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The Emotional Unraveling of Women
In Selected American Western Narratives: Fact and Fiction

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English Literature Honors Thesis
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Flood, drought, wind, hail, tornado, fire, financial trauma—we suffered them all, each in turn slicing still another sliver from my heart until I thought my heart was dead, it must be dead, had to be dead, for survival depends upon courage and resilience and fortitude and I had none of those. A hollowness of soul crept in, leaving me bereft and lonely and alone.

I don’t know where it went, that utter despair, that dryness of the soul. It’s gone now, disappeared like a shadow at noon. I misplaced it somewhere in that whispering sea of grass, somewhere among the bare-root pines, or perhaps at dusk among the wild lilies in the gray-gumbo prairie. It was lost in the sinking of roots into the hardsod—a simple thing after all, to anchor, to stay. It just takes a leaning into the wind.
Introduction

A female character who experiences emotional frailty or madness is a prevalent figure in literature. Lurking in the shadows, behind the words and phrases of many narratives, a woman struggles to maintain emotional balance. This subverted, hidden character may feel the constraints of a patriarchal society, traditional gender roles, and failed expectations. Whatever the cause of her frailty—this woman catches my attention.

The American western narrative is no different. Feminist critic Jane Tompkins writes in “Me and My Shadow” from The Intimate Critique: Autobiographical Literary Criticism.

What enrages me is the way women are used as extensions of men, mirrors of men, devices for showing men off, devices for helping men get what they want. They are never there in their own right, or rarely. The world of the Western contains no women. (qtd. in Bressler 178)

However, women are not only present, but significant in the West. Before the white settlement, women of indigenous cultures held prominent positions in their societies. Women were present as the frontier edged westward, sometimes behind the scenes, and sometimes holding a crucial role. Women characters also reside in the American western narrative. Though a male oriented genre, if the reader looks carefully, there she is, hiding behind those same traditional gender roles and societal constraints, silently, or not so silently, pulling her hair out. Disillusioned, betrayed, and broken, at times the western woman hangs on to her sanity by what’s left of her fingernails.

Tompkins gives us a geographical definition of the West in West of Everything, encompassing my West—Modoc County California, east to Montana, the ultimate “Big Sky country”: 
Big sky country is a psychological and spiritual place known by definite physical marks. It is the American West, and not just any part of that but the West of the desert, of mountains and prairies, the West of Arizona, Utah, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, the Dakotas, and some parts of California. (4)

The geographical description of the West is clearly defined by boundaries, but the psychological and spiritual West is less easily contained; we carry it with us in our souls.

In Tompkins’ view the “West functions as a symbol of freedom, and of the opportunity for conquest,” symbols often associated with masculinity (4). She believes the West offers an alternative to life in the modern industrial centers and cities, and promises the possibility of personal transformation into something “purer and more intense, more real” (4). Moving to the western narrative, Tompkins quotes a character from Louis L’Amour’s Galloway, “The cities are for money but the high-up hills are purely for the soul” (4, 5).

To Tompkins the American western serves the same function: “Thriving on physical sensation, wedded to violence, dominated by the need for domination, and imprisoned by its own heroic code, the western appeals finally beyond all these to whatever it is the high-up hills betoken” (4). But I ask to whose souls do these “high-up hills” appeal—men’s or women’s? The West is a daunting place, brimming with strong sounds, smells, and sights. And storm: strong winds, flash floods, cyclones and wildfire. The sensuous, masculine landscape dotted with what Tompkins calls “phallic butte[s]” seduces its enamored admirer into the myth just as its hero, the rugged and handsome cowboy, does his girl (81).
Still, the myth is slippery, containing enough truth to make one wonder what is real and what isn’t. Once caught, the unsuspecting devotee discovers the reality of the place—the isolation and barrenness, the enormity, the harshness of the elements and climate. Perhaps unprepared for this reality, women may find themselves daunted, emotionally at risk, sinking into the victim stereotypes as described by Sandra L. Myres: the frightened, tearful woman wrenched from home and hearth and dragged off into the terrible West where she is condemned to a life of lonely terror among savage beasts and rapine Indians. Overworked and overbirthed, she lived through a long succession of dreary days of toil and loneliness until, at last, driven to or past the edge of sanity, she resigned herself to a hard life and early death. (1)

This paper in no way intends to give a disparaging view of western women, but to look beyond the victims to the strong western women stereotypes.

Indeed, the women in my paper choose the western life and buy into the myth, but I maintain these women have huge illusions and mistaken ideas of what the West entails. Scattered about among the “strong western women” are those more frail, the marginalized misfits; this paper explores their experience and destination, via their disillusionment, betrayal, and, finally, crisis. In so doing, I look to literary scholars’ view of women’s difficulties in the American West and the fictional West to expand and develop my thesis and to draw my conclusions.

But there is no conclusion without resolution. Women’s creativity within their western environment offers just that. Susan Rosowski writes in Birthing a Nation: Gender, Creativity, and the West in American Literature, “Any study of gender,
creativity, and the West builds upon the ongoing process of reclaiming women’s voices…” (xi). Historians and theorists alike refer to western women’s writing and creativity, which allows them respite from their madness. I minimally explore women’s art and its role in helping women cope with the disappointment and horror they experience in their western environment. All of the women featured in this paper have a creative bent that offers release from their mental anguish: two are writers, and my mother’s craft is design and decorating. Western women’s creativity and its part in maintaining their emotional balance is an interesting component of this study.

Though women of color and native cultures were present in the West, this paper focuses on white women, in particular women who “come in” from outside. This paper explores the experience of the eastern woman, the homesteader, and my mother, who moved north from the more cosmopolitan California coast to cattle country, Surprise Valley in Modoc County. These women carry high expectations of the West and their men, and pack along their individual cultural constructions, often lacking in preparation for the western landscape. I will explore how disillusionment, betrayal, and crisis contribute to their eventual breakdown.

It is also important to note that fact and fiction blur in this project. This is not a historical study, but rather investigates representations of two “real” women’s western lives, as well as B. M. Bower’s fictional heroine. In her essay, “History for the Masses: Commercializing the Western Past,” Ann Fabian writes:

> Historians working in today’s scholarly West still labor to demystify the past, to print the facts and dispel the legend, but the process of demystification can never be complete. Throughout the twentieth century
politicians, fashion designers, and producers of mass culture have kept right on turning popular legend into the social and economic facts of the living present. In so doing, they keep the legendary past vibrantly alive, promising future historians a West made and remade by the constant interplay of fact and fiction. (227)

We will never uncover the “real” western woman in a study such as this, but through these representations, sliding from fact to fiction and back again, we become more aware of the complexities of women’s figuration and experience in general and western women’s in particular.

This paper is divided into three sections. The initial portion of this project looks to scholarly historians and literary critics for insight into western women’s stereotypes and those elements that contribute to women’s disillusionment, betrayal and ultimate crisis. I investigate those environmental factors integral to the western landscape: the climate and natural phenomena that add to the difficulties women run up against in this place. Finally I examine theorists’ and historians’ perspectives on creativity and the western woman as a means of coping with the strains of living in the West.

The second section of the project offers analysis of B. M. Bower’s Lonesome Land and her protagonist, Valeria Peyson Fleetwood, and then turns to the papers of Pearl Unglesbee Danniel, a homesteader to eastern Montana in the early 1900s.

The final component of the paper is memoir: the story of my mother’s western experience as seen through my eyes. One wonders about truth or validity in such a narrative and I can only answer—it is my truth. It is how I witnessed and interpreted happenings as a young child, until now. My mother’s experience varies from the others
as it doesn't exactly follow the script of the traditional western woman, but it is no less valuable and no less disturbing. It is a love story gone wrong and all that follows. This thesis invites the reader to rethink and redefine the “frail western woman” so as to validate her experience and her frailty, in fact and fiction.

This paper is about women and the West; it is about loss, resentment, and repressed emotions; it is about broken dreams and broken hearts; it is about loneliness. These are timeless issues facing all women. This paper is about rebuilding lives and risking—writing and restoration. I once said I didn’t want this project to be a journey into self-discovery, and a listener responded, “there is no writing without self-discovery.” In the long haul, this paper defines my educational experience and my western experience. As such it becomes my story and an exploration of writing creative nonfiction and literary analysis that has given me further insight into these two components elemental to this field of study, English.
...Folks say the west is good enough for a man or a dog, but no place for a woman or a cat.

*Dorothy Scarborough* "The Wind"
Literature brims with stereotypes and it is certainly no different for western women in the American western narrative. From the strong, independent woman of the frontier, to the weakened, despairing lady of the West, beaten down by the rugged, isolated landscape, and the unending drudgery the West demanded, to the wicked or bad woman, these images run the gamut. However, stereotypes are limiting and fail to explore the complexities of western women. To become more fully informed about these women, it is necessary to first look at the literary and historical stereotypes, then move beyond them so as to give western women the understanding they deserve.

Historian Susan Armitage in "Through Women’s Eyes: A New View of the West" describes “Hisland”:

In a magnificent western landscape, under perpetually cloudless western skies, a cast of heroic characters engages in dramatic combat, sometimes with nature, sometimes with each other.Occupationally, these heroes are diverse: they are mountain men, cowboys, Indians, soldiers, farmers, miners, and desperadoes, but they share one distinguishing characteristic—they are all men. It seems that all rational demography has ended at the Mississippi River: only men occupy all the land west of it. This mythical land is America’s most enduring contribution to folklore: the legendary Wild West. (9)

Armitage lists three common images of western women as seen in Hisland: “the refined lady, the helpmate, and the bad woman” (12). The refined lady is the schoolteacher type, the finely educated and socially acceptable woman who doesn’t fit into the “rough and
ready West” (12). This woman often is depicted as unhappy or out of place and unraveling. The helpmate is the strong western heroine, never complaining, but submitting to the landscape, the work, and her spouse, as she loses herself in the enormity of the West. The bad woman may seem the most attractive and the most despicable stereotype to those of more refined sensibilities. This woman has power and independence but often loses it, or her life, in some unseemly manner (12).

Similar stereotypes appear in Sandra Myres Westering Women and the Frontier Experience 1800-1915. Myers begins with the “reluctant” pioneer, “the weary and forlorn wife, a sort of helpless heroine” (2). Next is the “sturdy helpmate and civilizer of the frontier,” also reluctant but one who sets her will and carries on with “grim determination” (2). Myers fleshes out this image as sturdy and moral, domestic and submissive. She serves as an example to others of her gender and is the “Catherine Sevier” type of woman who “could fight Indians, kill the bear in the barn, make two pots of lye soap, and do a week’s wash before dinnertime...all without a word of complaint” (3). She is “the Madonna of the Prairies, the Brave Pioneer Mother, the Gentle Tamer” as seen in 19th century literature (3). The third image Myers identifies is “the bad woman.” She is often depicted as “the soiled dove or female bandit, the Calamity Jane who drank, smoked and cursed and was handy with a poker deck, a six-gun, and a horse.” Myers continues, “she was the antithesis of the civilizer-helpmate; she was more masculine than feminine in her behavior, but she always had a heart of gold” (4). It seems Armitage and Myers agree on the basic stereotypes of women in the male dominated American western both historically and in literature. Both authors remind the
reader these stereotypes interfere with the true telling of western women’s history and warn against being confined by these distortions.

