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In Reach

Pamela Carter Joern

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IN REACH

Pamela Carter Joern

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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For Shannon and Raegan, with love and admiration

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REACH (rēch) n. an unbroken expanse of land or water
<a *reach* of open prairie>

The founder of Reach, Nebraska, was a British immigrant named Arthur Weston. Weston had grown up on the shores of Kent and made his way to America as an orphan aboard the *Queen Mary* in 1851. He homesteaded in the North Platte River valley, and when he saw the wide expanse of prairie grass undulating in the breeze, he said it reminded him of the open reach of the ocean.

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“So this is Nebraska,” Ted Kooser writes in a poem. Not being a poet, I set out to capture Nebraska in these stories. Of course, as is the nature of fiction, none of these stories happened. Out of a flash of memory here, an intriguing shadow there, I followed a path of wonder to see what it would reveal to me. This may not be your Nebraska, but it is mine, mingled with all the places I have been since, all the loves and losses I have known, all the thoughts that have crossed my mind, and all the dragonflies and sunflowers and prairie grasses that worked their enchantments on me. My intention is to pay tribute to the beauty and complexities of lives lived hard and well. To the people who did and still do make up the world of the western plains, thank you.

This collection of stories was a long time in the making. Short of thanking the entire universe and at the risk of leaving someone out, I want to express my gratitude to the following: Sheila O’Connor and Mary Rockcastle, my mentors in the Hamline MFA program where some of these stories germinated; Mary Bednarowski, who read the most recent stories and never failed to believe in them; the writers’ group from Mallard Island; my Hamline writing buddies; the staff and my students at the Loft Literary Center, who inspire me with their dedication and love of writing; Kristen

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IN REACH

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RUNNING IN PLACE

Wayne McManus sits at the hospital bedside of his dying cousin. He's reading Mary Oliver poems aloud, the poet lying on her stomach, studying a single blade of grass, a grasshopper's wings. His own spindly legs are crossed knee over knee, bony silk-socked ankles nested in black wing-tipped shoes polished to mirror the sky, the laces new and waxy. His blue dress shirt snugs into the waistband of gray pleated trousers, belted with Italian leather. Glasses in small metal frames pinch a narrow nose, his eyes an icy blue. Blond hair, trimmed and tidy, shot through with gray. He looks like a character from *Masterpiece Theatre*, not a bank teller who's lived all his life (save one indescribable summer) in Reach, Nebraska.

The body on the bed shifts. The younger man is quiet now, morphine dripping into his arm, his skin translucent. Wayne has read about that. The lesions, too. One high on Mark's forehead, another on his arm. Wayne helped the nurse turn him once. Put his hands under Mark's body and lifted him while she tugged on the stained sheet. It was like lifting a skeleton, the bones loose and jangling. He feared that some part of Mark would break off, his leg, say, or a brittle arm that would shatter on the floor to be swept up by Hazel, the scowling cleaning woman.

Mark strains to raise his head. Wayne lays the book of poetry, open and pages down, on the bedside table. The room smells of antiseptic, the walls white and sterile, but as he leans over Mark, his nostrils twitch at the foul odor emanating from Mark's mouth.

"Do you want water?" Wayne asks.

Mark shakes his head. "What's that?" he says, his voice whispery and coarse.

"Water?" Wayne repeats.

Mark rolls his head toward the book. "No, that."

"Mary Oliver," Wayne says. Then, quoting from the poet, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?"

"I like Bond," Mark says.

"Bond?"

"James Bond."

"Oh, dear," Wayne says.

What do they have in common, really? Mark's lived in San Francisco. He once personally met Jerry Garcia. Except for an occasional Christmas card, Wayne hasn't heard from him in twenty years. He only found out that Mark was sick because Maude, the hospital receptionist, called him.

Back at the bank, through a small window, Wayne smiles at his customers (he knows them all by name) and counts out tens, twenties, hundreds, bills creased and soiled from human hands. He wears gloves.

