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Review of *One Degree West: Reflections of a Plainsdaughter* By Julene Bair

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One Degree West: Reflections of a Plainsdaughter.
By Julene Bair. Minneapolis: Mid-List Press,
2000. 182 pp. \$16.00 paper.

Readers will likely be familiar with the background dramas in *One Degree West: Reflections of a Plainsdaughter*, Julene Bair's collection of eleven personal essays. Life in western Kansas has changed dramatically since the 1950s; the farming communities that were scraped or nestled into dryland, shortgrass country have seen two migrations in the last half-century: from the farm into town, the course taken by Julene Bair's parents; and out of the region, the trajectory of her own life. Farming itself has changed so much that those who haven't left cannot maintain the shape and rhythm of the lives they fell in love with and hoped to continue. Bair says, "With the aid of machinery and chemicals, and with families a tenth of their former size, we conquered the Plains, not just out of greed, but out of a failure to recognize what we loved and that love was reason enough not to destroy." And here her book sounds much like William Kittredge's *Owning It All* or *A Hole in the Sky*, lamenting the lost landscape of her childhood, plowed under by the very industry that fed its inhabitants. (Her work could also call to mind John Ise's ur-memoir of a Kansas farm family whose very success is measured through the children's ability to leave and the parents' ability to sell—though her people are descendants of the generation Ise depicted.)

Bair is graceful and vivid in descriptions of the place “west of that invisible curtain along the hundredth meridian” where rainfall averages fifteen inches a year and the extremes of heat and cold grip the land. In one essay she describes a little oasis of memory, a rain in 1959 that closed a dangerous, dry decade with a party—on her tenth birthday—at “the lagoon,” where the sudden storm had flooded a low spot. The air was filled with “a thrumming, voluminous chorus of toad song,” and friends and neighbors gathered to actually *boat* across the unaccustomed water, the children watching “the toads scatter, as relatives do when they pass.” She’s also keenly pointed in her meditations on that lost rural life and the empty, open distances that seem to have isolated family members from one another. “I can’t help but think we’ve lost something that it wasn’t inevitable we lose, something we failed to cherish, something akin to art,” she says, with that acute sense of *time left*, her father in failing health and her son growing up quickly.

But the real value of Bair’s book is not its environmentalist lessons or its demographic truths, valid as these are. She is, as she says, a *plainsdaughter*, and her thoughtful, articulate “reflections” on the land and the culture that, for a while, flourished there are a daughter’s thoughts. Twice-divorced, having left an abusive, alcoholic husband even before the birth of her son, Bair returns home to her parents’ farm, to long days of cultivation in the fields and of thought about identity. (In this respect, her work recalls that of South Dakota rancher, Linda Hasselstrom.) She considers her parents’ marriage through a double lens of idealism and critique, while she measures the way gender roles have, since her childhood, relaxed without quite releasing their grasp.

These essays are memoirs of childhood, trellised on the structure of the life Bair has chosen to make for herself and her son: “Confused by my conflicting desires, on the one hand, to live that life [the farm life I remember

from childhood], and, on the other hand, to escape it, I now write about it.”

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