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CATHER’S LAST THREE STORIES
A TESTAMENT OF LIFE AND ENDURANCE

Marilyn Arnold

Near the end of her career—and her life—in the conclusion to the story “Before Breakfast,” Willa Cather described the “first amphibious frog-toad” who, when he “found his water-hole dried up behind him,” undauntedly “jumped out to hop along till he could find another” and in doing so, “started on a long hop.” At first glance, this little parable might appear to be a misplaced curiosity in a story by a midwesterner about a frazzled businessman seeking refuge on an island off the North Atlantic sea coast. Closer scrutiny reveals it to be essential to the meaning of the story and crucial to the meaning of Cather’s work. This “first amphibious frog-toad” is a survivor; he finds a way to live in spite of changed circumstances and environmental opposition. The emphatic concluding position of this frog in Cather’s next to last story is significant. More than that, all three stories in the posthumous collection, The Old Beauty and Others (1948), reinforce this emphasis on adaptability and survival.

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The stories in the Old Beauty collection could not have been written in Cather’s early or middle career. They are the product of many years of struggle between the will to face life straight on and the wish to escape from life and the painful changes brought inevitably by the passing of time. Cather felt deeply that life is infinitely precious and yet infinitely difficult. She seems always to have placed a high premium on life—and for a time, life on any terms, at any cost. One need only remember how an artist like Thea Kronborg (The Song of the Lark) strove for it, or how characters like Clara Vavrika (“The Bohemian Girl”), Marie Shabata (O Pioneers!), and Marian Forrester (A Lost Lady) were willing to sacrifice almost anything to their need to feel alive. Cather’s sympathy with this desire for life and with the ache that accompanies a diminishing of life runs long and deep, from some very early stories through Sapphira and the Slave Girl and the last stories.

But at the same time, with A Lost Lady (1923) Cather’s expression of her feeling toward life began to take on a new dimension. For example, even though Marian Forrester and Marie Shabata are both adulterers, they can hardly be judged on the same moral grounds.
Marie falls because she is young and terribly in love; the older Marian consciously chooses to be unfaithful. Marian is not only a woman who pulses with life, who must have it, but also one who must and will survive. Marie lacks that kind of toughness. More and more in Cather’s later work, to live is less to vibrate with energy and desire than to endure, no matter what befalls one. Cather never lost her admiration for youth and the fire of life that seems to motivate it, as the late book *Lucy Gayheart* (1935) attests, but as her own perspective matured, she coupled that admiration with an increased regard for the capacity to absorb the shock of change without breaking, to look ahead as well as behind. She seemed increasingly to admire the survivor, and the theme of endurance, of survival, is central to her last three stories.

David Stouck argues that in Cather’s last four books there is evidence that she mellowed and became more concerned with the importance of human relationships than she had been earlier. In these last works there is even a suggestion that she may have felt she erred in sacrificing so much on the altar of art. A further sign of possible reevaluation as Cather grew older is her increased veneration for the survivor—and her scarcely veiled scorn for the non-survivor in the *Old Beauty* collection. Cather seems to have concluded that it is possible to lose youthful verve without losing appreciation for youth, and that people could develop qualities of adaptability and endurance as an antidote against the changes that rob them of youth and beauty. Cather had written about a great many survivors and nonsurvivors before the 1920s—her stories and novels are full of those who adapt and survive and those who do not. Generally, in the stories, if not always in the novels, she seems to like the survivors better, but she herself does not appear emotionally involved with the question of survival in the early stories. She seems simply to project an intellectual approval for flexibility and hardihood.

In *A Lost Lady*, however, Cather makes a clear statement about survival. She does not want Marian Forrester to break under the strain of being caught between two eras. She wants her to adjust and go on living. Cather reaffirms this position in *The Professor’s House*, where in the end Godfrey St. Peter takes the survivor, Augusta, as his model and faces the future with determination, if not joy. He must and will adapt to a difficult world. These novels are an important step in the evolution of thought and feeling that ultimately produced Cather’s last three stories.

That evolution began perhaps as early as 1898 with a clever little story called “The Way of the World,” a story about a miniature Eve who deserts her hapless Adam in favor of the more resourceful and successful snake in the garden, the New Boy in town. The evolution continued through a series of stories about people who languish in the face of change, or who are destroyed because they cannot face change, or who seek refuge in the past, or who take up life and go on. Mary Eliza in “The Way of the World,” as Cather’s first full-fledged, willful survivor, is certainly a prefiguration of Marian Forrester. But Cather’s line of evolution is not a steady, unbroken movement in a single direction; her work nearly always asserts a double thrust. Although she begins with a nodding approval of the spirit of survival in “The Way of the World” and ends with a celebration of it in “Before Breakfast,” the last story in *The Old Beauty and Others*, along the way occurs a good deal of reversal—probably because Cather herself often wished she could turn her back on some disturbing aspects of contemporary life.