Later, inside his house, he walks past leather upholstery, cases of books, watercolor paintings to a back bedroom where his hand slides along a pebbly plaster wall, flips a switch that lights 150 hurricane lamps crowded on shelves lining the room. More than half have been electrified, but the other 63, with their original oil wicks intact, are illuminated by lights recessed within the shelves. The lamps displayed here are his current favorites. Another 450 are boxed and labeled and tucked away in his basement. He runs his

hand over the pink roses, the delicate fluted edges, hand-painted globes of exquisite little worlds.

After supper (a meal of cold turkey and salad), he dons a light jacket to ward off the October chill and walks three blocks to the Albertsons' house. He raps lightly on the door, stands patiently while Mary looks through the peephole. She lets him in, stands there in her black lace-up shoes, a gray crepe dress, her white hair mashed under a net. Her back is stooped, the only real change in her since she taught his fifth-grade class fifty-three years ago. Propped in an overstuffed chair, her brother Dave's arms rest on long-necked swans crocheted into doilies, a needlepoint pillow of pansies behind his head. He doesn't rise or speak when Wayne steps in. Wayne sits forward on the edge of the Edwardian couch, signaling that he won't stay long.

"How's business?" Dave asks. The tube to Dave's oxygen tank snakes across the floor, his breathing shallow and labored.

"Not the same without you," Wayne says, though Dave has been retired from the bank for twelve years.

Mary seats herself in the rocking chair, pulls her knitting into her lap. Heavy brocade curtains veil the windows, the room spiked with shadows. No television, of course. A lamp with fringed shade. Antique tables, hand-carved. An oil painting grown dark with age, a bucolic landscape, sheep on hillsides, far from the Nebraska prairie. There's nothing of tumbleweeds or windmills in this room. Wayne wonders, as he always does, what they do all day. They don't allow any other visitors. Their groceries are delivered from the Jack & Jill to their back door. After the boy has gone, Mary retrieves the bags from the back porch. If they're too heavy, she waits for Wayne and asks if he will carry them to her kitchen counter.

Wayne first came here because Dave told him they had an old kerosene lamp that had belonged to their mother. The top globe

broken. Worthless, Dave said. Wayne asked if he could take a look at it, and when he did, he could hardly conceal his excitement. Some unknown but gifted artist had painted a picnic by a river, two laughing young men against a backdrop of shimmering yellow and autumn gold. One extended his hand toward the other. Apart from them, seated on the ground, a woman wearing white clutched a parasol and looked off across the river, her face invisible. He bought it from them for \$15.00. He took it to an antiques restorer down by Ogallala and had a top globe hand-made, painted with sky to make a roof over this perfect world. Whenever Mary asks about her mother's lamp, he lies to her. *Not much could be done. Packed away in my basement.* Because he lies, he mows their lawn in the summer. Lights the pilot light on the furnace in the winter. When they need to go to the doctor in Scottsbluff, he drives them.

"Any news?" Mary asks.

Wayne clasps his hands, clears his throat. "My cousin Mark is in the hospital."

"Wilhelmina's grandson?" Mary says.

Wayne nods. "Truman's boy."

Mary knits a row. She's making socks, narrow cotton yarn, gray. She'll wear them herself, bunched around her ankles above low-heeled shoes.

"Truman was in my class," she says.

Wayne nods again.

"Not much of a thinker," she says.

Wayne bristles and, at the same time, can't fathom himself. Why should he, of all people, want to stick up for Tru?

"Mark's dying," Wayne says, to punish her a little.

Mary's needles stop for a fraction of a second. He waits for her to ask him why. He's decided he will say that it is cancer, which it is, by now. But she doesn't ask. She goes on knitting.

Back in his living room, it's only 8:00 p.m. Not enough time used up. He pours himself a glass of red wine, settles into his

leather recliner, adjusts the lamp, and lifts a book. He finds that he can't concentrate, thinking instead that Mary could be a mean teacher, batting the backs of hands with rulers, raising red welts on knuckles, making big dumb kids—like Tru—cry out in pain.

Wayne continues to sit with Mark. Every day when he enters the hospital room, he has to fight the urge to remove his shoes. Some old vestige of what one is supposed to do on holy ground, like Moses in the wilderness. He would not be surprised if the bed burst into flames. He keeps reading poetry, Whitman, even Yeats, trying to understand what is happening. When he is sure no nurse will come barging into the room, he speaks in gentle tones. "It's all right," he says, though clearly, it is not all right.

