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Joanne Jacobson

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Review · *Joanne Jacobson*

During the Reign of the Queen of Persia. Joan Chase. New York: Harper and Row, 1983. *Leaving the Land.* Douglas Unger. New York: Harper and Row, 1984. *Pastorale.* Susan Engberg. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982.

Throughout the twentieth century the idea of an insular, unchanging Midwest has served a changing America outside the region. The proliferation of Grant Wood's extraordinarily well known *American Gothic* in cartoons and advertisements—caricatures of a caricature in which the figures' earnest, direct stare epitomizes their (but not Wood's) innocence of modern irony—suggests the popularity of an idea of the Midwest as static and plain. While nineteenth-century American literature used the frontier West to dramatize a changing culture's shifting centers of authority, twentieth-century American writers have used the agricultural Midwest to fix two alternative visions of resistance to change. Writers in the tradition of Willa Cather have turned toward the rural Midwest, the embodiment of stability, fertility and coherence, as a timeless refuge from an urban industrial America. Writers in revolt from the village, on the other hand, have located in the same unchanging Midwest a source of suffocation and paralysis in an inescapably changing world. Over the past seventy years the idea of an unself-conscious "Midwest" has come to be isolated symbolically in self-conscious response to cultural transition.

Three very recent pieces of fiction, all first novels or collections of stories, inherit and attempt to transform our idea of the Midwest. A pattern emerges in all three. Each book draws on both the literary traditions which precede it: each acknowledges the traditional notion of a Midwest which is insular, centered around family and land; and each, in turn, challenges that mythic Midwest by exposing its beleaguered defenses against time. But all three refuse to isolate "the Midwest" symbolically. All three refuse to use the Midwest either to celebrate or to reject changelessness. Instead, they probe more subtly than their predecessors the plain survival of life and of feeling which both change and changelessness set in motion within the region. What makes all three books powerful is their achievement of fragile kinds of equilibrium which a conceptualized "Midwest" never could provide.

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Joan Chase's 1983 novel *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* opens in a private, protected Midwestern territory to which we retreat in narrowing circles: first to a rural county in northern Ohio; then to one of its "small settlements that repose on the edge of nowhere"; finally to a family farm just outside the city limits, "the very center of the world." But immediately this story of "plain people, whose faces reflected the timeless, ordered certainty of their innocence" is interrupted by time and experience. Both directly challenge the symbolic mythology of a Midwest of stability with a Midwest of vulnerability. Cather built *My Antonia* around the asexual safety of fertility, and Chase builds her novel around a circle of five sisters and their mother whose stability is buttressed by the frustrations of husbands and fathers who remain outside it. But Gram Krauss' granddaughter Celia's arrival at puberty quickly sets the first section of *During the Reign of the Queen of Persia* on anxious edge, bringing to the surface an entire household's unsatisfied hungers. Aunt Grace's slow, premature death by cancer occupies the center of the novel, inflicting its irredeemable horror on the whole family. Helplessly they endure her agony, humiliation and accusations—"How can you ask me to live like this, cut up and stinking?"—as the disease violates the protective boundaries of her life: "At last, when Aunt May succeeded in feeding a few bites to her, a vile black substance rose out of her, and after that, no one coaxed her to eat." And at the end of the novel, Gram, "the Queen of Persia," openly challenges the myth of the enduring, nurturing rural matriarch: expressly against her daughters' wishes she sells off the family farm to an outsider who will develop it into a shopping center, and she buys a tract house. Raw, autonomous,

> She drove with the authority of her right to drive on the future Krauss Drive. . . . At the end of the parking lot, facing the house, she leaned forward and with two fingers grasping the end of her nose, blew it and expertly flicked the residue into the weeds of the ditch.

During the Reign of the Queen of Persia is, then, a harsh book. It exposes the insufficiency of the mythologized defenses—fertility and family—which "the Midwest" has offered against the real pressures of time. But if Chase refuses to be gentle, she has a subtle, moving appreciation for the

