

## On Carol Bly's *Backbone*\* · Elizabeth Carpenter

IGNORING F. SCOTT FITZGERALD's Middle West—which was “not the wheat or the prairies or the lost Swede towns”—and overlooking Louise Erdrich's more recent *Beet Queen* ancestors, our modern view of the Minnesota prairie dweller comes primarily from Garrison Keillor, whose popular monologues (revised and collected in *Leaving Home*) tell stories of inarticulate, self-conscious Minnesotans, whose inhibitions are often laughable, and whose prosaic lives provide a nostalgic if not sentimental sort of inspiration. Lutheran or Catholic, they are almost always Norwegian and generally have names with *r*'s in them: Carl, Florian, Bertha, Hjalmar.

Keillor's often delightful, conscience-ridden folks seem near cousins to the Minnesotans in Carol Bly's collection of stories, *Backbone*. This is a book of five stories, each roughly four times longer than a Keillor monologue. Using commonplace settings and local events—a Norwegian dinner, a church fair, a funeral parlor, a nursing home—Bly takes characters mired in conventional lives and urges them toward limits they have scarcely imagined. Keillor's humorous, parable-like sketches read a little as outlines for Bly's more richly layered work.

Bly's stories have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *American Review*, and *Best American Short Stories 1983*. She lives in Sturgeon Lake, Minn., and teaches writing at Hamline University in St. Paul. A collection of her essays, *Letters from the Country*, addressed first to a rural audience, appeared individually in the *Minnesota Monthly*, and in them, one discovers ideas that move her fiction:

People who have dazedly accepted belonging to clubs for twenty years now choose to topple into their own inner lives . . . They simply have finally learned a sense of *time left*—and the tragedy of it is that a spiritually dormant society ever allowed them to waste twenty years.

---

Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1985.

Bly's fiction begins in spiritual dormancy and waste, her stories set in the North's quiet, vanishing beauty of shrinking forests and lakes, mists, frozen fields, and untravelled highways. They move with a voice given to precise observation. "On a windless early evening in October, almost the best time of day of the best time of year in Minnesota" begins "The Last of the Gold Star Mothers." A few lines later Bly reflects, "People in Rachel River keep busy, and sometimes they seem too distracted to see things." "Her place was what was called 'inconvenient'; that is, it had no water up to the house." Or again, "Oh yes!" [Jack] cried to himself. "Look at that flushed face of hers! And that lively look in her eyes: that isn't from hiking over here in the cold!"

In "The Dignity of Life," Jack is an elderly bachelor, a funeral director who has perfected an air of solemn restraint while he remains inwardly "unconfident." The only woman he'd considered marrying—though he'd never declared this love—has died, and amid the turmoil surrounding her death Jack holds coolly to "decency and dignity." He is confused, then, and overwhelmed by a sudden jealous passion for his aging adult education instructor:

Men in their sixties do not ask humanities consultants why they spend the night with whomever they spend the night with. Yet it was my voice that said that.

In similar outbursts or soliloquies, Bly's characters finally voice their emotions—in their thirties, fifties, sixties, eighties—and usually after some unforeseen event brings the passing quiet days to a frightening halt. In their final face-off, Jack and his instructor, Molly Galan, regard each other "with that great concentration and that great natural stupidity of birds," the familiar boundaries of their lives suddenly in question. The previous day Jack had decided he lacked confidence because "he wasn't touching live bodies enough," and now, studying Molly, he is alert and awkward, venturing beyond his normal reserve. He feels "a hope taking fire," the hope "rising rather weakly . . . like a hand rising from a lap," an image suggesting sexual arousal. Later, as he drives Molly home, he sees along the highway the great trees of the black forest cut down, the earth staked out for uranium prospectors, the land nearly wrecked—but not completely. The forest, like his own "untravelled" life, is not yet devastated.

As in all of Bly's stories, the reckoning is not easy; but it is *felt*, and it remains mysterious.

Decorum and obligation continually distract these Minnesotans from a freer, unconventional life. Like Chopin's Edna Pontellier, Jack is awakened to some intimacy with the living, even in this bleak North. Bly's most resilient (or resistant) protagonist is Father Bill Hewlitt, in "The Mouse Roulette Wheel," a Harvard graduate and saintly reverend for a small Episcopal parish. Father Bill no sooner finishes counseling a parishioner on repenting his CIA activities than the reverend's dying brother appears, offering tainted inheritance money—the profits from CIA-manipulated investments. On the surface Father Bill's refusal is automatic; however, all the time he is speaking

his own voice sounded shaky and false to him, like the voice of Marchbanks. It sounded like a mixture of callow righteousness with callow unfamiliarity with "the world men have to live in, after all." He heard his own voice like a fool's voice, sailing on, in high, nervous timbre.