The women featured in this project, Valeria Peyson, Pearl Danniel, and my mother, may appear to “almost fit” into one or the other of the above stereotypes of western women. Still, none of them is a perfect match and the stereotypes only limit their identity. One may think Val fits into the refined lady image of the American western woman—but Valeria Peyson is not a reluctant pioneer. She looks forward to her westward journey and yearns for the roughness and fresh experience that Cold Springs Coulee offers. Val crosses over to the strong western hero as she hauls water from the spring, splits wood, and fights fire until she drops and yet—she is not uncomplaining. Though at times submissive, Valeria finds her voice and her resiliency once she comes to grips with the truth of her situation. Pearl Danniel also slides between images—the strong western heroine helping Clarence homestead their piece of ground in the Big Dry of eastern Montana to the bad woman when she moves from man to man in her search for love and stability. The refined lady—weak, tearful woman torn from “home and hearth” could be my mother, but my mother was never one to go easily anywhere. And don’t forget: these three women chose to head West in search of a new life, however it was defined in their minds. Armitage and Myers agree there is a grain of truth in each of the stereotypes and this grain of truth allows them to run roughshod over the personal identities and experiences of western women. The representations of these women personify qualities associated with all of the above-mentioned stereotypes and confining any of them to one predetermined image devalues their experience.
Much recent scholarship has been devoted to the strong western woman stereotypes. Sherrie A. Inness offers an interesting explanation for the prominence of the heroic woman's image and references Mrs. E. F. L. Ellet's *Pioneer Women of the West* (1852), which includes a biography of Catherine Sevier, wife of the first governor of Tennessee, as well as Rebecca Boone, and some fifty other frontier women. Ellet describes Mrs. Sevier as, "no shrinking violet" and continues, "this frontier woman, who gave birth to eighteen children, had "the spirit of the heroine" (qtd. in Inness 25). This stereotypical strong western woman was, "able to shoot nearly as straight as her husband, remain calm in an Indian attack, and handle with equanimity the myriad chores of a rural household...a stereotype that has proven remarkably durable even up to the present" (25, 26). Inness argues this strong stereotype persists because it offers a different perspective from the male oriented western saga still prevalent in western studies and allows an avenue for recounting the important role women played in western development. Still and all, this strong western woman's image, in Inness's opinion, can be as "limiting" as the image of the weak, despondent woman and may not tell women's stories at all. She claims the strong woman stereotype is "such a dominant symbol that it distorts the actuality of women's frontier life with all its diversity and complexity" (26). Inness contends the reason many twentieth-century American women writers began to write narratives depicting women who fail to meet the stringent qualifications of the strong western woman is to counter this impressive myth.

I go it one further in saying that the strong woman stereotype has the tendency to silence that woman struggling to hang on for whatever reason. The larger-than-life "strong woman" image contributes to the despondency of women fighting to own their
place on the western landscape. In an effort to put a good face on women, to show her at her strongest instead of at her weakest, some feminist historians and literary scholars ask us to ignore that fragile, unraveling woman. This thesis invites the reader to rethink and redefine the “frail western woman” so as to validate her experience and her frailty.

The mythical West looms as large as its mythical cowboy hero, and seduces women into believing what may not be true, contributing to their betrayal and as such, their frailty. Women’s expectations of the West often didn’t fit with what they found; when fact and fantasy collide disillusionment isn’t far away. There are competing scholarly accounts of western mythology. In “The Significance of the Frontier in American History” (1893) Frederick Jackson Turner asserts “Up to our day, American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development” (qtd. in Myers xv). Susan Armitage and Elizabeth Jameson contend in the Editors’ Introduction to The Women's West, that the West, more than any other region of the United States, shaped the “image of our national identity” (3). A historical topic of debate since Turner set out his famous “frontier thesis” in 1893, has been the effects the frontier has had on “American individualism and democracy” (3). Armitage and Jameson assert that the impact of the frontier on our collective mythology is more assured than its impact on our historical reality and is overrun by white males of rugged stock, seeking “their selfhood in the freedom of an untamed land” (3). However, they contend this stereotype excludes most westerners such as indigenous peoples originating in this “free land,” men and their
families, and all women. In addition, it not only excludes, but also denies and devalues the frail western woman.

Turner’s theory maintained the frontier “was a liberating influence both personally and socially” (16). He believed the “individual” heading West was liberated from “the economic and psychological constraints of civilized society” (16). Armitage isn’t as certain and particularly not in the case of women. She argues that, by focusing on the individual and not on groups, Turner perpetuated the “biases of the frontier myth: adventure, individualism, and violence” still seen in literature, movies, and in historical accounts (16). Armitage questions the historical validity of the myth that Turner’s theory promotes. It is her position, and mine, that women, and most particularly the frail woman, did not see this western experience as adventure and were more concerned “with separation, loss, tedium, fatigue, and the daily effort of living” (16). These daily survival issues were the very issues that unraveled her nerves and left her frayed. To dismiss these daily interventions denies this woman’s experience.

Interestingly, according to Armitage, Myres supports Turner’s theory and believes that for women, as well as men, the West offered opportunities and “innovations in roles and behaviors” (143). But what of the frail disintegrating woman? Looking to Melody Graulich’s chapter, “Violence Against Women: Power Dynamics in Literature of the Western Family,” it is hard to confirm that western women were economically or psychologically liberated. It is Graulich’s position that women were economically and socially dependent on men which, rather than liberating, confined them in violent, abusive domestic relationships (114). The very myth of the “liberating” West excludes these fragile women, almost to the point of denying their existence, but with closer
examination, there they are. Myres is complicit in furthering a western myth that
excludes and devalues this struggling female figure in western narrative. It is my goal to
rescue and revalue this flailing woman so to reveal her strength, while honoring her
weakness.

Armitage continues to debunk the rugged individualism assumed in Turner’s
text by examining the “loner of legend,” the fur trapper (17). She writes that this man
wasn’t always a loner and that he often formed dependent relationships with Indian
society and often marrying Indian women (16,17). I also wonder about the western
woman’s individuality. The dependency of women seems counter to any idea of
individuality. Graulich’s essay on violence against women argues that, for example Mari
Sandoz’s father, Jules, as depicted in her autobiographical novel, Old Jules (1935), felt
small, if any, concern for women’s individuality. In fact she shows that “Jules’
conversations with his friends show that they believe women are to be used and
controlled, their individuality of little consequence” (114). The at-risk, unraveling
woman had little sense of individuality and was concerned more with survival. Turner’s
liberation theory loses credence in light of the frail woman.

Women’s individuality and liberty became buried under the burden of work they
encountered in their new western home. In “Wild Women of the West: A Study of the
Female Image in Selected Novels,” Patricia Maida refers to Elizabeth Jameson’s opinion
that, “the frontier family cannot be defined by Victorian elite codes; there was just too
much work to be done, and everyone had to contribute” (28). Westering women often
held a fantasized vision of “home” in their minds. Annette Kolodny writes in The Land
Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860, that mid-
nineteenth century novels promoted the idea of a home-centered, idealized life for women on the frontier. The West offered women the opportunity to “live again in the land of my heart,” or so expounded Eliza Farnham in her Illinois sketches. Another popular 19th century novelist “declared on behalf of American women in 1838” that women broke away from the confinement of the east to find their “true sphere” inside the frontier cabin (qtd. in Kolodny 110). Both Mary Austin Holley, in her 1833 and 1836 editions of Texas, and Eliza Farnham, in her narratives, eventually “owned up to the fact that, at least in part, they were engaged in fantasy” (110). Life rarely lived up to this fantasy, but these images were the only desirable options represented at the time (Kolodny 109, 110). Bower’s novel shows Val fantasizing about the sweet peas by the cabin door, the spring by the rock wall, and even the meadowlark’s nest illustrate this idea held by women moving West (63). But reality painted a harsher picture.

After the westward journey, women were anxious to arrive at their destination. They longed to put down roots and re-establish family life, but were often “apprehensive” about their new life style (Myres 141). Myres writes that Katherine Kirk approached her South Dakota homestead and remembered, “With a sinking feeling I realized that I was entering a new kind of life, as rough and full of ups and downs as the road over which we traveled. Would I have the courage and fortitude to stick it out?” (141). Myres continues, “The first look at their new homes certainly tested women’s courage and fortitude. Crude log cabins without doors or windows; mining shacks with dirt floors and canvas ceilings; dark and dreary dugouts…the sight of unfamiliar dwelling places was enough to discourage all but the most optimistic or foolhardy” (141). Elizabeth Jameson reveals the findings from her research:
The public image of women's work, however, was often idealized... The reality was harder and more mundane. For all the talk of 'modern conveniences,' no woman I interviewed had a washing machine before 1915, and few had running water. Cooking on coal or wood stoves; hauling water for cooking, cleaning, and washing; sometimes hauling and heating water for baths for men on different shifts; doing the family baking; raising and processing vegetables at high altitudes, were often more than full-time occupations. (151)

Clearly it appears the burden of work was at times overwhelming for all western women. For the frail woman, this drudgery helped keep her from experiencing much needed relief from her despondency. With no diversion from the never-ending tasks, she sank further into hopelessness.

There was no turning back for many women and their disappointment was real. Primitive and inadequate housing, coupled with the never-ending work associated with living in the West were overwhelming to the unraveling woman. Reflecting, if there was time for reflection, on what they left behind was crazy making. Their displacement and separation from the familiar only added to their despondency. One wonders that they withstood the demands at all.

Gender roles were necessarily blurred and work was unrelenting for western men and women. Katherine Harris's essay “Homesteading in Northeastern Colorado, 1873-1920: Sex Roles and Women's Experience” explains, “The muting of gender-role distinctions, evident in homesteaders' community activities, also affected the division of labor between males and females in families. Necessity frequently required men and
women to assume each other’s tasks, leading to the development of unfamiliar skills, especially among women” (169). Tasks traditionally thought of as men’s work slid into the realm of everyone’s work (169). Val’s problem, and that of many other women in the West, is not her unwillingness to work, but that she is the only reliable contributor to the success of Cold Springs Coulee Ranch. Val’s disintegrating husband, Manley, abandons his commitment to the ranch and leaves it in her hands. For those more frail women the unrelenting workload added yet another stress on their disintegrating psyches. Depleted of energy and with nothing to look forward to but more of the same, the frail woman tottered feebly through her chores and fell exhausted and disappointed into bed.

Betrayal, in a slippery way, rides the coattails of this disappointment. Western women often experience betrayal by those they love and trust. This deception snaps through their fantasized image, splinters their resiliency, and contributes to their ultimate breakdown. Betrayal is often manifested in domestic violence, alcoholism, and abandonment. Literary scholars and historians offer valuable insight into these horrifying issues threatening women in the West. While not exclusive to the western experience, these relational breaches and family secrets exist in western history and literature and are significant in western women’s unraveling.