He wants to know—things. What's it like? Love?

Sometimes Mark looks at him and speaks. "Where's my momma?"

"She died. With your daddy, in that old truck. You remember. You were seven years old."

"I want my momma." Later, "Where's Curtis?"

Wayne scoots his chair close to the bed, bends his lips to Mark's ear. "Tell me about Curtis," he says. He wants to hear of candlelight, whispered words, limbs entwined, taut skin sliding.

"Momma?" Mark says.

"Shhh. Quiet, now. Momma wants you to rest."

At night, he thinks about that summer in Denver. Was that love? How could something that moved him so far outside himself be good for him? He came out of the two months he spent there like someone surfacing from a fever, dazed and disoriented. One morning, he woke and turned his head in the dim light of a hotel room. He heard sounds in the bathroom, smelled the heavy odors of sweat and semen. His glance fell on a naked light bulb dangling from the ceiling, a pair of pants thrown over the back of a chair,

a cracked window repaired with yellowed tape. Before a thought could form in his head, he'd slipped on his shoes. I don't know you, he was thinking, as his feet trod down the stairs. He tripped on the bottom step, something he would recall for years. He would relive the sharp stab in his ankle, but he would not remember the color of eyes or shape of jaw or the tremble in his own hand.

On the day Mark slips into the final coma, he whispers a few words to Wayne. Wayne bends low to hear them.

"I never wanted—I never wanted . . ." Mark stops, gasps for air.

"It's okay," Wayne says. What does the past matter? Truman nearly beat him to death, tied him to a barbed wire fence with his pants down around his ankles. None of that was Mark's fault. The boy wasn't even born yet. Don't apologize for that sorry sonofabitch, Wayne wants to say. But all he can manage is, "It's okay."

"I never wanted—" Mark grasps him by the shirtfront, pulls him down to the bed. "To be like you," he says.

Afraid that he will start to cry, Wayne only nods. He understands completely. Who would choose this? He melts with gratitude. Transparent and relieved, like listening to Bach, his soul wrung out and connected and momentarily not alone.

"I never wanted"—Mark's hand still clenches the starched front of Wayne's shirt—"to be afraid. Like you."

Wayne steps back. He raises his hand to quell the sting, as if he's been slapped, thinks of a string of retorts—he's not the one who ran away—but before he can shape his lips around his defense, Mark slides under, like someone who's fallen through ice, and though Wayne comes every day and sits longer hours, though he holds Mark in his arms through the final shudder into death, Mark doesn't waken.

He attends Mark's funeral, although Wilhelmina will not look at him. He does not sit with her. He stands in the back at the

cemetery, not under the tarp that protects Wilhelmina and her friends from the November wind. She did not visit her grandson in the hospital; he knows that for a fact. She neither forgets nor forgives, and while he stares at her stiffened back, a flock of geese rises from the river a half mile north and honks across the sky.

Two days later, Wayne is fired from his job at the bank. The banker's son has taken over, moved back to Reach after Harvard and years of failure on the New York Stock Exchange. He cites change, more automation, redundancy. Wayne doesn't even have a desk to clean out.

He doesn't tell Mary and Dave for another week. He doesn't want them to connect the loss of his job to Mark's funeral, to the fact that Wilhelmina has all the money from the sale of her ranch in that bank.

He's sitting in their living room, under the rosy glow of the lamp, when he lets them know that he's decided to retire.

"Oh?" Mary says. She rests her knitting in her lap.

"Why?" Dave says. He rallies to ask this question, piercing eyes, then sinks back.

"Time to do other things," Wayne says, his voice upbeat and cheerful.

They lapse into silence. Dave falls asleep, a thin line of drool spinning from the corner of his mouth to the needlepoint pillow. It must be filthy, that pillow, and Wayne reminds himself not to touch it. Mary resumes knitting, the click-click of the needles twanging Wayne's nerves. He rubs his forehead with his hand. He despises people who have their hands on themselves all the time, grooming a mustache, pulling their ears, pushing their glasses up on their nose. He's pondering the larger fate of humanity, how eventually we all become what we detest, when Mary speaks.