We see in Cather’s work the two sides of her inclination, the desire to escape from what was painful in the present (and a certain sympathy with characters who do that) and a growing genuine admiration for the spirit of survival. What is different about her handling of these two impulses in the *Old Beauty* stories is that in one story, “The Old Beauty,” she openly dislikes her nostalgic major character, and in another, “Before Breakfast,” she moves beyond survival as stoic acceptance to an affirmative portrayal of survival as rebirth and renewal of
life and faith. In “The Old Beauty,” she has almost no regard—pity, yes, but not regard—for her title character, who is unable to cope with the changes in the world and retreats into the past. More than that, Cather very nearly treats her with contempt. By way of comparison, her dislike of Harriet Westfield, a worshiper of the past in the much earlier story “Eleanor’s House,” is veiled and subtle, a distant, intellectual distaste rather than an emotional disgust. By the time she wrote the Old Beauty stories, Cather’s long-standing commitment to life and its preciousness is affirmed with seasoned, calculated, and yet feeling strokes, through negative illustration in “The Old Beauty” and positive illustration in “Before Breakfast.” The third story in The Old Beauty and Others, “The Best Years,” strikes a middle note, projecting the warmth of family life, a stoic acceptance of change and loss, and regret for life’s permutations.

Readers have often assumed a devolution rather than an evolution in Cather’s attitude about the value of life and the possibilities for living meaningfully. Her emotional and physical withdrawal from the world is legendary, and she is seen as issuing her final indictment against modernity in “The Old Beauty.” “The Best Years” is sometimes viewed as a sugary little nostalgia trip, and “Before Breakfast” is largely ignored. I suggest, however, that the Old Beauty collection is not a final sign of Cather’s surrender to nostalgia and her wish for death, but rather positive evidence of Cather’s continuing battle against those inclinations in herself. Far from indicating Cather’s supposed defeat, the stories actually constitute a victory for her, going beyond the flexibility imposed by necessity upon Marian Forrester, beyond the grim acquiescence of Godfrey St. Peter. They turn the corner and say that to deny life is wrong and to be a survivor is blessed.

Written in 1936, though not published until it appeared in The Old Beauty and Others in 1948, “The Old Beauty” is a classic story of a character totally unable to adapt to an altered world. Her survival into old age is a matter of chance rather than choice. Gabrielle Longstreet’s single exercise of will is to retreat into a past that is congenial to a woman of her nature. She is probably the most pathetic character Cather ever drew, and some readers, assuming that Gabrielle speaks for Cather, have erroneously deemed Cather pathetic.

The story is set in France, and Gabrielle is accompanied by two persons, one repelled (as she is) by anything modern, the other not. Henry Seabury, a chivalric expatriate American out of Gabrielle’s past, becomes her protector in the present but prefers to remember her and the world as they once were. On the other hand, Cherry Beamish, the aging beauty’s companion of several years, is just the opposite. Although she values the past, she still loves life and young people and modern ways.

While returning from an outing, the three of them are involved in a minor automobile accident with two American tourists, brassy young women in soiled knickers who call each other by nicknames. The clash with modernity is too much for the Old Beauty, and she succumbs during the night. Gabrielle is clearly an antilife force, hating the young and worshiping what is dead in the past. The story is full of death and living death; the very atmosphere sags with it. Gabrielle Longstreet has none of the qualities Cather admired in her survivors, and she uses Gabrielle as a striking example of negativism, escapism, and needless surrender. The story is framed with her death, and that death is given symbolic significance: it is the death not simply of an individual, but of a whole way of thinking and of viewing the world. In the story’s opening pages, Seabury is contemplating Gabrielle’s death and wondering whom he should notify since most of her admirers are dead. In the end, the reader is forced to contemplate the Old Beauty’s body and to watch her coffin as it is loaded on a railroad car. Her body appears in death to be “regal” and “victorious” at last (p. 70), having achieved the only state she would have deemed worthwhile. Cherry’s comment that now the Old Beauty is at last with her “own kind” (p. 71) has a double meaning, for Gabrielle’s own kind
are and have always been the dead or nearly dead.