Secrets—those dark, hidden happenings kept close to the chest so no one will know what goes on in families. Certainly abusive behavior can be categorized as betrayal to the already faltering western woman. Graulich’s essay on “Violence Against Women...” examines four books written by western women authors that explore abusive behavior in western families: Mari Sandoz’s Old Jules (1935); Meridel Le Sueur’s The Girl (written in 1939, published in 1978); Agnes Smedley’s Daughter of the Earth
(1929); and Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnodio* (written between 1932 and 1937). These texts “suggest domestic violence was commonplace in the American West” (112, 113).

Though often kept hidden, Graulich writes there were those willing to speak out about domestic violence and tells of novelist Mary Austin’s testimony about violence and abuse against women from husbands or lovers:

> Yet isolated voices in the wilderness, pioneer daughters like Austin, have realized the costs of concealment and focused on violence against women in their autobiographical narratives, demonstrating its centrality to their understanding of their mothers’—and their own—lives. (112)

As today, western women were often frightened to come forward in their own defense, or in the defense of their western sisters, against powerful male figures. By testifying, Austin took a significant step and risked her safety, but for many frail women the risk was too great. As seen in this essay, often their lives were, and are, at stake.

To the frail woman, abnormal behavior became the norm the more enmeshed she was in these violent relationships. Meridel Le Sueur develops her characters in *The Girl* from working class women who move to the city but have “pioneer backgrounds.” Le Sueur’s piece is autobiographical and her characters view violence as part of normal sexual relations. Le Sueur suggests this came from their pioneer mothers: “Their experience of this world centered around the male as beast, his drunkenness and chicanery, his oppressive violence” (114). And it didn’t stop there; Le Sueur’s novel tells us that daughters of these frail women were also vulnerable and often followed in their mother’s footsteps. Their perception of marriage was one of violence and forced sexual relationships, and they often carried their perceptions with them when they moved into
urban areas and into their own relationships. This concept is consistent with the battered woman syndrome of the present, which contributes mightily to a victim mentality in women.

One wonders if alcoholism was the only contributing factor to domestic violence in the West. Graulich claims the western women in the four books she analyzed were victims of individual men and of "social and economic institutions, of gender expectations" (115). She continues to state that the authors are not completely unsympathetic to the societal expectations of the men in the narratives, who were also "victims of gender roles and of economic exploitation." Still, the authors are clear that their mothers’ lives were far more "circumscribed than their fathers’" and their mothers’ "physical victimization is one of the most powerful results of the unequal power men hold over women" (115). The accounts of abuse in history and literature are chilling, and while abuse is not confined to the West, this kind of betrayal of women’s trust existed in western narrative and certainly led to emotional disintegration for many western women.

As cited earlier, in Graulich’s view women were economically, and socially dependent on men in the West and this dependence seemed to "institutionalize wife abuse by forcing them to remain in violent marriages" (114). Not only were they forced to stay in violent marriages, they were set completely adrift if their husband moved on. Later we see that Pearl is left in dire straits when Scotty abandons her and her illness causes them to lose their land. My mother married a man who never left her, but it wasn’t enough; her own father’s abandonment of his only daughter, his eventual suicide, and the discovery of his hidden remains, altered her life and kept her from trusting. Abandonment is the betrayal that strikes at the hearts of women and strands them in frightfully lonely country.
It is an aloneness that never leaves them. These stories and others reveal that alcoholism is prevalent and concomitant with domestic abuse as seen in western history and narrative. These experiences, added to being abandoned by those they trust, puts women on a slippery slope towards despair.

Clearly abandonment is a significant betrayal to western women. Sherry Inness’s analysis of Scarborough’s *The Wind* (1925) reaffirms this aspect of western life. Scarborough defends her novel, stating her critics had missed the point:

> My West Texas critics have read so hastily that they missed several important points of the story. One is that the story is given through the mind of the homesick, frightened girl, who sees everything distorted to a certain extent. The other is that the story is a study in obsession, the tyranny of fear. (qtd. in Inness 26)

Clearly, Scarborough was ahead of her time. The people of Texas were too defensive of their place and way of life to carefully examine the complexities of her narrative. This text calls for a closer read and interpretation of Scarborough’s novel as allowed through the window of time and distance.

Scarborough’s tyranny of fear includes many components, among them abuse and abandonment. As Inness notes, Scarborough’s protagonist, Letty, like many women, was “helplessly caught by a system that encourages women to think of men as heroic rescuers” (35). Letty’s husband abandons her and she is no longer “protected by her location within the heterosexual family; she is open to attacks, particularly sexual ones, that all single women are subject to” (35). Inness interprets Scarborough’s narrative as a social commentary and views the heroine, Letty, as rejecting a society in which women’s
lives are controlled by patriarchal dictates. Further, Inness writes that Scarborough envisioned no escape from “the dominant ideology of the society” and her novel’s tragic end came about because the heroine dared to challenge male authority (36). Inness contends that Scarborough’s novel ends with “the woman” fleeing both the storm and “society’s narrow definitions of acceptable feminine behavior” (37). This insightful analysis of *The Wind* is thought provoking and rings true in light of the frail woman.

Inness defends *The Wind*, as a piece that “sought to re-envision women’s role in the west” (26). The story takes place in west Texas in the 1880s and is often branded as being too harsh in its portrayal of western life and for its negative stereotypes of women as weak and floundering, as opposed to the more attractive strong western women. Inness argues that instead of furthering the standard stereotypes, this text pushes the reader to look beyond stereotypes and discover what contributed to the breaking down of the “melancholic, tearful frontier woman,” suggesting that it wasn’t exclusively the western landscape that broke this woman, but the “culture that bred her” (27). Inness believes Scarborough’s text critiques a society which left women woefully unprepared for the demands of the western environment and limited their “autonomy.” While I agree with much of what Inness sees in *The Wind*, and certainly feel it parallels Bower’s book, as mentioned earlier, I maintain that Inness’s view is limiting in itself.

For the most part, Inness’s view is consistent with mine in that it validates the frail woman’s experience. Inness claims the novel “reshapes the stereotypical refined woman” and that Scarborough uses this stereotype to demonstrate “not the incapability and weakness of women, but the social restrictions that limit any woman’s actions” (37). Under such conditions, it is no wonder the unraveling woman stumbles and flees. It is
Inness’s interpretation, and mine, that the societal constraints leading to western women’s frailty would bring anyone to her knees and it is by recognizing this that the fragile woman is rescued and reshaped in these representations. However, it is difficult to lay all the blame on societal constraints as there are many components comprising the western experience that contribute to this frail woman’s breakdown. It is too simplistic to assume that a culture so different from the West could completely prepare a woman, or a man for that matter, for the wild and rough western environment with its wide open spaces, expansive plains, rugged mountains—and the elements with the loneliness, and physical demands it entails.

In this western environment isolation is unrelenting and demoralizing for many western women. Based on her theory about “the male configuration” of the West that excluded women and “alienated them from the land,” Annette Kolodny believes “It is not surprising then that women’s isolation, in its many forms, is a major theme of women writers of the west” (qtd. in Stillwell 189). However, Myres almost grudgingly allows that some westering women were lonely and isolated but believes our perception of this isolation is predominately a product of stereotyping. She writes, “A familiar image in Western American history is that of the lonely frontier woman, solitary, separated from home and companionship, a victim of the isolation, the wildness, of the frontier. Her story has been told in numerous prints, lithographs, and canvases” (167). Myres continues, “…women’s isolation was more perceived than real. The physical isolation imposed by distance or weather soon came to an end; new settlers arrived; the comforting sight of smoke from a neighboring cabin could be seen on the horizon; the long winters ended; spring came again” (167).
Myres’ view is in contrast to my own. Perhaps some women were not lonely or isolated, but others were and are. One wonders how they could not be lonely given the wide-open spaces and distance between homes, let alone time and labor demands placed on western women. If isolation is a major theme of western narrative it deserves attention, and must be considered as a factor in the breakdown of the fragile western woman.

Kolodny writes that women’s public writings often rejected the supposed male fantasies of the West and replaced them with visions of “open rolling expanses broken, here and there, by a clump of trees” (9). She continues that in promotional writings and domestic novels, women writers “stripped the American Adam of his hunting shirt and moccasins, fetching him out of the forest and into the town” (9). However, in women’s private writings and histories, it is clear that few frontier women enjoyed much community. Instead, she claims that in central Illinois, the setting of many domestic fictions, “there were only about eight people to the square mile during the antebellum decades, and homesteads were generally separated rather than clustered” (9). The western landscape, as with previous frontiers, offered men an avenue to stretch out and explore, but the landscape excluded women from recreation. A Wisconsin farmer recalled in 1869, “the country was all open and free to roam over,” but it was men doing the roaming. He admitted it was different for their wives: “From all these bright, and to us fascinating scenes and pastimes, they were excluded. They were shut up with the children in log cabins” (9). Women were excluded and alienated from the land, isolated by the constraints that kept them confined.
Sometimes isolation conspires with the western landscape, contributing to the betrayal of unsuspecting women. The romantic call of the land beckons and seduces the hopeful newcomer with the promise of new life, but soon reveals what Tompkins labels its fickle "hardness and austerity" (73). Outsiders—those coming in from somewhere else—were unaccustomed to the western landscape and all that it entails. Either suffocated by high mountains, or frightened by the wide-open, empty plains, this overpowering expanse could be intimidating to the newcomer. Inness uses Letty, the protagonist of Scarborough's novel, to explain women's fear of the land claiming that the vast prairie frightens Letty:

She felt oppressed by the solitude of nature, which was so different from the friendly countryside she had known at home—these vast, distressing stretches of treeless plain, with nothing to see but a few stunted mesquite bushes, and samples of cactus that would repel the touch. (qtd. in Inness 31)

Conceding there was cause for fear and estrangement for women, Myres writes, "The West was the land of opportunity, the place of beginning again, but the West was also an unsettled area fraught with danger" (13). In Leaning into the Wind, a compilation of contemporary western women's writing, Mary Lynn Vosen shares her estrangement from the landscape that confined her and her daughter, alone and often anxious: "For three years I lived alone with my daughter on a farm sixty miles from anywhere. There I learned that the land and its seasons are not friends of mine" (200). The western landscape is an entity to be reckoned with, one that you don't fully know until submerged.
The natural world draws us into its enormity and beauty, but nature is fickle. The western landscape also unpredictably turns predatory. Ferocious winters, suffocating summers, fierce winds, and wildfire are as much a part of the West as its mountains, lakes and rivers. Tompkins describes nature and the harshness of the western landscape as so “rhetorically persuasive that an entire code of values is in place, rock solid, from the outset without anyone ever saying a word” (74). Nature is the one transcendent element larger than man or woman and is constantly changing. In westerns, it is “portrayed as immense” (72). Thus, men never “lord it over nature”; rather, men cower in its enormity and power (72). Myres also tells us that nature is as “desolate and violent as it is beautiful and entertaining” (33). This huge entity consists of fire and flood, cyclone and tornado, blizzard-blocking mountain passes, and the fear of being swept away by engorged, raging streams. Prairie and wildfire is a given in the West. Summer winds dry out prairie and forest, and arid climates fail to provide moisture necessary to relieve the threat. Railroad trains fly across the expanse, spraying sparks ready to ignite the dry grass and fuel. Myres emphasizes the constant fear of prairie fires in the West. Men, women and children “clear firebreaks near houses and planted fields... keep a sharp eye out for windblown sparks and to help set back fires,” hoping to hold the threatening blazes (161). The elements of nature are sneaky—blind-siding unsuspecting westerners and reminding them of their powerlessness to harness its force.