"Have I told you about this ring on my left hand?" she asks.

Wayne shakes his head. He has wondered. A big diamond ring. An inheritance, he supposed. He's heard that there was family money. This high-quality furniture came from somewhere.

"I was engaged," she says.

"Really?"

"I was young, once." Her sharp tone. That teacher voice that made kids not like her. He shouldn't have acted so surprised.

"It was during the war," she says. "I lived in Cheyenne, then. I was teaching school and living in a boardinghouse. I met him through mutual friends."

"The war separated you?"

"We had one last evening. I had decided to break it off. I loved him, but something was missing."

"So, did you?"

"We had dinner at the Plains Hotel. We drank wine and laughed. He was a lovely man, curly dark hair."

She stops to adjust her knitting, gather her thoughts. Wayne says nothing. He's working hard to picture Mary young, with a man, drinking wine.

"He walked me back to my hotel. I tried to work up the courage to tell him, and then in the lobby, he took both my hands in his. There was another young couple kissing in front of the elevator. She wore a green hat with three white feathers and a rhinestone ornament. I was thinking how fine I'd look in that hat when he said, 'Mary, I have to tell you something. I love you, but I am not in love with you. I don't think I'll ever be in love with a woman.'"

Wayne's hands go numb. He fights the urge to curl his arms across his chest. Hide, hide, rings in his head, but there's nowhere to go. He shifts his weight to stand, when her voice goes on.

"He told me to keep this ring. He said, 'When you wear it, remember that I love you.' I didn't know what to tell our families and friends, so I said nothing. He was killed at Normandy."

Wayne waits, but she has stopped talking.

“Lucky he died,” Wayne says. He cannot keep the bitterness out of his voice.

“Do you think so?” She doesn’t look up. Her fingers slide along the needle, counting stitches.

Three weeks after he’s been fired, halfway into December, Wayne decides to go to Denver for the weekend. He packs a small suitcase and drives south.

The air is heavy and dull, an anvil-colored sky that presses on the plains. Feeling low, he stops in Kimball at a truck stop. A bell attached to the diner door clangs when he opens it. A tired waitress looks up from behind the counter. She’s white-headed, heavysset, wearing glasses. He’s seen a million like her. He picks out a booth along the outside wall and runs his hand along the underside of the table, checking for fresh wads of gum before he sits, having once ruined a good pair of pants.

The waitress brings him a steaming cup of coffee, a murky film skimming the top. He orders a plate of eggs and bacon, why not? Patsy Cline sings mournfully in the background, amid static. Gray outside. Puddles of muck and dirty boot prints on the floor.

Wayne sips his coffee and looks around. In one corner, a woman huddles in a brown coat, leafing through a stack of bills piled in front of her. Occasionally, she tugs at her hair, then back to fingering the envelopes. A trucker sits at the counter, beefy hands cradling a coffee cup, eyes bloodshot and glazed with road hypnosis, an inch of hairy skin revealed by low-slung jeans. A teenager (shouldn’t she be in school?) occupies the adjacent booth, her back against the window, legs slung up on the seat. Heavy mascara fringes her eyes, black blobs gummed on the lash tips, her lips red as an overripe plum. The aging waitress brings her a cup of coffee, a carton of half-and-half in her other hand. She stands and creams the coffee for the girl, then walks away. There’s a dog, too, lying on the floor, a black Lab with one foot missing.

Wayne lets out a long breath and slides into a strange, unsettling calm. He knows these people, even the dog. The way they leave the radio on at night to trick themselves into thinking someone else is in the room. The stickiness of spilled syrup, left to dry on the kitchen counter. The sweating hands when they check the mail, the answering machine. Ask them, any one of them, who's waiting for you at home? He knows the answer. Like him, they find rest in these gray walls, the broke down look of this place, the knowledge that people come and go, come and go, nobody stays, because this isn't supposed to be home. Nobody pretends that they belong. Here, where everyone is transient and anonymous, nobody betrays you.