Only later, and in a "pure, bad mood," Father Bill gives in to anger over the money he's passed up.

For less saintly, debt-ridden Mary Graving ("The Last of the Gold Star Mothers"), the distractions to a purposeful or "serious" life are examined one by one. The 33-year-old woodworker is divorced, suicidal, and receiving erratic child support payments. When a former classmate nearly cheats her in a business deal, she vents her frustration in a petty street quarrel. When her rage subsides, Mary remembers she is secretly celebrating a new reason for living, which she attempts to explain to her therapist:

Suddenly I realized I wasn't staying alive for my children. . . . So I stopped being altruistic as if I were some saint, giving myself up for others. And I stopped thinking my life would be so different if only I could live in a cultivated place. . . . And animal life—all that body stuff—that isn't it, either. . . .

Children, culture, others, sex, even woodworking "isn't why we live," and when all these are taken away, Mary feels both empty and wonderful.

For the remainder of the session, she and her therapist settle into “serious work,” which Bly explains has nothing to do with “telling stories about coarse women, or any of the other supposed facts of her life.” The moral force propelling Mary to look beyond her obligations seems to promise her a larger-than-life, if unclear, purpose.

Conversely, Harriet White, Bly’s oldest protagonist (“Gunnar’s Sword”), has lived her entire life for her family and their farm, and now lives by choice with her immobilized husband in a nursing home. Harriet fears growing older and losing her senses and believes “the best defense of one’s personality, against everything . . . was one’s humor.” According to the Norse legend of Gunnar, which she relates to a couple of humorless, chairbound inmates, the Vikings believed you must joke before you die to show Death you are better than he is. Until Harriet’s son sells the family farm without consulting her, she is like Gunnar’s victim—preferring proud humor to the gravity of Death’s approach. At her son’s news, however, she wanders, bereft of purpose, over miles of roads to the farmstead during a snowstorm. In pages of lovely, fluid language, Bly describes Harriet’s examination of her old life, her spirit urging her past dreams “along the old intelligent reflections.” Aching from the cold and embarrassed by an approaching rescue party, Harriet decides she’s been foolish after all; she will live without the farm. Like Jack, the elderly funeral director, she is not wrecked yet, and with new seriousness she discovers she can no longer “toss off anything with a laugh”:

Now she needed every possible second, even if it were to be spent in a daze.

But it is “Talk of Heroes,” *Backbone*’s masterpiece story, that most movingly addresses what old Harriet feels. The widow, Emily, another of Bly’s proud, self-contained characters, escapes her troubled daughter—“a ubiquitous houseguest”—to attend a Norwegian-American celebration. The planned speaker is a man she and her husband knew years ago in Norway, a war hero who collapses drunkenly at the podium. In an impromptu speech to the disrupted gathering, Emily remembers Willi’s courage during World War II, his refusal to talk while being tortured. She is moved by his heroism and by the broken man he’s become; and later, in a pensive mood, she imagines the Norwegian underground team Willi saved. There

was nothing to guarantee that even after Willi's sacrifice, the team hadn't wasted their lives. "They may not have done anything lovely at all," Emily muses. But as she ponders mist-covered White Bear Lake, its presence "so rich and full of rainwater it was nearly rounded upward," she forestalls a harsh realization of her own lost years and waits full of hope for an impossible redemption.

Bly touches on an old unacknowledged attraction between Emily and Willi, one not as likely to be consummated as Jack's attraction for his instructor. A tragic vision of lost love and wasted years gives way, however, to Emily's final spirit of elation. She refuses a grim picture of "aged, paunchy, or lonely old Norwegians" as she imagines the escape of the underground team,

the little sailing boat in the North Sea, with its crew young and beautiful; the sea had misted crystal into their hand-knitted caps and sweaters; . . . their knees ably took the sea's heave—and all the time, the three of them kept looking and looking, hoping and half-knowing a powerful friend would emerge from the deep, and come up alongside, and save them.

There is plenty of backbone in *Backbone*, displays of valiant effort by these aging women and men. The sense of urgency that Bly introduces to each requires an effort in the writing which is conversely unhurried; these stories build toward their awakenings in their own good time. They are wrinkled with complications, characters, and commentary, and though each retains the smalltown, Keillorlike humor—and the names with *r*'s in them—Bly's poetic language of emotion and her generous detail (what Tess Gallagher has called "a novel's amplitude") carry these stories beyond Keillor's episodic visits, and considerably raise the ante.