If men cower in nature’s enormity, it could shatter the frail woman’s psyche. Inness claims Scarborough uses Letty to explain how the environment can be a relentless
force—driving women crazy, “not because they are innately weak,” but because there is nothing in their experience to prepare them for the terrifying and alien terrain they find in the West (34). The unconquerable, unrelenting force of nature is part of the West, and it gives no hint when it will turn on you. Nature contributes to, as well as compounds, these other betrayals that western women experience. As such it can be the breaking point for the susceptible woman.

Conversely, for some women the land was the best part of their western experience. Pam Houston writes in the introduction to Bower’s novel:

B. M. Bower had little tolerance for the popular romanticized view of the West... Bower understood the power of the western landscape to shape the lives of the people who chose to live there. She understood its wildness, its vastness, its utter indifference to the microscopic communities that were trying to tame it, and both her characters and her sentences seem fueled by the way they encounter the land around them, with a mixture of equal parts rapture and terror and awe. (vi, vii)

Myers also shares reflections from pioneer women in regard to the western landscape as follows:

Anna Gordon found the Rockies ‘divinely beautiful’ while Mary Bailey suggested that ‘it is not worthwhile for anyone to go to Switzerland to see mountains’ for ‘some of the finest views of mountain scenery that was ever seen by mortal’ was available in the American Rockies. (30)
These descriptions indicate the pleasure and comfort some women received from the land. Bower understood and respected the powerful landscape without romanticizing it, but for many women the land's beauty had little to do with the isolating and fearful hold it had on them.

Certainly, Pearl Danniel found solace in the land, isolation and erratic weather events not withstanding; she stoically remained on her homestead as long as she was physically able. Ellie Arguimbau, archivist at the Montana Historical Society Library, writes, "Pearl fell in love with the land. Something in the wild, strange badlands appealed to her and she had visions of the land's great potential" (65). B. M. Bowers' Val also seems to come to terms with the landscape after the fire, and as her friendship with Kent grows she confides, "I think I must have been just lonesome. The country is just as big, but it isn't quite so—so empty, you see" (215). Still, my mother's affection never attached itself to the high-desert landscape of Surprise Valley. And so it seems the landscape, like other components of the West and the western, runs the gamut of emotional reaction and response—loving and hating the unpredictable, awesome, essential element of the West, the land. Patricia Maida tells us that women were unable to extricate themselves from the power of landscape. The land demanded response. She captures it beautifully:

To gain a sense of what it was like to be a woman on the Western frontier, one cannot overlook the determining factor with which they all had to contend—the land. Few settlers, male or female, could be idle, and most faced formidable obstacles in adapting to the new land...The West was
simply not the kind of landscape that would allow a woman to be passive, not to take an active role in her own survival. (29)

Telling their stories provides western women the opportunity to take an active role in their survival by voicing their despair and achieving restoration. Western women’s creativity is a consistent component in scholarly discussion of women in the American West. Joan Jensen’s book, One Foot on the Rockies, examines western women’s creativity. Jensen’s focus is broad; based on women who created “for the public and the marketplace,” she examines culturally diverse women situated in a narrow “crescent” of the Pacific Southwest: beginning in Mendocino, north of San Francisco, moving southeast through California, Arizona, and parts of New Mexico (4). She divides the cultural history of the American West into three periods: Postfrontier, 1890 to 1920; Modern, 1920 to 1945; and Postmodern 1945 to the present (5). However, I narrow the focus to her examination of twentieth-century Anglo-Americans living in the American West and move beyond the boundaries of her historical divisions of Postfrontier to Modern since many women’s stories, though written earlier, were not published before 1920.

Jensen’s chapter on Tillie Olsen’s book Silences explores ways women found their voices in the West and why (8). Jensen identifies three literary traditions so as to analyze the circumstances leading women to write: anthropological, pioneer, and avant-garde. I am most interested in the pioneer tradition. It is Jensen’s belief that “What a creative tradition does for women is essentially find people who listen” (107). It was not always easy to find people to listen or those willing to share their voice. As mentioned above, few pioneer stories by Anglo American women were published in the early
nineteenth century. More became available after 1890, but most weren’t published until after 1920. Many remained family stories kept by descendents in manuscript form and few poor women left any account at all.

For women to write, it was necessary to take time off work, or take time after work—with their energy depleted—to create; this luxury was largely unavailable for the poor. Women were often afraid to tell their true stories and they were rarely offered for publication. It just wasn’t done (120). Anne Ellis and Agnes Smedley were two women who ventured forth with their pioneer narratives. Anne Ellis began her writing career at the age of fifty when, suffering with asthma, she found a supportive community who encouraged her to write down her stories of growing up in the mining camps. Similarly, Smedley grew up in mining towns in Colorado and the family’s difficulties began with their move West. Both women’s stories are compelling and valuable as we examine them now in light of the frail western woman and creativity.

However, it is those voices never heard that touch Tillie Olsen’s heart. Joan Jensen writes in “Olsen’s Silences and Women’s Voices in the American West” that Olsen mourned the “unnatural silences,” that time stolen from writing by obligations felt toward household duties, the difficulty of finding an audience, and of finding support to write. Certainly life in the West doesn’t lend itself to the leisurely writing of one’s story, and as certainly, the story may be unattractive to audiences. Referring to Olsen’s quote of an unknown source that “creativity is transactional between the individual and the environment in which [s]he lives,” Jensen concludes, “Writers in the West should be writing about that transaction—what it means to live in this particular environment—so that we could see a range of relationships here, in the West. And if authors, including
historians had not spoken to and of those spaces, then we should try to know why” (146, 147). Thus began Jensen’s journey into One Foot on the Rockies and a search for the voices attached to the western space. She looked at frontier authors Mary Austin, Agnes Smedley and Anne Ellis as a means of examining the creative life of western women. Going beyond them, Jensen found many voices—some who published only one book or a short body of work and some whose voice lived only in oral tradition. Jensen writes:

In the end I found far more voices than I could encompass in my work.

Women, it turned out, had not been silenced. Many had spoken through oral and written words. But their voices were scattered and they had not the audience that they needed in order to live for us. That gathering together is the job of writers in both literature and history. (147)

Jensen’s research is heartening and a validation of women’s’ experience of all kinds. If those women’s voices are out there, they deserve to be uncovered and honored.

Jensen reminds us that there is still much to be done to understand western women and their creative voices. She calls scholars, also silenced by time constraints, to examine and understand the differences between the circumstances of women able to support their creative bent, those elite women able to draw on colonizers, and the “subaltern” who struggled with constrictions of class and culture in getting their voices heard (148). She urges us:

to extend our study of writings to women who composed gospel and blues music as well as those composed oratorios, who danced the hula and performed in rodeos as well as those like Isadora Duncan who danced in concert halls, those who made beautiful clothing and other objects for
display, those who built and designed buildings, and those whose words were only spoken, not written. We have to remember that women’s words may be expressed in many forms, that expression itself takes different forms. (148)

This inclusive view of women’s creativity only serves to validate all women’s stories. By excluding varying forms of artistic expression we conspire in silencing those women whose art with which we are unfamiliar.

Like Jensen, I believe there is much to be done to evaluate the role of creativity in the lives of frail women—diarists, letter writers, and those with hidden manuscripts detailing the grueling details and horrors of western life that led to their undoing. By “unsilencing” their plaintive voices, we give them power to rise above their difficulties and add validity to their lives and experiences.

Myres also writes about women’s creativity and expression in the West. In her view, “The West offered challenges to women’s skills and provided opportunities for them to develop and test new talents and to broaden the scope of their home and community activities” (238). She writes that scholars disagree in this area and many argue that the economic opportunity offered men in the West did not extend to women. However, Myres states there is evidence that western women did not confine themselves to traditional domestic and community concerns but branched out as the West allowed them the freedom to do so (239). I counter that this bright view of opportunity in the West doesn’t fit all women and most particularly the frail woman. Women’s creativity often evolved from their pain and need for expression. It was a struggle for women to find the time to create, much less find a market for their art.
Myres writes that western women found an “outlet for their boredom” by making quilts and creating decorative items for their homes (245). Fortunately, some women found time to be bored and so developed a creative outlet. For the frail, unraveling woman, boredom was only part of the picture. Myres’ optimistic interpretation continues: “The Western frontiers supported a number of successful women writers who drew on their pioneer experiences and the rich natural resources of their frontier homes for source material eagerly read by a fascinated Eastern public” (246). She lists a number of successful writers and notes the fact that “writing, like various domestic jobs and services, could be combined with homemaking and child rearing and thus it had a special attraction for women with families to care for” (247). Myres must not have read Tillie Olsen. What about the domestic constraints, abusive and restrictive spouses, limited support, and lack of audience which silence many despondent and dependent western women? Myres’ simplistic and optimistic view falls short. While the West may have offered these opportunities to some, many were excluded. It is in spite of, and because of, the West’s limitations that the unraveling western woman sought and needed creative expression.

Valeria Peyson, Pearl Danniel, and my mother express their creativity in varying ways. Pearl’s writing is obscure and difficult, but there are select pieces with literary value and some articles were published. Her writing allowed her voice to be heard, creatively and politically. The fictional Val struck out for independence as did Jensen’s above mentioned writers. My mother’s craft is more elusive and didn’t find its way to the marketplace, but it brought her some level of pleasure and relief, and much needed prestige among her peers.
To conclude this section, women were and are much a part of the western landscape and the American western narrative. There are strong western women able to take on all the West throws at them, but there are also those less resilient, less stoic and more fragile—maybe not all the time, but sometimes. Denying moments of weakness and not owning up to frailties doesn’t make them disappear; it just keeps them hidden. In an effort to put a good face on women, to emphasize our strengths and not our weaknesses, many recent feminist scholars have denied the fragile, unraveling western woman. For instance, Myres asks us not to focus on the “frightened, tearful woman wrenched from home and hearth and dragged off into the West” (1) and focuses our attention on those frontier women able to shoot a gun, chop the wood, and bake a cake, all at the same time, while standing up to any man. Inness tells us that it isn’t the woman who is to blame, but a society which does not prepare women for the western experience.