He stays as long as he can without drawing attention to himself. Eventually, he tears himself away, gets in his car, and stops at the top of the driveway, unable to decide what to do. He can't show his face in Reach, the whole town buzzing over his loss of job. If he goes on to Denver, he could get a fresh start, but does he even know where to begin? It won't be any different in Denver than it is in Reach. Everywhere he goes, he takes his damn self, and for him, the likes of him, there is no coming home.

When he hears the knock on his window, he mistakes it for a gunshot. He feels for the wound, his hand moving around on his chest, the pain real, searing, and then he hears a man's voice.

"You all right in there?"

He rolls the foggy window down a few inches and leans back to peer out. It's the trucker from the diner, a leather jacket thrown over his plaid flannel shirt, a toothpick riding his lower lip. Snot dribbles from his nose, and the man wipes at it with the back of his hand. "You been sitting there a while. Everything okay?"

"Fine," Wayne says.

"You goin' to Denver?"

"I thought about it."

"Because that kid over there wants a ride."

The man hitches his thumb toward the teenager hunched by the diner's front door. It's the girl from inside. She looks mad as hell and scared, her eyes glassy. She's on something, meth probably, these kids today.

"You can't take her?" Wayne says.

"Nah. I'm headed to Sidney, to Cabela's. She asked me, but I ain't goin' that direction."

The girl sees them talking about her. She looks down, scuffs her feet, then turns and disappears back inside the diner. She's standing in the outer foyer, between the gumball machine and a bulletin board with tacked-up notices of garage sales. Through the window, they can see she's pulled out a cell phone.

"Probably had a fight with her boyfriend," the trucker says.

"Or her parents," Wayne offers.

"Yeah."

The girl is gesturing wildly, her fingers splayed, hands tense. She whirls around. The two men watch her and don't speak, and finally, she cries with heaving sobs, her head propped against the window.

"Well, I guess she'll be all right, then," the trucker says.

"I suppose." Wayne knows what the man is thinking. Someone is on the other end of that phone line.

"Well," the man says, looking toward his truck.

"Go ahead," Wayne says. "I'll wait."

The man nods. He moves away, and without turning his head, lifts his hand behind him in a farewell wave.

Wayne sits in his car, engine running, for what seems like a long time. The girl has snapped her phone together and stands in the entryway, eyes dark and watching. A beat-up Chevy pulls into the parking lot, one fender bent like a potato chip. The driver is a woman, middle-aged, her hair a frowsy mess. Without bothering to turn off the car or close the door behind her, she catapults inside the diner. He watches her fold the girl in her arms, pat her

on the back. The girl is taller than the woman, but she manages to slump down, turn her face into the woman's neck, clench her arms around the woman's waist. The two of them maneuver out to the Chevy, jerky but together, like dancing circus bears. The girl doesn't look up, so he puts his car in gear and heads out.

He threads his way through a few streets. That girl has the same problems she had two minutes ago, make no mistake about that. One hug isn't going to fix whatever's wrong. Still. Someone cared enough to come after her. He's thinking about Mark accusing him of being afraid. All along, he thought leaving was the coward's way out. He sees now, you can run away even if you stay in one place.

He's staring at himself, down a long corridor with shut doors, and none of them have doorknobs. He sees how it will be. He'll pack away the lamp that belonged to Mary and Dave's mother because it reminds him, of what? That they know what they must have always known? That he isn't worthy of their friendship? Dave will die, and he'll be too proud to attend the funeral, too afraid that Mary will see him and reproach him for his absence. Not long after, Mary will be gone, too. He'll walk by their house and wonder, did she mean to be his friend? Did she tell him that story to say, I see you and I don't care. Or did she tell him, as he had thought at the time, as a warning. What was she saying, come close or stay away? For him, it has always been stay away, until by now, he walks himself away and shuts the gate after.

He's sitting in his car, idling at a stop sign, thinking about a strange girl who turned her head into the soft neck of someone and cried. He could, he is thinking, show up on Mary's doorstep with her mother's lamp. He could hold it out to her, an offering. He has no idea what she would do or say, that's a risk. But he could do this one thing. He could give it back to her. Restored.