As an aging woman, the Old Beauty actually resembles a corpse. She is “stern, gaunt-cheeked,” and has “a yellowing complexion” (p. 9). But even as a young woman she is almost painstakingly described as the very antithesis of the young women who embrace life in so many of Cather’s works—Marie Shabata, Clara Vavrika, Thea Kronborg, Nelly Deane, Lucy Gayheart. Her association has never been with the young and alive but with the old, whose lives are essentially over. The beautiful young Gabrielle surrounded herself with throngs of aged men who thrilled her with stories of their valorous pasts. When she is old, Gabrielle carries about with her the pictures of these men and displays them in her hotel rooms, still enjoying their hovering presence. Even a woman of death, she confesses, “My friends mean more to me now than when they were alive” (p. 32).

Cather is careful to note that the life force was always low in Gabrielle and that her beauty was all she had to recommend her. She was not “witty or especially clever,” and furthermore, “she showed no great zest for this life.” “There was no glitter about her, no sparkle,” and although she never said anything stupid, “she was not spirited, she was not witty” (pp. 17-18). Thinking back on her, Seabury recalls that he remembers her eyes best, “no glint in them, no sparkle, no drive.” All she was was beautiful, “and now it was all gone” (p. 24). An upsetting incident left her in a “langour of exhaustion” with “her hands lying nerveless” on her chair (pp. 54-55). Her chief attraction for the then very young Seabury was her helplessness.

In the present, Gabrielle is characteristically “dissatisfied” and “resigned” (p. 10), suffering “strange regrets,” and brooding misearia (p. 43). Her voice, which in her younger days was cool, is now cold. An illness some years back has left her sadly reduced, with no desire to live anywhere but in the past. When Seabury mentions that he is at least grateful to be alive in “a France still undestroyed,” she replies, “Are you grateful? I am not. I think one should go out with one’s time” (p. 46). She is simply waiting to join the old men whose pasts she admired more than anything the present could offer.

Gabrielle, then, is the classic nonsurvivor, the person who has linked herself with death instead of life. She may show in the extreme some traits Cather saw in herself—nostalgia, a distaste for some aspects of the modern world, a tendency to resist change—but in other ways her attitudes are the opposite of Cather’s. For example, Gabrielle hates young people, and Cather loved them. Cherry has learned to steer Gabrielle away from places where young people are likely to be, and Gabrielle’s typical comments about them are suggestive and indecent. On one occasion, she observes wryly that on a dance floor the young look “like lizards dancing—or reptiles coupling” (p. 58). Her distaste for the young American women who caused the fateful accident is venomous. She comments bitterly that her driver had no choice but to ram the rock wall rather than run the two young women off the cliff, adding, “They happened to be worth nobody’s consideration, but that doesn’t alter the code” (p. 68).

Cherry, always the antidote for Gabrielle’s poison, is more like Cather in her attitude toward young people. She finds them delightful and wonderful even though their dancing is not as spirited as she herself prefers. She, like Cather, is happily attached to a “swarm of young nieces and nephews” (p. 45). Moreover, although Cherry regrets some changes in modern life, she adapts readily and enjoys life immensely, approaching it with spunk and good humor. Cather clearly appreciates Cherry’s zest and love for life, even if she herself could not consistently keep a youthful, optimistic outlook. Unlike Cherry, Gabrielle has been devastated by change, and she hates it. Ironically, she is more altered than the world. Her great beauty, her only distinguishing feature, is wholly gone, and her “face was not recognizable” (p. 25). Gabrielle herself admits that it is her encounter with youth and modernity, not the physical effects of the automobile accident, that most shocks her delicate constitution. She attributes her latest indisposition
not to "the bruises we got," but to "the white breeches" (p. 68). The Old Beauty contrasts, certainly, with Sapphira Dodderidge Colbert, Cather's next major fictional character, an obstinate survivor who is more to her liking.

The next story in the collection, "The Best Years," is actually Cather's last known completed piece of fiction, even though it precedes the slightly earlier "Before Breakfast" in The Old Beauty and Others. Along with the other two stories in the collection, "The Best Years" provides important insight into the nature of the resolution that seems to have occurred for Cather on the question of whether or not one can or should endure painful loss and difficult change. Cather's vivid picture of a nature almost totally antithetical to life in "The Old Beauty" differs considerably from her portrayal of life in the vigor and continuity of enduring family love in "The Best Years." The story tells of the death of a beloved young person and her mother's sorrow over a modified world, but it is not a story about death. It is a story about living and loving and learning to accept life's vicissitudes.