In my view there are certain aspects of the West that can lead any woman to the brink. Those elements for the women in this project are disillusionment with a mythic West that can never become reality; betrayal and abandonment by significant and trusted loved ones; and finally a crisis of some magnitude that is the tipping factor for those tottering on the brink of sanity. Yet breaking down isn’t the only issue—ultimately, it is the getting up that makes the difference between sanity and insanity in this “big country.” Weak isn’t necessarily bad, and strong and resilient isn’t necessarily better. They are both stereotypes and the western woman lies in between. Rescuing the representation of the frail western woman in all her complexity acknowledges her existence and values her experience. This rescue makes us all better informed about our western sisters.
On the plains, in the mountains, you learn that you are as important as the beaver, the hawk, the dragonfly—but not more so. You are part of the circle.

"Gaydell Collier"

*Leaning into the Wind*
I now share with you three women’s stories, western narratives: the story of Valeria Peyson, the protagonist in B. M. Bower’s *Lonesome Land*; the story of Pearl Danniel as presented in her personal papers; and the bitter-sweet tale of my mother, enamoured by the western myth, as perceived through my eyes. These three women live in the West, trying to hang on to their sanity. They come with high expectations—they seek the myth, the magic that will wipe the slate clean and provide them with the life they long for: adventure, security, position. And land. What they find is broken dreams and betrayal. They are betrayed by their upbringing, which doesn’t give them the grit they need for this harsh and isolated place; they are betrayed by the men they love, who aren’t the handsome cowboys and heroic saviors they expect; ultimately and most unexpectedly, they are betrayed by the land.

Valeria Peyson’s images of “a gurgly little brook with rocks and watercress and distracting little pools the size of a bathtub...the brook bubbled out and formed a basin the shadow of the rock...a picturesque little cottage...great, beautiful country, fascinating in its very immensity” fall victim to the squalid reality of Cold Spring Coulee (59). Val’s fear of prairie fire becomes terrifyingly real as this land she so wanted to call her own burns without restraint, threatening all she has, even her life. Pearl Danniel’s “land, free land...Out west there was...room and oppurtunity for all” (ms 237, box 3, folder 2 p. 1) comes to cost her dearly, encompassing two failed marriages and the loss of most of the ground she cherishes. Even my mother’s idea of the pretty ranch house, white picket fence, barns, and horses betray her when it doesn’t calm her nerves. Ownership and possession slide out of her grasp as she slides into depression and mental illness. Such betrayals of high expectations result, for all three, in utter disillusionment.
Each woman came to different conclusions in their stories but the end result was facing their frailties and reinventing themselves as strong, determined women, or succumbing. My mother’s story is different from the other’s. Val and Pearl write away their madness but my mother’s creative bent, her flare for fashion and decorating, fail her and there is no resolution. Still, I maintain that though my mother could never conquer the West, she claims it as her own. In her mind—her imagination—it is more hers than anywhere else she landed. Today, the West remains, more civilized perhaps, but much the same in that women come searching out a romantic image—the myth of unrestrained self-expression, love, and fulfillment in untamed country. What we find is decidedly different. It is still isolated, sometimes lonely, and freedom is relative. How we come to grips with that reality determines our destinies. Do we stay and fall in love with the landscape, making it our own, or do we discover that the myth is too large, too demanding for us to lay claim to? Whatever the choice—the West remains the West in fact and in fiction.

§

VAL AND HER COWBOY

We first meet B. M. Bower’s Valeria Peyson about to disembark the train, which has carried her West to meet her betrothed. She has abandoned her eastern upbringing to prepare for a new life in new land with a new husband. The first hints of Valeria’s emotional fraying show early in her western adventure. On the train bound for Hope, a fictitious railroad town in northern Montana, she prattles on to a “thin-faced” vacationing schoolteacher with excitement and happiness about the wide-open country and the ranch her sainted Manley Fleetwood has readied for her. Her weary companion listens
knowingly and smiles “with somewhat wistful sympathy,” wishing Val happiness (3). Val is incredulous anyone could doubt her good fortune and joy, but her confidence slips when she confides, “isn’t it a funny little depot?” (3). Val’s incessant babbling implies a less than certain feeling about her new situation and she reassures herself, “…but I’m going to be happy. My mind is quite made up” (3). She departs the train and bids the teacher, conductor, and porter farewell and watches the rear platform of the train leave her behind, as she wonders “why it was that her heart went heavy so suddenly” (4). This sinking feeling foreshadows her eventual disappointment in her new life.

Val’s sinking feeling turns to anxiety when, instead of Manley, his friend Kent greets her at the depot. She anticipates Manley’s “face to be the first she looked upon in that town” (4). She worries that Manley may be ill and feels alone and afraid, “I hope he isn’t sick, or—” (4). Later in the shabby hotel lobby, where Kent has deposited her, Val fidgets—glancing at the time, watching the door open and close—“with a timid fluttering of heart…the saloons so numerous and terrifying in their simplicity” (9). All Val wants is for Manley to arrive intact, but no one comes near her with any word of her beloved. “She had never dreamed of being treated in this way” she admits, and breaks into tears (10). In Valeria’s mind nothing but death could keep her anxious sweetheart from her and apprehension sets in before she repeats her wedding vows.

Val has high expectations of the West, and this town, ironically named Hope, falls way short of her dreams. She disembarks from the train and notices the conditions of the street and the poorly cared for buildings with disdain. Val is an outsider, a greenhorn, and to her, as to other passengers on the train, “the place looked crudely picturesque—interesting, so long as one was not compelled to live there and could retain a perfectly
impersonal viewpoint...” (2). Trudging into the dilapidated hotel with the “sagging door,” she says to no one other than herself, “and I expected bearskin rugs, and antlers on the walls, and big fireplaces!” (4). Val’s romantic picture of the West is challenged, but she holds tight to her romanticized notions, denying what she clearly sees, so as to maintain her equilibrium.

Val valiantly tries to recover from her rocky reception at Hope, and chatters incessantly to Manley on their ride toward the ranch. He warns her “it will be rough” but she retorts, “ah, Manley, if you only knew how I long for something rough and real in my life” (63). Val’s romanticized notion of “rough” includes the spring and the spilling water, the rock ledge, and the sweet peas by the cottage door. Her vision of “rough” is nothing like Cold Spring Ranch, and upon arrival she murmurs, “I wanted it to be rough, but I didn’t mean—why, this is just squalid” (68). The illusion slips away and disappointment creeps into her psyche as her eastern notions fade into a self-delusional fantasy.

Val comes head to head with disillusionment in her new little house and her emotional fraying continues. Entering the front room she sees a masculine kind of housekeeping—a “dusty carpet, and a rug or two” but most particularly glaring is her latest picture “nailed to the wall”—a fitting view of her situation at the moment. Val sees it and “breaks into hysterical laughter” (66). She wanders around the house noticing the horse flies, the frying pans hung on nails, and returning to the kitchen her eye again falls to her picture—“her face lost a little of its frozen blankness—enough so that her lips quivered until she bit them into steadiness” (68). Her illusions continue to fall away as she tours the ranch, the spring, the trees—“there were no trees—not real trees” and
mercilessly she was stripping her mind of her illusions and was clothing it in the harsher weave of reality” (70, 71). Clearly Val’s hitting up against reality alters her romantic vision of life on the ranch.

Valeria’s eastern upbringing fails to prepare her for what is ahead and her romanticized image of the West sets her up for a fall. Back east Val had prepared herself to be the perfect wife for Manley Fleetwood by learning to cook and sew and practice the violin, only to find out through experience that the rules have changed. Later she confides in Kent, “reality is hard and ugly” (157). Her drunken husband has, for all purposes, abandoned his responsibilities and now she finds herself responsible for chopping wood and carrying water, all the things Manley is supposed to do. She must re-evaluate her duties as a wife—not as an eastern woman, but as “wife of a Western rancher” (87).

Manley’s increasing disintegration into drunkenness parallels Valeria’s building disillusionment. Days run into days and time moves unmeasured in the surreal atmosphere of smoke and haze veiling the red sun and moon. The prairie shimmers with heat and the ever-present threat of wildfire hangs in the air just as the “dull haze of smoke” (72). A disinterested Manley becomes complacent about chores around the place and his fire guards, crucial to protecting their ranch, are haphazard and inadequate. Val appears helpless to alter her course (77). Inevitably, fire ignites. First a minor blaze, smothered by neighboring ranchers, including Polycarp Jenks and Kent, but it is only a prelude to what is to come.

Val is sick with worry about fire and her disillusionment couples with fear each time that her husband abandons her on the prairie in such dangerous and unpredictable
circumstances. Manley needs little excuse to head to town alone and celebrate so the arrival of a campaigning politician is just the ticket. Interestingly, the very train Manley goes to greet speeds across the prairie spewing sparks and igniting the blaze that brings the abandoned Val to crisis and breakdown. Many times, “in utter desolation” while her husband is detained by some errand, she lies alone, “nights when the coyotes howled much louder than usual, and she could not sleep for the mysterious snapping and creaking about the shack, but lay shivering with fear until dawn” (87). Even then, she clings to her sanity by a thread, but the fire drains the rest of her resiliency and leaves her staggering and bereft. Collapsing in a heap she whispers, “I—can’t—fight—any more” (126). Kent arrives in the nick of time to help fight the fire and realizes, “her mental and physical apathy were not to be mistaken. The girl was utterly exhausted with firefighting and nervous strain” (130). The blaze has taken everything, and refusing Kent’s offer of tea, Val murmurs, “I want to die” (134). Finally she bows to his insistence and drinking the tea, spews out her fears, “I have always thought that I could bear anything. But last night...I dreamed about fires and that Manley was—dead—and I woke up in a perfect horror” (139). At the end of her rope, Val comes face to face with her vulnerability. It is over, this dream world in which she has been living, and she is left with the ashes.

Somehow Valeria remains in the dark about Manley’s increasing alcoholism. She refuses to see the signs of this ultimate betrayal. After hearing Val is trapped, alone in a prairie fire, Manley rides to the saloon, staggers inside, and answers the bartender’s inquiry with, “Val—my Val...Back there alone—get me a drink...or I’ll go crazy” (115). Manley Fleetwood sinks deeper into his infirmity even as Valeria faces a crisis that brings her soundly to her knees. When Arline Hawley arrives at the ranch, Val asks
plaintively, "Manley didn’t come?" and Mrs. Hawley passes off another excuse, sheltering Val from the awful truth. Still soundly immersed in denial, Val’s concern is silenced by the fraudulent community, which conspires to keep Man’s dark secret. She doesn’t understand her husband’s absence.

Kent realizes the time for truth has come and, once back in town, he answers Val’s inquiry about Manley being hurt or dead, "He ain’t either one...he’s drunk!" (152). "Drunk," the word is finally out in the open and, after digesting it, Val seems stricken. "Her face was perfectly colorless, her manner frozen;" she takes the news harder than she would Manley’s death (153). Kent recognizes here is a woman “who believes that she might better die than marry a drunkard” (154). This woman is tipping and flailing to keep her balance. Learning Man is a raging alcoholic, Val laments bitterly, “But if it’s true, what you tell me—if Manley himself is another disillusionment—if beyond his selfishness and his carelessness he is a drunken brute whom I can’t even respect, then I’m done with my ideals” (157). She is done with her illusions of what would be on Cold Springs Coulee Ranch and more than that, done believing in her husband, who had betrayed her trust and broken her heart—broken her resiliency and left her to her own devices. How now is she to come back from the brink of her desolation?