ways in which people survive their own vulnerability. Instability calls forth from her characters a set of resources by which they manage to achieve a fragile stability. In one scene, the dying Aunt Grace labors excitedly over the diversion of a Chinese dinner until her husband accidentally knocks her loaded plate to the floor. With the pretense of domestic ease suddenly stripped away, "She just collapses into a heap amidst the mess and starts to heave in an odd retching despair." Nothing will erase that exposed pain, but when her sisters move in around her, "circling around each other in weaving patterns, almost a formal dance figure," pain ceases to be its own unbalanced world and a tenuous equilibrium is reestablished. Among these five sisters and their daughters, a truce with Aunt Grace's suffering evolves into a sense of complicity. They cannot make her well, but they make her illness an intimate part of their lives: "We hunched against her cries, but we were there to listen." And if her autonomy protects Gram from Grace's pain, it also makes her strong enough to let that pain touch her. She refuses to give up her nightly bingo game to stay home with her daughters and wait for Grace's laboratory results; but when she returns to them with the tacky candy dish she won, she feels ready to open herself up to their circle: "Gram kept stroking Anne's arm. The tears running from her eyes immediately filled the crevices of her ancient face the way rain first puddles clay seams." This is an enormously credible and satisfying book, because its characters live so delicately balanced between wariness and responsiveness. That fragile, hungry equilibrium makes the pleasure they offer achingly sharp: "And Aunt Grace had said, 'If you only knew the wonder of it, you wouldn't waste a single instant.'"

Like Chase, Douglas Unger directly challenges the myth of a timeless Midwest protected by its unassailable fertility. Both parts of his novel *Leaving the Land* (1984) open with images of a South Dakota town giving in to the surrounding wildness that it once tamed: at the beginning it is literally going to seed in a stifling plague of "the Canadian thistle and of the milkweed and dogbane [that] filled the air like an invasion of white parachutes"; twenty years later, after the breakdown of the local turkey farming industry, scavenging coyotes roam the nearly deserted streets after dark. Pressures from outside, World War II and a changing national economy, dramatize the vulnerability of a Midwest isolated by the same

limited repertoire of resources which once protected it from change. This is a book about emptying out, about failure to replenish. *Leaving the Land* is punctuated by images of vulnerable animals coming to graphically hard ends, as the stability of the Midwestern life cycle gives way to the threat of death: "Marge's pet hen exploded into a cloud of blood and feathers in the old threshing machine"; an epidemic of salmonella "made turkeys suddenly drop their necks to the ground, their bodies listing drunkenly as they struggled to walk while dragging their beaks alongside them or between their legs." The narrator's father finds his pet Belgian hares butchered in the back yard, each one's "head swaying in the soft breeze as did all their heads, bare red cords left of their throats." Furious farmers trying to asphyxiate the turkeys for which they cannot get a decent market price bungle the job—"When they opened the truck, there were dozens of turkeys still alive in there, flopping around, crawling over themselves . . ." —and they are forced to burn them alive with diesel fuel.

But this is also a story of survival. At the center of the novel is Marge Hogan, daughter of a turkey farmer, wife of the attorney for the turkey processing plant, mother of a son, lover of a man she meets at the roulette table in the Elks Club where she works briefly. Against her brothers' war deaths, her father's failing farm, her failed marriage, the town's desertion, her lover's violence, her son's departure, she holds on, eventually presiding over the local cafe like a matriarch: "Marge kept much of what was left of this town alive. The town came to her for what they needed." In part Marge survives by holding herself back: though she dominates the novel, Unger metes out access to her feelings sparingly; her terms of survival remain private. Yet her relations with the men who surround her are deeply felt, sometimes fierce. With her father, her husband, her son and her lover, as well as with the reader, Marge remains silently poised between passion and loneliness, between giving herself and withholding. Like Sherwood Anderson, Unger is frustrated by the emotional claustrophobia of small Midwestern towns beached by changes outside them; but Marge Hogan's singular toughness gives her struggle both to survive and to satisfy her passion a flat, wrenching power that the knot of repressed figures in Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* never claims. Like Chase, Unger seeks a surviving balance which he acknowledges as elusive. Marge Hogan dramatizes the driving power of tension between promise and acceptance, desire and fear.

In the novel's final scene, Marge drags her visiting son in a Christmas Eve blizzard to her father's farm, to hand down to him ceremoniously the patrimony that she has remained in the dying town to claim. They become stranded in the rotting farmhouse without telephone or electricity, their truck turned helplessly into an icy ditch. The emptiness of her gift and of the lonely sacrifice she has had to make for it is matched by Marge's determined passion to offer her son all she has to give. If her son knows that he has to leave because what she offers him is insufficient, he is also held by the inheritance which that farm marks, by its challenge to locate some sort of sufficiency:

> . . . my own grandfather [moved] across half a continent in a Model T Ford that stuck in reverse gear on the journey so he had to back up the last two hundred miles. Then he found the house we were in, a seldom used line station for the railroad that he put on log rollers and hitched to the piece of dry prairie he could call his own. It was the knowledge of his generation that if at first you don't succeed in life, you can always learn to plow. I thought, *There must be other secrets now and I don't know them.*