Lesley Ferguesson leaves home very young to become a country schoolteacher, and the story recounts the first return visit of her second year, her joy at being once more in familiar rooms with her loved ones. In the aftermath of a terrible blizzard, Lesley dies of pneumonia. Many years later, Mrs. Ferguesson is still lamenting the loss of her daughter, and she seems never to have accepted the other changes that have disturbed her life.

Paradoxically, although the death at the center of "The Best Years" is much more tragic than the death of the Old Beauty, the later story is not dominated by an atmosphere of death or loss. Notable, too, is the cemetery in "The Best Years." Near the school and a prominent feature of the landscape, it is a natural and acceptable part of life and holds no terror for the children. In fact, they like to gather there and sit on the headstones to talk. Cather treats death differently in order to feature attitudes very different from those of Gabrielle Longstreet. Most noticeable, perhaps, is Cather's handling of the actual events of death. In "The Old Beauty" the corpse is described, the coffin is present, reporters are seeking information about the dead person, and a mysterious man appears with carloads of flowers. In "The Best Years," Cather mutes the effects of young Lesley's death by announcing it in a conversation, almost as if it were an afterthought by the speaker, several days after its occurrence. A substitute railroad conductor mentions it to Evangeline Knightly, Lesley's superintendent, as just one of many unfortunate incidents connected with a recent blizzard.

Cather further softens the theme of death by stressing Miss Knightly's controlled reaction to the shocking news. She turns white, but through what is clearly practiced effort, she recovers herself and asks calmly for a full account. Readers learn the story secondhand, as Miss Knightly hears it, and their responses are cushioned and controlled along with hers. The ability to accept loss and change is a dominant motif in the story, appearing again many years later, when Mrs. Thorndike, the former Miss Knightly, visits the still-aggrieved Mrs. Fergusson. During that visit the former superintendent again demonstrates her conviction that wisdom lies in regarding change and loss as inevitable, in accepting them as part of the natural course of things. In her eyes the town even seems "much changed for the better" (p. 132).

Miss Knightly's kindly stoicism and the loving family circle of the Fergussons stand in sharp contrast to the weary complaints of Gabrielle Longstreet and the death-filled atmosphere in which she chooses to move. Moreover, unlike the young Gabrielle, the young Miss Knightly radiates life. The "splashes of colour" in her eyes "made light—and warmth. When she laughed, her eyes positively glowed with humour, and in each oval cheek a roguish dimple came magically to the surface. . . . Her voice had as many colours as her eyes—nearly always on the bright side, though it had a beautiful gravity for people who were in trouble." And while the young Gabrielle is incredibly beautiful, Miss Knightly is "plain—distinctly plain" (pp. 76-77). Miss Knightly also has a warm appreciation for youth
and thinks that the young people she knows later in the story are rather braver and finer than those she knew in her own youth.

"The Best Years," representing a final touching tribute to Cather's own beloved family and her Nebraska childhood, seems the perfect concluding story for Cather's life. "Before Breakfast," on the other hand, seems an appropriate concluding story for her career as an artist, especially if that career is seen as one attesting to the value of life and to a human being's capacity for survival. In a real sense, The Old Beauty and Others is the culminating volume of this lifelong concern, and "Before Breakfast" is the culminating story in that volume. Cather looks at the life permeated by death, unable to adapt to change; she looks at stoicism and love and acceptance of loss; and finally, she sorts through the facts of upheaval and loss and arrives at a new faith in the ability of nature and humanity to endure.

Henry Grenfell's resourceful frog, then, in "Before Breakfast," serves as a final type or symbol for the Cather survivor, for the one who resourcefully adapts to whatever life metes out. Confronted with reduced possibilities, a world drying up, that frog does not lie down and die—nor does he try futilely to turn the world into a puddle. Rather, he learns to live on land as well as in water; he finds a way to survive. This is the saving insight that caps Henry Grenfell's rejuvenation in the closing pages of what must be one of Cather's most important stories, "Before Breakfast." It is fitting that the story that climaxes Cather's artistic career affirms her commitment to life and her belief in the human capacity to adapt and survive—and at the same time presents the very real temptation to back away from life and its perplexities.