Val’s awakening and restoration comes through facing reality, through humbling herself, and most importantly, through writing her western stories. She recaps her situation and disillusionment, “I was raised well...my mother was very careful about me” (156). She elucidates her upbringing and values: she was taught to be a good wife and to prepare for a marriage that must last forever. Val suddenly realizes she “lived a beautiful, picturesque dream of domestic happiness” and it was all a lie (157). Val tells
Kent she wants to face facts and see Manley as he really is and recites a significant piece of poetry about love gone wrong and men hurting the ones they love. At this point Kent stops her, silences her, and abruptly tells her that she is talking “hysterics” and needs sleep, that she isn’t “normal” (158). Val’s heart sinks. Even this kind, practical savior misses it and diminishes her feelings, telling her she’ll feel better in the morning. Truth is he can’t take it. Val explodes, “You men are all alike...you give orders and you consider yourselves above all the laws of morality or decency; in reality you are beneath them. We shouldn’t expect anything of the lower animals! How I despise men” (159). She needs to talk, to uncover deeply repressed emotions buried since she arrived in this big, lonely country and in revealing these disappointments, she charts her course toward equilibrium.

The climb out of the ashes is humiliating but regenerating, and Val recognizes how despicable and rude her snooty attitude toward the community and her neighbors has been. Her eastern societal etiquette and structure fail her. The rules she depended on to define propriety are inadequate. She appears snobbish and silly until she relents, goes to Arline’s dance, bridges the gap and forms relationships. After the group rebuilds the ranch, Val repents to Arline, "We should go down on our knees and beg their pardon, and yours—I especially” (201). She begs forgiveness for "all the resentment I have felt against the country and the people in it” (202). This humbling confession and plea for forgiveness forges a bond with Arline she will need shortly.

Perhaps the most significant element in the reinvention of Valeria Peyson Fleetwood is her writing. Manley “sloped down” and slides resolutely off the wagon, rustles cattle, and continues his downward spiral; Kent falls in love; and Val begins
writing. She turns to Kent as a confidante and asks him to collaborate with her on stories and poems—tales about the land and the life she lives, owning it, learning the West. Val confides, “It seems to change everything. Pal, I—I’ve been writing things” (230). The marriage is irretrievably over and she needs to make her own way. Kent can partner up with her in this way at least. Val’s writing clears her vision and helps her formulate a plan. She needs money and explains, “But there seems to be money in it for those who succeed and it’s work that I can do here. I have oceans of time, and I’m not disturbed...I do so much thinking, I might as well put my brain to some use” (232). In that “lonesome land” she and others like her find solace putting words to the page.

Kent is in love with Val and the reader can only surmise how the love story unfolds. What we do know is that Valeria Peyson Fleetwood came West filled with illusions of a grand adventure in wide-open country with the sainted Manley Fleetwood, but her eastern manners and mores failed to prepare her for reality. She hit the wall hard. Disillusioned, she was further betrayed by her man, and even the land, when its unpredictability and enormity seemed to turn on her. Val took another look at the West and came out of the ashes—with the help of her friends and by writing her stories. Left in the east, Valeria wouldn’t have experienced this breakdown, nor would she have developed into a strong woman in charge of her destiny, instead of the fragile, sniveling, shrinking violet we met at the depot. The West and its isolation, fearsome noises and natural disasters, crudeness and toughness, its beauty and enormity, contribute to her unraveling and, ultimately, to her restoration.
PEARL AND HER COWBOYS

Pearl Danniel’s manuscript collection is daunting, filling three boxes with multiple folders. Pearl edited some portions, scratched out, and cut and pasted. It is difficult to sift through, and her story is a mix of fact and fiction. Ellie Arguimbau, archivist of the Montana Historical Society Library, reveals, “Pearl did not clearly distinguish between her fiction and her autobiography. She fictionalized portions of her autobiography and most of her fiction was loosely autobiographical” (63). Ann Fabian’s essay, “History for the Masses: Commercializing the Western Past” argues, “Western history (both the history that has been written by scholars and history that has been lived by western peoples) cannot be set up as pure, scientific, and free of the artful distortions of the popular imagination… the factual and the legendary are so thoroughly entwined that they cannot be separated” (226). Certainly, in comparing Valeria Peyson Fleetwood (the protagonist in Lonesome Land by B. M. Bower) and Pearl Danniel, it is difficult in many ways to tell the difference between fact and fiction. Like Val, Pearl is disillusioned when her idea of the West doesn’t fit reality and her men likewise betray her.

Unlike Valeria Peyson, Pearl Danniel’s upbringing is dysfunctional and traumatic. Raised by an alcoholic father and an abusive mother, her childhood influences the rest of her life. Her dear grandparents, Dad and Ma, supply some measure of balance in her youth, and Pearl expresses great affection for her extended family. She writes in her 1961 “Brief Biography, “My father who had been a well dressed, clean man when I was little had become a dirty, drunken man who beat me, and the woman I called my mother” (ms 237, 3:1). Pearl doesn’t have the benefit of a fine upbringing, with established social mores to guide her, but her drunken father did provide her with treasured gifts: books and
education. Pearl writes, “I can not remember a time when I did not know how to read.” Still she asserts, “I saw more of drunkenness than I saw of anything else” (ms 237, 3:1, p.2).

Born in Quincy, Illinois, in 1885, Pearl Sparks moved around a lot as a child. At seven or eight years of age she moved in with her grandparents in Moody Bottoms, near the Mississippi River in Missouri. In Pearl’s manuscripts she terms the family “bottom rats” or what was thought of as “poor white trash” (Arguimbau 63). She married Clarence Unglesbee in 1904 and his father disowned him for marrying a “bottom rat,” so the couple returned to Quincy and Clarence worked in a foundry. The family missed the country so much they moved back to Moody Bottoms to sharecrop, but the situation was bleak and Pearl and Clarence began collecting information on homesteading in the West (63, 64).

The couple saw homesteading as an opportunity and headed West. Clarence went ahead, leaving Pearl and the children to follow. When the time comes, Pearl travels West in fear and trepidation. She cries as she leaves friends and home behind and the children thought it was “cold” and “dirty.” Through the “dirty, frosty windows” of the train Pearl and the girls look in dismay at those huddled on the platform in Minot and wonder if they are, “all Indians” (Danniel, 3:2, p.7). Inwardly Pearl questions if the West is still as wild as portrayed in the movies.

Interestingly, Pearl Danniel’s introduction to the West parallels the fictional Valeria Peyson’s experience in that, when she arrives at Snowden, the town isn’t what she expects, nor is her husband there to meet the little family when they arrive. It was the right date and place, but no Clarence. Hearing the crowd talking about a drunk man
falling into the water tank and drowning, Pearl is terrified it is her husband. Someone climbs into the tank and comes out with a description of the dead man, scaring Pearl even more. The body stays in the tank and the coroner is called. He arrives, late and drunk, asking for a distinguishing mark to identify the corpse. Pearl describes a tattoo on Clarence’s arm and is assured the deceased is not her husband. Unlike Manley Fleetwood, Clarence shows up—sober; he had been detained by work. But while she waits in a strange place with no one to meet her, Pearl is anxiety-ridden. She writes, “...neither tears nor talk would persuade them to see the dead man” (ms 237, box 3:2, p.10). Her first introduction to the West is fraught with fear and uncertainty; she is alone in a strange land, and continues, “How little they knew. I had plenty to worry about I had so little money, and where was Clarence?” (ms 237, box 3:2, p.11). Like Val’s story, this quirky beginning foreshadows how Pearl’s western adventure turns from dreams to disillusionment.

Pearl and Clarence’s obsession with “free land” and the disillusionment that follows provides the context for Pearl’s breakdown. Dissatisfied with their sharecroppers’ life, the couple follows Clarence’s relatives West to homestead government ground. Pearl explains in The Way the West Greeted Me, “I would do anything for a chance to have a home...Out west there was, they said, room and oppurtunity [sic] for all” (ms 237, 3:2, p.1). Pearl writes, “I was picturing in my mind the small log house we would build. White pine flooring, clean windows shining, white curtains sparkling—of course we would build a big house after we got ahead—” (ms 237, 3:2, p.12). In 1918 Pear, Clarence and some of Pearl’s siblings, homesteaded on Rock Creek, east of Big Dry country, about twenty miles south of where Fort Peck Dam would
later be built. Her little cabin hardly resembles the house she envisioned (Arguimbau, 64, 65). Like Val, Pearl seeks new life, adventure, and prosperity and heads West toward wide open, free land, only to be disappointed.

Homesteading is harsh but rewarding for Pearl and like Val, she discovers the goodness of folks in the Big Dry as they gather for dances and parties, and lend a helping hand in hard times. Pearl and Clarence become proprietors of the store and post office in Bonin and things appear to be good and Pearl “fell in love with the land” (Arguimbau, 65). Then, just as in Lonesome Land, crisis comes in the form of fire and the community betrayal that follows. When the store and post office burns, the Unglesbees are accused of wrongdoing—Clarence of arson and Pearl of embezzling post office funds. Though cleared of criminal charges, Pearl becomes disillusioned with the community and her unraveling manifests itself in a kind of mysticism, isolating her even more from her neighbors. She begins meditating and has visions and experiences that, Arguimbau writes, “border on witchcraft” (66).

Pearl also has a penchant for bad choices in men. She becomes involved in an ill-fated romance and Clarence returns to Illinois. In 1927, Pearl follows Clarence to Wisconsin, where he eventually finds work, to “try to patch up their marriage” (66). They reconcile, but Clarence dies unexpectedly and Pearl turns back, alone, to Montana. Her next beau is Perry Scott Danniel, a horseman who hunts Montana’s wild horses to sell. Married in 1929, “The year of the beginning of the Great Bloodless revolution,” their relationship is rocky (Brief Biography, 1960, ms 237, 3:1 p.2). Scotty’s personality is fickle—sometimes warm and kind and other times cruel and harsh. Pearl becomes more ensconced in mysticism and the rift widens between the couple.
Pearl’s personal depression coincides with the national depression but as it deepens, Pearl discovers she can write and so discovers her voice.

In 1930 the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* publishes a letter Pearl wrote a friend about life in Montana,

> This is a hard, hard land, any time, desert-like in this particular locality, most years. Though lavish are nature’s gifts when it rains, as it does some years, just extremes. It is almost always too hot or too cold, too wet or too dry, and life is like that here also, gray, lonely, chilling...It is now four years this summer since we raised any crops. Only a few people live here.

(qtd. in Arguimbau 66)

According to Arguimbau, writing becomes Pearl’s “greatest passion” (66). Several more articles were published but they brought in little revenue. Times were lean for Scotty and Pearl and they depended on the Red Cross and other relief agencies for their existence (66).