It is also those "secrets" of will, the will to survive and to achieve an equilibrium between self and world, between motion and stasis, between protection and risk, which Susan Engberg's characters seek in *Pastorale* (1983). Virtually every story in the collection begins with a loss which transforms a Midwest protected by time into a Midwest shaken by time's passage. Divorces, separations, deaths of children, of parents, of husbands loom over the first pages of each story. But once people's lives are thrown off balance, each of these stories evolves into an effort to re-establish equilibrium. In the title story, for example, an Iowa farm couple's ten-year-old daughter Hannah has recently died of a brain tumor. Husband, wife and two remaining children settle into a routine which is silent around their uncertainty, around the mother Catherine's sense that "within and without the world seems constructed of motion and loss." Like Chases's Gram Krauss, Catherine turns to an outsider, her husband's apprentice, for release from the emotional knot of her family and pours out her grief in the cushioning darkness of a summer blackout. Limp with her pain and her helplessness against the "headache no mother's hand

could touch," she finally admits to him the depth of the fear with which the entire family has been paralyzed, the unanswerable questions which Hannah's death has raised:

> And then she realizes that it is herself she is talking about, grieving for: the inability of her hands to help her child, the weakness of her mind to understand what is now happening, the confusions of her heart. Her voice continues. She doesn't know what is coming next, she simply doesn't know, and she is asking herself, will she be able to live it?

In uncovering that pain she also uncovers for herself the possibility of feeling pleasure again, of being touched by a world which still might hurt her. Sitting beneath an orange tree in her back yard she feels delivered, though not entirely recovered, from death:

> . . . she felt almost like a child, and what was more, she was gradually understanding that her own lost child was being returned to her, not as she in her suffering had dreamt of the reunion, but simply as she herself was moving to the embrace.

Like Chase and Unger, Engberg's most powerful quality is her sense of balance. Equilibrium is precariously achieved and tenuously maintained in these stories. The strongest of them are, in fact, about discovering and appreciating the fineness of that balance. In "Lambs of God" another Midwestern woman, Helene, struggles against time's pressure, against her husband Leonard's insistence on going "sixty miles an hour through Iowa farm land which at no other time of day, at no other time of year would look exactly this way," against her own steady aging, against her daughter's first menstrual period: "Too fast." Without warning important things, matters of life and death, just go wrong. Her young daughter surprises herself by casually dropping two kittens down an empty cistern. Helene explodes at Leonard's inattention to their little boy, who is throwing sticks into a bonfire: "'What am I to think when you do something like this?' She felt only the weariness of her life." Yet Helene responds with more than weariness to these strains, coming slowly and quietly to realize how much pleasure she takes in her family. Engberg reaches this potentially trite conclusion freshly because her story remains exquisitely

balanced between the ordinary events of a farm morning and a woman's responsiveness to their extraordinary qualities, between Helene's sense of herself as burdened and her sense of herself as "alert . . . above the ordinary run of women," between fatigue and energy, loss and recovery: "The great duty was to take a stand, to accept the terrible burdens, to survive the imperfections." Engberg resists either making the ordinary glow heroically or letting it wear her characters down. One finishes "Lambs of God" feeling moved by the familiar, because Engberg acknowledges both the risk and the reward of responsiveness to it. In the end it is their quiet, self-conscious struggle to make that peace that restores to Engberg's characters, Helene, Catherine and others, their sense of being alive:

> She closed her eyes and stood with the sun on her face. She would have liked to stand so still that the parts of her life came home to her in a single luminosity; she would have liked for the sun to burn into her until she had loosened to the bone, made ready, as once she had been to the feel of the touch of hands.

More than Chase or Unger, Engberg sometimes directs readers symbolically in heavy, unlikely ways: the narrator who struggles in "In the Land of Plenty" to pull her life together after the breakup of her marriage works at "the New Life Food Cooperative"; the protagonist working to establish a harmonious relationship with his two daughters during a separation from his wife, in "Trio," is a political scientist working, unfortunately I think, on "emerging forms of European cooperation." These notes ring a bit false because generally Engberg's pitch is so perfect. Though they mar the collection in minor ways, their strain also serves as a reminder of the compelling fineness which moves most of these stories beyond a symbolic conceptualization of a "Midwest" seen from a distance, into a Midwest whose daily strains are intimately experienced and whose equilibrium is hard won.

The openness of the struggle for both stability and feeling that these books carry on in the Midwest speaks for a new willingness to confront there both time's toll and time's possibilities. In important ways, also, these changes mark the coming to maturity of a well established literary investment in the Midwest as a testing ground for humane survival in a changing world.