Seeking relief from the coldness of his family and the anxiety of a highly successful business career, Henry Grenfell is distressed when a geologist on the boat to his island off the Atlantic Coast reels off a whole string of scientific facts about the island, including figures about its age. Grenfell arrives at his cabin feeling like an alien, a thing with no staying power, insignificant in the vast cosmos. He sees Venus outside his window, a lesson in cosmic endurance that angers him. There is that orb, indifferent to the petty struggles of humanity—and of the animal kingdom too. Grenfell does not need, just now, to confront something else impervious to time and change, something reigning in "ageless sovereignty" to which even the unfathomable one hundred and thirty-six million years of the island's existence are nothing, a drop in the bucket. The island's longevity is scarcely impressive when sized up against the "hundred and thirty-six million" years that Venus had existed before the island was formed (p. 144). Faced with survival statistics like these, a mere mortal does not have much show. "A man had his little hour, with heat and cold and a time-sense suited to his endurance. If you took that away from him you left him spineless, accidental, unrelated to anything." You depleted him, Grenfell realizes as he sits "in his bathrobe by his washtub, limp" (pp. 148-49).

Grenfell is fighting a personal battle for survival as well. Not only does he suffer a spiritual debility that requires solitude in a natural setting, but he also suffers from a disturbingly weak physical constitution. Refusing to give in to it, he works his frail body all the harder—big-game hunting, canoeing, whatever will test his physical endurance. Still out of sorts from his encounter with the geologist and with Venus, Grenfell goes for a walk before breakfast, taking a familiar route and seeing familiar things. He finds his beloved island just as he remembered it and begins to feel once again his old relationship with the earth and the universe. The age of the island, its long survival, after all, has "nothing to do with the green surface where men lived and trees lived and blue flags and buttercups and daisies and meadowsweet and steeplebush and goldenrod crowded one another in all the clearings" (p. 161).

His walk makes him feel better, but what ultimately rescues him from despair is the sight of a human figure, the geologist's young daughter, pitting herself gamely against the vast
ocean, plunging into its icy waters and swimming the course she had set for herself. Her act, the fact that “she hadn’t dodged,” but “had gone out, and she had come back,” assures him that humanity has the capacity to endure (pp. 165-66). It can meet the test; it will survive. So what if Venus will survive forever? Youth testifies to the durability of the human race. In the final paragraph of the story, after his experience of seeing the girl, Grenfell chuckles and thinks about the adaptability of “that first amphibious frog-toad” (p. 166). Whatever lives, if it has courage and the will to survive, proves humanity’s value and life’s value. Grenfell feels a part, now, of a race of survivors.

It is significant that it is a young person who triggers Grenfell’s happy mood and his comment about the frog. He realizes, much as he likes his old “grandfather tree,” that “plucky youth is more bracing than enduring age” (pp. 165-66). This is not a new notion for Cather, nor is the message contained in the frog story new. Since the beginning of her writing career Cather had equated youth with what she herself valued most—life, energy, vitality. She wrote lovingly about the young, describing youth ideally as a glorious and difficult time of desire and need; she was willing to excuse the follies of youth. But only in the end does she suggest that the example of the young may be the salvation of us all, that as long as the young tackle the world head-on, the human race will endure. Surely this final assertion of the value of human capacity to meet life, to adjust to new circumstances, to adapt to change, and hence to survive, is the product of a lifelong personal battle for Willa Cather. With the passing years, Cather found change more and more difficult. She found herself wishing at times that she could return to an era when the old values seemed to be in place and things did not move so fast. This frame of mind must have given her a special skill in creating characters who suffer similarly over disruption and change. At the same time, her fiction—especially her short fiction and more especially her last collection of stories—suggests that she increasingly saw an inability to adapt, in both herself and her characters, as a weakness. Maybe in her admiration for the survivors in her fiction, for those able to accommodate themselves to altered circumstances and fortunes, there is just the hint of a wish that she could be more like them.

NOTES


3. Bernice Slote in The Kingdom of Art: Willa Cather’s First Principles and Critical Statements, 1893–1896 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 92, acknowledges the quality and importance of “Before Breakfast,” calling it “one of the most remarkable things Willa Cather wrote: at the end, a re-affirmation of the beginning.”

4. Cather sent the story to Gertrude Lane, editor of Woman’s Home Companion, who indicated a willingness to print it even though she did not feel its quality to be on a par with Cather’s better work. Cather asked her to return the story and did not publish it elsewhere.

5. James Woodress, Willa Cather: Her Life and Art (1970; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, Landmark Edition, 1982), pp. 256–57. Woodress’s view is an exception to this general assessment. Although he sees the story as highly nostalgic, he nevertheless suggests that Cather’s views are more nearly reflected by Cherry Beamish, the Old Beauty’s companion, than by Gabrielle herself.