Pearl’s breakdown is complete when, in 1936, the building of Fort Peck dam results in the loss of most of her property. She falls ill and needs surgery, and the couple is forced to liquidate at great loss. She does what she can to cover the cost, but Scotty ends up paying the balance by selling his ground. He bitterly resents it and decides to leave Pearl and move to Idaho (Arguimbau 67). Pearl writes:

> Scotty was leaving me. I wept as he packed...I was only Circumstance: the circumstance that had cost him all he ever owned, his homestead, the little log cabin he had built on it with his own hands located in the very
heart of Montana Badlands on the Big Dry Creek... (ms 237, box 3, folder 2).

The disillusion of her marriage and the loss of property due to the dam project left Pearl despondent and alone.

Pearl articulates her frustration and disillusionment with the government through her writing, channeling her views in an acceptable, if somewhat fanatical, format. Arguimbau cites several examples of Pearl’s writing but adds,

Pearl’s writing is difficult. It is often awful. It violates every rule of good writing. Much of her political writing is polemical and borders on the paranoid. She was bigoted and intolerant. She could not keep to a topic and wandered in a stream-of-consciousness from one thought to another. That said, there is still a tremendous appeal to her writing. She cared.

There is an immediacy and genuineness that tugs at you. She became almost lyric when talking about the land. She craved beauty and saw it in the land. Her descriptions of the Montana badlands and the wild horses that lived there are among her best writing. (69)

Included in her writing is a plodding history of the world, a poem about Napoleon, and a complete novel, *Slum Timber*, set in the Mississippi River bottoms. The novel tells the story of a dam being built across the river, damaging the lives of residents and the beauty of the countryside, which Arguimbau believes is an obvious allusion to Fort Peck (69). There is also an unpublished manuscript about the lives of horsemen in the Montana badlands. However, in Arguimbau’s opinion, her poetry stands out against the rest. Pearl
wrote a small book of poetry titled *The Heart of an Old Woman* from which this piece was taken:

The Lonely Coyotes Howl

It's a lonely bugle calling  
Across the windy hills  
It sings of blood upon the trail,  
And of bellies to be filled.  
'Tis as haunting as the laughter  
Of Love's first awkward try  
As old as the song the wild goose sings  
Of adventure in the sky.  

It's dark as deepest midnight.  
It holds courage to meet life.  
It is primitive and savage  
As murder with a knife.  
It sets the air to throbbing,  
And makes one want to sway  
In a rigadoon that tells the tale  
And is the only way.  

To tell of things that have no words  
Of things Man can't endure  
When he must see the walls of home,  
And pray for something pure.  
It sings of night, and cold and pain  
Of Death beneath his cowl.  
It holds the sorrows of the world  
The lonely coyote's howl.  (qtd. in Arguimbau 69-70)

Pearl Danniel was an eccentric. She fought the government and wrote raging and scathing political narratives. She wrote for the Glasgow *Courier* and the Circle *Banner*, as well as poetry, songs, and one complete novel. When she could no longer live year round in her little homesteader cabin, she spent winters with her daughter in Miles City and died on June 14, 1975 at the age of 90 (70). Pearl lived hard and danced with madness in that big country called the West.
B. M. Bower creates a life as her protagonist, Valeria Peyson, journeys West to marry her sweetheart with a romantic western fantasy dancing in her head. Pearl Danniel, a homesteader in the “Big Dry” country of eastern Montana, records her story in her personal papers held by the Montana Historical Society Library. Written in 1912, Bower’s novel tells of homesteading in eastern Montana circa the late 1800s, while Pearl travels West in 1916, homesteading in 1918. Decades separate the tales, but the landscape’s severity, the isolation, and the austerity of their lives are constants. Both women come from points east; both anticipate a fulfilling life of adventure and domestic tranquility on “free Land” in wide-open country; both are disappointed. Their romanticized vision of the West fails to fit reality and the men they love are not who they pretended to be. A combination of disillusionment, betrayal, and crisis contribute to each woman’s unraveling. Yet these narratives do not end in tragedy for Valeria and Pearl. Ultimately coming to terms with the western landscape, sheer determination and most, strikingly, their writing bring a measure of resolution to both women.

Pam Houston writes in her introduction to Lonesome Land, “A brush fire, a glass of whisky, some unpublished words on a white page; these were the differences between sanity and madness in that big country. People who went down went down slowly, irretrievably and the ones who didn’t were not free from days when they thought they might” (vii). Traditional domestic female roles don’t work in the West, and Valeria and Pearl reinvent themselves as strong western women who must fight to survive, writing their way back to sanity.

Houston tells us that B.M. Bower writes “about the isolation, the loneliness, the strangeness of being a smart and articulate woman in a place where people would just as
soon you weren’t that way.” She explains that Bowers’ “fear and love for the
surrounding lonely land get so balled up together there ought to be a single word for it…”
(viii). Like Bower’s character, Val, Pearl Danniel also wrote about life and about place.
She was a western woman who clung to the land she loved and barely hung on to her
sanity. Houston speaks beautifully to these women’s stories:

We walk on the land, we raise children in it, we curse it, we love it, we
make it our own. One day we realize it has been a very long time since we
needed a translator. Our lives have become so bound up in the land that
we can no longer find the separation; that the land speaks to us and
through us in a way that it hasn’t before spoken; that our woman’s ears
hear it differently than it has ever been heard before.

Our next response, if we’re lucky, is to write. (ix)
"The sharp air stirred my senses, awakening something in me—the nesting instinct, like women and animals about to give birth. Restlessness, which drives me to make myself ready. To prepare for the oncoming winter. This land and its seasons are not friends of mine. I know them well—they are not mine. Winter of starkness, I know that you're coming, I feel it."

"Mary Lynn Vosen"

_Leaning into the Wind_
My Mother and Her Cowboy

My mother gazes devotedly at the back cover of *Time Magazine*. “They are the best” she states. I wonder who “they” are as she reiterates, “He is the best.” Leaning closer I understand and smile as a nostalgic image tugs at my heart. Scanning the fenced range, the weathered, rugged Marlboro Man, in chaps and hat, sits his horse and pulls on a cigarette. “If only he didn’t smoke,” she continues thoughtfully. Indicative of the state of her mind now, Mom doesn’t get it that the point of the ad is selling cigarettes; and indicative of the state of her heart is the everlasting, overpowering attraction she has to cowboys and the western mystique. My mother isn’t looking for truth. Pure fantasy—that’s the only reality she ever wanted. Eighty-six-years-old, she lives in a lovely assisted care facility far from her California home. Her primary caregiver for 60 years is gone—her husband, my father, a cattleman. Now in Montana, the ultimate West, Mom fantasizes about what never was but what she hoped for, the bigger than life western myth.

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Born and raised in the high-desert country of northeastern California, near 50 miles south of Oregon, and 12 miles West of the Nevada border, my father’s roots burrow far under the alkali lakes dotting the length of the valley. They say settlers traveling the “‘49” Trail were so relieved after topping the Nevada mountains and discovering green respite from the desert they named this place Surprise Valley. It could be true. Standing in the middle of the valley looking east, the scene is of sagebrush and bare mountains. To the West lies the Warner Range of the Sierra Nevadas, timbered, and
dotted with cedar and aspen. Yet in between lies a pretty, peaceful glen, my Dad’s home ground.

The Hills, my Dad’s folks, were ranch people with a touch of class. Those who came before gave form to my father. My great-grandmother’s name was Susan Tranquil; I’m told it suited her. Among the original settlers, her husband, Daniel Eden Hill, traveled West to the Surprise on a prospecting venture, took up ground and, with hard work and thriftiness, developed a good homestead. Straight and tall, one of ten children with temperaments as varied as Modoc County weather, my Grandad spoke with a gentle voice. Emigrating from Canada, via Virginia City, Nevada, a town much too violent for their taste, Dad’s maternal grandparents, Thomas and Anna Johnstone, became merchants, buying the dry goods store in Cedarville, the largest town in the valley. My dad was one of three, the middle child. His family regarded education highly and all attended college—Dad studied “Animal Husbandry,” preparing for what he believed to be his career, raising registered Hereford breeding stock. Dad loved cattle. He was a natural, my cousin tells me, I don’t know how he did it. Near the end he couldn’t see to drive a car but he could walk among the herd and separate cows as well or better than most.

My mother’s grandparents, Alec and Margaret Kirk Cameron, sailed in 1896 from Scotland into Mendocino, California on the Noyo with their three small children, Margaret, Nell, and little Archie, my maternal grandfather. “Papa” Cameron’s brothers, big Uncle Archie and Duncan, arrived in America some years before, settling in the northern California town of Comptche. Anxious for housekeeping help, the two bachelors urged Alec to join them, portraying a rosy view of life in California. She was
the refined one, my mother says of her Granny, Her name was Lyle but marriage turned her to a Cameron, and she found herself in Comptche, of all places. My maternal grandmother, Myrtle Parsons, was raised near Salinas, California. Something happened; she wasn’t close to her family, my mother confides. In a complicated coupling, young Archie Cameron and Myrtle Parsons began a life of continuing complexity, parenting two children, my mother the elder.

My mother’s father battled alcoholism most of his life and shortly after his daughter’s marriage he vanished. One day a parcel arrived for my mother from a classy San Francisco department store. It bore no card and contained a fine, red raincoat. My mother knew who sent it. In and out of bars and unreliable, this likeable Scotsman and my grandmother separated and reconciled various times throughout their tumultuous marriage, unmindful of the effects on their children. The sins of the fathers....

***

My parents marry May 4, 1936, in Reno. His folks stand attractive, steady, and straightforward. My mother’s parents hold a different appeal: her mother’s hair white and coifed, a fur draping her neck (head and tail attached), her father, short and dapper, hat angling cockily in a dare-me kind of way. A star-crossed romance, my parents’ union—married to others they may have found happiness, but my mother has her demons. Off to the Oregon Caves, my mother cries, I wonder when I will see the ocean again, and after the honeymoon, she settles with her new husband into the old white ranch house, north of Cedarville, Dad’s home place, without electricity and indoor plumbing. Demon. Ranch life is hard and the valley desolate and isolated. Demon. Years later, her father ends his long battle with the bottle by committing suicide in a
remote forest, his remains lost for years. Demon. Dad’s cousin appears one day bearing a newspaper article detailing the grisly discovery of a corpse in the mountains of Shasta County. The identifying evidence of the dead man was a Masonic ring with her father’s initials. All prove too difficult for my mother’s psyche and, she too attempts to end her life. This desperate act of a troubled woman sets the tone for the years to come, for her husband, for two small daughters.

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Some four-hundred-miles from the Mendocino Coast, the Circle Cross is the first of three ranches bordering one another right down to the shore of what valley people call Middle Lake, snuggled right up against the California-Nevada line. All run by Hills: the first my dad’s, then Grandad’s, the last our cousin, Clyde’s. The one-room-school my Grandad taught in sits empty and useless beyond our gate. My father finishes painting “Circle Cross” in bold, black letters on the gatepost he just erected and leaning against the fence, he proudly poses for a snapshot. This is my parents’ first home.

My mother’s coastal holiday tradition dictates having “the tree” on Christmas Eve and a hearty Scottish celebration Christmas Day. But in Modoc there are cows to milk and chores need doing. Early Christmas morning—more milking, then feeding the stock. *I thought we would never open our presents*, she says of her first Christmas, a warning of difference to this seacoast girl.

