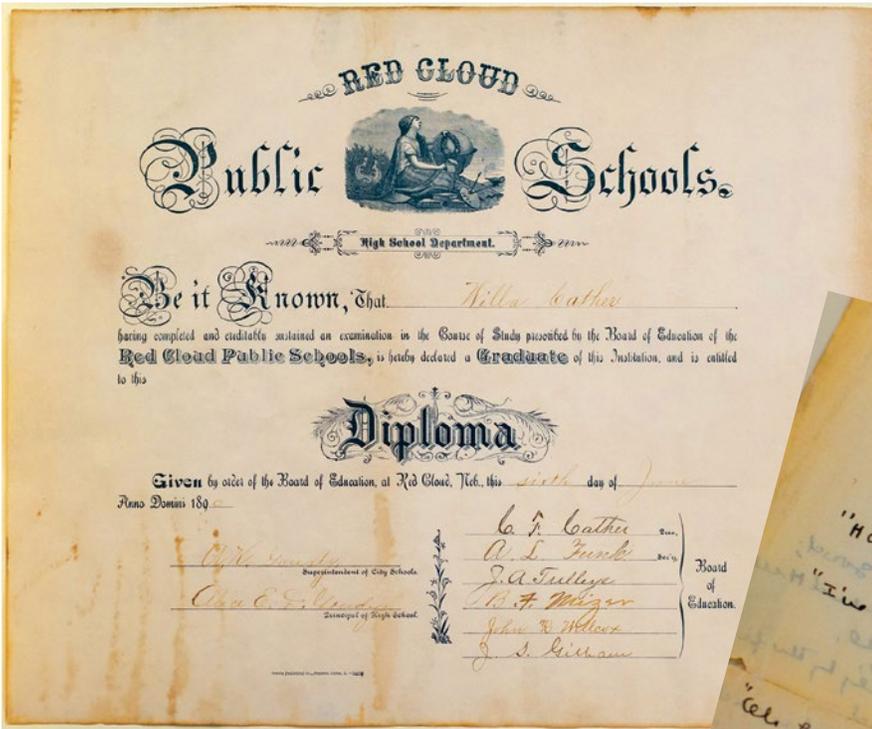
The creation of a dedicated archive and museum space at the National Willa Cather Center alongside the growth and development of the Willa Cather Foundation has made it possible for us to once again own and preserve the WCPM collection and the Willa Cather historic sites. In subsequent issues, we'll share additional treasures from the collection and our aspirations for restoration of sites like Willa Cather's Childhood Home and the Pavelka Farmstead.

—Ashley Olson



Willa Cather's iconic "Hiawatha dress," dating to her Virginia childhood. Cather wore this dress in a portrait photograph taken in Washington, D.C. in 1882.

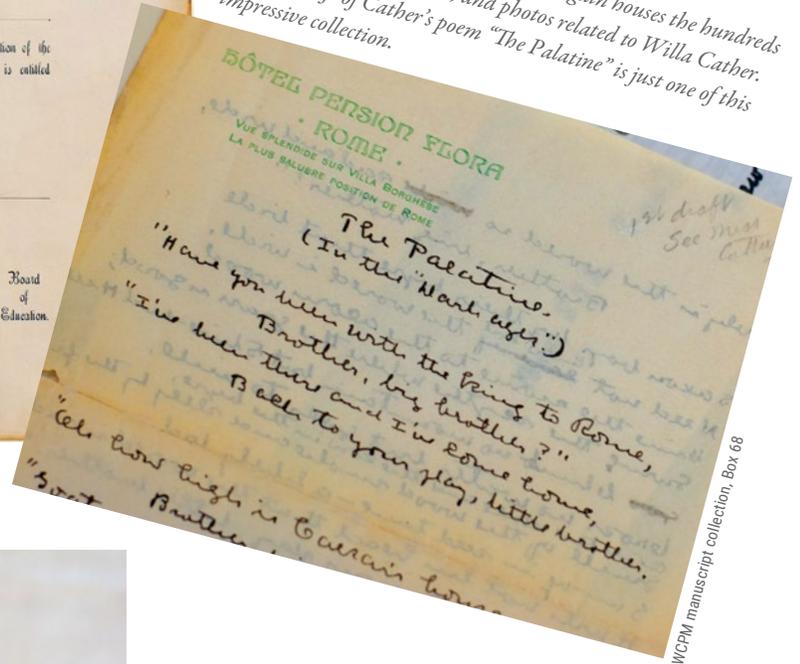




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Willa Cather's high school diploma, awarded June 6, 1890.

The National Willa Cather Center once again houses the hundreds of letters, manuscripts, notes, and photos related to Willa Cather. This first draft of Cather's poem "The Palatine" is just one of this impressive collection.

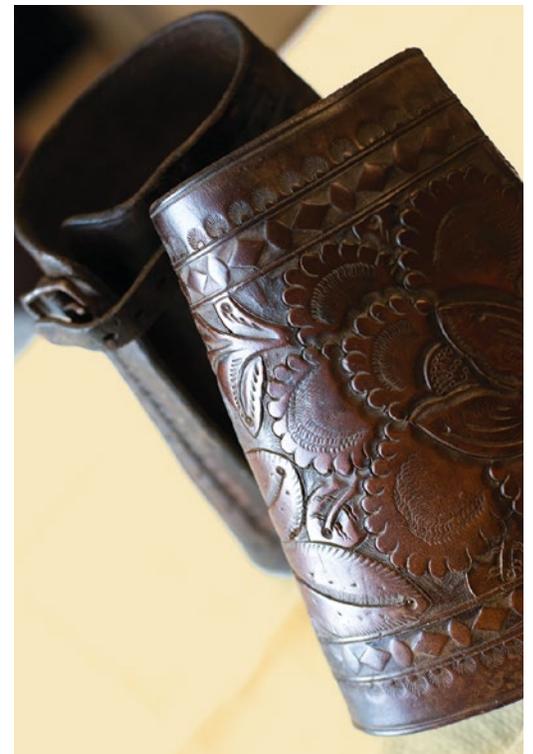


WCPM manuscript collection, Box 68



OBJ-5-3560-160

An elaborately embroidered silk purse carried by Willa Cather's good friend Evelene (or Evelina, and later Evelyn) Brodstone, who would become a highly successful international business executive. Upon her 1924 marriage to William Vestey, first Baron Vestey, she became Lady Vestey.



OBJ-4-3560-559

The beautiful tooled leather wrist cuffs of Kyd Clutter, Willa Cather's first cousin.

The collections and archives at the National Willa Cather Center make up a large and growing body of artifacts and manuscripts related to the life and work and times of Willa Cather. We actively seek new donations of materials relating to Cather, her family, her literature and her literary prototypes, and other items that shed light on the period in which she lived and worked. To inquire about donating materials or to make an appointment to research the collections, please contact archivist Tracy Tucker at [ttucker@willacather.org](mailto:ttucker@willacather.org) or 402-746-2653.

The Willa Pioneer Memorial Collection Comes Home to Red Cloud.

← See inside for the story.



OBJ-4-3560-1209

### *Bittersweet* by Elizabeth Honor Dolan

Dolan, well known for her *Spirit of the Prairie* mural in the Nebraska State Capitol Law Library and her murals in Morrill Hall on the University of Nebraska–Lincoln campus, was a widely praised artist, noted particularly for her frescoes. She is widely represented in public and private collections in Nebraska, particularly Lincoln. This is one of six Dolan canvases donated to the Willa Cather Foundation in 1958.