Married seven and one-half-years, my parents’ first-born arrives on Christmas Day, 1943, and five years later I follow. My mother fears giving birth in the valley and travels to the coast in advance of each arrival. She needs to be near her mother, a nurse, and medical facilities she trusts. Each time away is long and the labors are difficult.
Daddy misses my birth, instead attending a bull sale, and she never gets beyond his betrayal. She tells me often of his disappointment—*he wanted a boy*—but I know better. Child rearing is trying for my mother and she sometimes laments, *I never should have had kids*: no threat, rather blunt truth for a woman struggling with identity and place.

***

Irrigation transforms the sagebrush-covered ground of Surprise Valley into alfalfa and hay fields. In this dry, high-country climate, my father marvels at water. To him, changing the face of nature to produce feed for his cattle is nothing short of miraculous. Three-years-old and tousel-haired, I traipse after my father as he slogs along the ditches, shovel slung over his shoulder. Snowmelt runs and the days lengthen, but a chill lingers in the air. Wearing irrigating boots and a cowboy hat, Dad channels the water in the way it should go. I stretch to plant my feet in his footprints so I don’t lose my boots, but Dad’s stride is long and my legs can’t reach. *Daddy, take smaller steps so I can keep up.* It is 1951; I don’t know it but my time in the valley is coming to a close. It is a place I feel safe, a place my father and I both fit.

Dad’s arms feel strong as he lifts me high, tossing me giggling into the hay on the horse-drawn wagon. It is haying season, a busy time on the ranch and the energy is high. Men laugh and talk, in for dinner served on our screened-in back porch. This is no fun for Mom and she is frantic. She has help cooking but it is hard work and foreign to her: the wood cook-stove is hot in the summer kitchen, and cooking seems endless. Hungry hands expect a hearty meal and women scurry about with lemonade and iced tea in aluminum pitchers, setting the oilcloth covered table, serving food. After the meal, the women face the turmoil of leftover food, dirty dishes, and scads of cooking utensils.
They set to work putting the kitchen to right, which takes near until evening and time to start supper. My mother didn’t sign on for this; the glamour of being a rancher’s wife melts away as sweat runs into her eyes, and she pushes her hair from her face.

Summer—our yard is big with a barnyard full of farm animals. The vegetable garden fills its plot of ground and my sister and I sprawl beneath the shade trees, eating fresh peas from the garden, cavorting, half-dressed; the cool, green grass balances the summer heat. Flowers pleasure my mother and bright blooms fill our yard. She lays out each bed by height, color and season of bloom. Country scents—the dusty lane, hay growing in the fields, and barnyard odors—filter through the air, but none of these pastoral components calm my mother. She withers as the flowers bloom and her turmoil is palpable; her moods swing and depression takes hold.

Winter in Modoc means snowdrifts choking lanes, schools closing, and my father feeding cattle from a hay wagon drawn by sturdy workhorses. My sister and I don snow gear and chase out to play in the snow-blanketed pasture beyond the house. Dad hitches a runner sled to the back of the old blue ranch truck and we hooky-bob behind. Delighted, we laugh and giggle, flying through the snow, tumbling off and climbing back on until the cold bites and our laughter turns to tears. My mother isn’t part of these winter games, the frozen landscape contains her—isolated and lonely—inside the pretty house.

***

We inhabit this valley four years beyond my birth. About six miles north of the little town of Cedarville, the white house rises behind a neat, white-picket-fence. Blooming flowers and evergreens alternately trail from the red window box, changing
with the season. Red shutters border the front windows and white lattice contrasts the red-brick porch steps, joining flat stepping-stones leading to the front gate. My mother creates a consoling space in this primitive country: a flowered chintz sofa and an overstuffed chair dominate our living room; waxed hardwood floors glow warmly, covered by homey, braided rugs. My big sister and I share meals at a small, red-topped table and our parents sit at a larger one tucked away in a cozy breakfast nook. Black and white checkerboard tiles boldly overlay the kitchen floor completing the color scheme—this is her art, her reach for sanity. One night, we gaze out the French windows in the dining room as large, feathery snowflakes drift through the lighted night; my mother softly admits, It is beautiful. A rare time of peace in this place I call home, a keeper in my child’s memory. I am young, but I know this pretty place isn’t happy anymore. My mother is unraveling.

Mom differs from the valley women. She cuts a swath in this rural community, dressing like a fashion plate; she draws much desired attention, setting her apart. It was our fault too, my aunt confides. We put her on a pedestal and made so much of her—it wasn’t good. The window dressing doesn’t work and even the delightful cowgirl clothes and her palomino pony, Nugget—gifts from her handsome cowboy—don’t quell her fears and feelings of inadequacy and difference. Over the long haul, she isn’t what she projects and the pretense is too much. The down and dirty way of the West—the isolation and drudgery, along with family secrets and mental illness—bring my mother to crisis and breakdown.
She is big in age only, this sibling of mine—small, spunky, five years older, the feminine side of this sister act. My baby self learns her name as Sister shortened to Sissy as I grow. My mother clothes us in sister-dresses and I own each dress twice, donning the hand-me-downs gladly. At home on the ranch I sleep upstairs in my crib. Flowered curtains drape the sash windows in my room and the blooms become lions’ heads in my imagination. I dream fitfully of jungle beasts, oblivious to what lies below, and my sister is off to school. Daddy’s out—to be away a while—but something calls him back. There on the bathroom floor of her peach and brown decorator bathroom lies my mother, unconscious from an overdose of pills. My mother’s suicide attempt sets us adrift.

My father kneels by the tub washing our long hair. Two little girls, one blond, one dark, each dripping mass cascading around our faces. This gentle cowman cares for his daughters with big hands and strong arms, alone with us for now. Silencing, repressing—our mother’s absence is not explained. Daddy lifts his two tiny girls from the bathtub, towel-dries, and dresses us. Braids or ponytails calm the tangles. Mother and father, he is our one true parent. Dad cares for us until it becomes too much and my aunt bundles me away to her house; Sissy shifts between other relatives, landing with my grandmother on the coast.

They diagnose my mother’s “nervous breakdown,” a catchall for emotional upset, later dubbed manic-depression, and my father decides he must help Mom find peace. But, there is no peace on the ranch. A rash decision—Dad sells the place to his father. My Grandad asks, Are you sure? Off to the coast, closer to my grandmother, Mom’s home. It’s a generous plan from a well-meaning man who assumes responsibility for my
mother's happiness. *I never wanted to come here*, claims my mother and the saga continues.

Perched on a petit-point-covered chair, my father bends uncomfortably over the small desk working on papers for the cattle operation he maintains some four hundred miles away. My dad is as out of place at that desk as he is on the coast. Ten years we spend on the craggy coastline before Dad hires on as the county fair manager and we head back to Modoc. My sister marries her high school sweetheart and stays behind, making her home on the coast. Back in the Valley the ranch is gone and Dad's place in the community has shifted but he is home at last. Mom seems resigned and pleased at her status in the valley, for the moment. Years pass and I marry the boy across the street. In time we make our own pioneering trek north and east into Big Sky Country—Montana.

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1995, Daddy is sick. Phone calls and messages, frantic attempts to reconcile what we must do, and how. *What about Mom? I don't want to go up there,* Sissy asserts, *I hate hospitals.* Dad is in intensive care in Klamath Falls, Oregon, the nearest adequate hospital. It is no longer a choice: I fly, my sister drives. Daddy grasps our hands and lifts them in a victorious sign of solidarity. Broken hearted, we comfort one another. *The end is near; do you want to say good-bye?* my cousin gently asks my mother. *No,* she responds and waits, distant from her husband, in the hospital lobby. Unable to watch, Sissy and I, with our husbands and children, stand vigil outside Dad's door until the nurses tells us it is over.

***
Mom never said good-bye and seldom mentions Dad, except now and then she says regretfully, *I'm glad Dan's not here, he had enough.* My mother lives in Montana now; it is up to me to watch over her. *We went to lunch today,* she casually mentions, *it was very nice, but I spent my time looking at the ground.* I ask why she was looking down and she responds, *I was watching people's feet—looking for cowboy boots.* It is myth, legend, bigger than life, this cowboy image deeply planted in my mother's psyche. After all these years, the measure of a real man is if he is a cowboy, even if, in real life, it isn't what it's cracked up to be. My mother and her cowboy—a crazy kind of western.
the dull, mustard sign blares caution—foghorn loud in its silence. 
crumpled concrete, cable, and boulders channel the ocean into bay 
calming breakers while fishing vessels ebb and flow from the harbor.

once the jetty was a long, solid concrete arm stretching 
into where the Noyo and Pacific collide. 
I held Dad’s hand as we walked this wall back then. 
on calm days we watched ocean dwellers in the green brine 
gently lapping the cement—small swells rising and falling. 
lulling us into false security—thinking it controlled, confined.

almost without warning the weather changes. 
the fickle sea responds to wind and storm, 
waves crashing against rocks, spraying high 
over the breakwater, sends all in its stead 
careening into the surging water and out to sea 
or battered on the shore—revenge against intruders.

sometimes sleepers sneak out of the tranquil depth, 
the seventh explodes without warning 
sweeping unsuspecting fisherfolk and tourist into its enormity 
perhaps to be found clinging to a rock 
or limp as seaweed washed onto a distant beach, 
leaving bewildered onlookers to wonder, mourn.

so it was with my mother’s illness: 
unpredictable storms of emotion, waxing and waning in tidal waves, 
hurling us into the storm as the crashing surf 
tosses small seacraft against the cliffs. 
hypervigilant we watched for signs, 
like seasoned sea captains seeking passage to safe port.

fogs of depression settled into my mother’s psyche, 
silently and deadly as the fog outside our house. 
rage waiting to explode as the breakers against the jetty. 
we the unsuspecting onlookers—never prepared.
A small walnut desk stands in the corner of my Montana mountain home. On its top shelf leans a delicate, sterling silver frame holding a photo of a young couple astride a horse. The woman is small and smart with a bracelet on her wrist. The handsome wrangler wears Levi’s and boots; his Stetson tips back on his head. With mountains and fence posts in the background, my parents smile back at me from this romantic snapshot fantasy. A handsome ranch boy away at college, broad shoulders, narrow waist, and dark wavy hair, exuding a rugged cowboy mystique, my father falls hard for a petite and classy coastal girl, my mother. Town and country, they come together for all the wrong reasons. The boy-meets-girl love story longs for a happy ending, but instead becomes a bittersweet and disillusioning blunder.

To paraphrase a line from Norman McLean’s *A River Runs Through It*, I am “haunted” by women, frailty, and the West. I propose there is much of B. M. Bower in her novel and in Valeria herself; Pearl Danniel’s story lends credence to Bower’s narrative; I recognize my mother’s story as my own. I go further to claim that many western women walk this walk, stumble, and find their feet, or an antidote to their madness, by writing the West. By sharing stories, we find some answers.
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