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## BETRAYAL AND REDEMPTION IN THE FICTION OF LOIS PHILLIPS HUDSON

The one thing she could not bear to think of was to be rootless, to be without well-defined positions, both human and geographical . . . roots were as irreplaceable as lives, and much less expendable. It would be better to stay here and lose her life than to leave her roots . . . What did one do when one no longer had a bed, a stove, or a table? . . . Without a mailing address, how did a person even know who she was? . . . How would her children know who they were? And if it was going to be bad for the mother not to have a porch or a stove, how was it going to be for the children not even to have a tree of their own again—a tree to climb into and to hang a swing from?

Strangers would see the four of them in their car, dragging behind them a ludicrous trailer made from a wagon box, and . . . think they were seeing only another shiftless roving family . . . a man and woman who had never been willing to . . . labor and sacrifice for roots.

Thus lightly did each parting neighbor give a little shake to the roots that had lain dying in the sun all afternoon. . . . It took but a little time, in such a sun, for un-covered roots to perish and to pass away as though they had never been.

*The Bones of Plenty*

In her story "When the Fields are Fresh and Green" Lois Phillips Hudson describes how the loss of our "first existence," which is our innocence, is redeemed in our "second existence," which is our sober maturity, by the surprise of love. Through love we regain

the "fresh and green fields" of our childhood. It is our second chance. She writes:

It is from those lost fields that we go on shyly, forever sealed against the trespasses of our grownup selves, forever splendid with light falling like trumpet salutes through the old heavy boughs of the world. . . .<sup>1</sup>

With her novel *The Bones of Plenty* in 1962 and her story collection, *Reapers of the Dust* in 1964, Lois Phillips Hudson was "discovered." Now, some twenty years later she has been "discovered" once again. With the paperback re-issue of both these works by the Minnesota Historical Society Press, her books have again become accessible. Rarely do we get second chances like this. Surely it is one of the duties of the critic to keep before readers those special works which are so powerful they have become part of her own experience. It is surely time to again begin talking about the fiction of Lois Phillips Hudson.<sup>2</sup>

Though her works chronicle the last grim years of those reapers of the dust who go down to defeat, ultimately Hudson writes not of defeat but of hope. Her works affirm the determination of the human spirit to endure the impermanence of existence. Again and again her characters seek out the "landmarks" which will tell them who they are. They search for a pattern in the stars, a configuration of footprints in the snow, look into the faces of their children for intimations of their own immortality. With a wondering, remembering eye for the slightest detail, with humor, and with eloquence, Lois Hudson has written a testament to the courage not only of the Dust Bowl farmer, but to all persons who seek permanence and love out of the earth.

Both works, and the stories of the intervening twenty years, are bound together by a single dominant narrative thread: the search for permanence in a world that has become tragically impermanent. The problem she examines again and again is the problem of identity: who are we when all the "landmarks" of our lives have disappeared? What remains? What stays? This search for permanence becomes, finally, a search for the prairie mother who has long ago died—the mother who some forty years before had stood on

her porch watching the accouterments of her life bartered away under the merciless prairie sun. In her latest story, "My Mother Waiting in the Fog," the prairie child becomes the adult artist in search of the image which will hold forever the mother who signifies all permanence and all loss. In the end she discovers the "fresh and green fields" of the prairie once again.

What is important to understand from the beginning is Hudson's crucial distinction between *space* and *place*. Place is space infused with meaning—with the boundaries and landmarks of culture, ritual, and possessions. Place is where the human desire for *roots* collides with the vagaries of time which seek to loose those roots from the earth to which they so perilously cling. For this, Hudson's gathering metaphor becomes the very dust of the earth, the tragic product of the collision of earth and sky.

In both *The Bones of Plenty* and *Reapers of the Dust* Hudson describes the betrayal of the universe as it beckons the instinct for "human permanence," for roots, even as it seeks to make that very permanence a tragic impossibility. The universe calls down the wind and heat and cold, until one's "roots" are loosed from their fragile hold upon the earth. It is as though the laws constructed to run an orderly universe have now twisted with dark intent into a system in which all of humankind is enmeshed in a cycle of destruction. The sky has collided with the earth, and the product is the dust that envelops a parched and dying world.

Time has collided with space in a universe whose laws have split asunder. Economic laws have completely unravelled; the laws which govern history threaten a deadly repetition; biological laws, as though in sympathy with the others, have become secretly perverted. Silent and deadly, the cells divide and multiply inside the grandfather's body, breaking the laws of orderly universe:

Of course it doesn't show—what's really wrong—Will could have told [the doctor]. You don't know what I know. . . . It's a set of laws working a different way toward a different end.<sup>3</sup>

But this unnatural working of natural laws is seen most clearly in the perversion of the seasons. There are four seasons on the prairie, two which descend upon it with an almost purposeful

vengeance, and two which are so brief and evanescent they soon appear never to have existed at all. In each the omnipotent dust sifts down from the sky upon all who seek to plant and save roots.

Summer in this, the tenth year of the drought, has become an endless succession of days, each "unnatural" and "endless" (*The Bones of Plenty*, 196). Time seems no longer fluid, but fixed. It seems to have pooled. The "thread-thin seedlings of the tomato plants" shrivel and die; the sun beats down upon the cows as they search for pasture; the well creaks and groans and gives forth gritty water. And the sun seems to have been nailed to the sky. For what it does not drink from the "dry brow of the hill[s]" (435) the wind sucks up in funnels, in gusts, or in a steady pervasive cloud of air.

On this, the last summer on the prairie, the human significance of the drought and the failure of the prairie farms is presented in images of earth's unguarded creatures. Here, it is the birds, which had become the prairie child's solitary companions, and for whom the sun has become a mortal enemy. The birds she has visited every day all summer long have had their babies, and this last day she sees that the baby birds are covered with red ants, their "little heads swollen with the blue bruises of their eyes under the lids that would never open." (*Reapers of the Dust*, "The Water Witch," 80)

If it is not the excruciating summers it is the "glacial" winters which erode the deep-root system of the land and the people who claim it. It is the year of the coldest winter on record. "The cold gust that blasted into the house was like a personal attack from the universe" (*Bones*, 361). The prairie child plays the game of "Eskimo," melting snow mounds on the stove, sculpting Eskimo villages until the heat melts the snow, melting the "shores of [the] iceland" into the sea, as the "frantic people moved higher and higher on the iceberg mountain." Then the ocean would "gush up through the hole, the island would break in pieces and the ice people would fall into the fatal warmth" (*Reapers*, "The Cold Wave," 63-64). But just as

the warm wave washed over my people, the game would become hideously real to me, and I would often have nightmares in which

I was climbing, climbing, on an ever-collapsing mountain to escape a hot tide. (64)

Cold becomes heat, solid becomes liquid, and nothing is what it seems.

Heat can come as a wave and cold can come as a wave too. The deadly ice-melting which destroys the Eskimos as they slide helplessly into the “fatal warmth” would spell survival just now for the creatures living on the prairie. But whether freezing or melting, it is betrayal either way. The melting, collapsing snow becomes an image of the fatal heart of the universe as its trickery is innocently acted out in a child’s game atop a black cookstove.

On this night there is nothing to be done about the stock, or about the tiny calf born out of season, the calf with fur “almost as fine and soft as a human baby’s” (*Reapers*, “The Cold Wave,” 65). The prairie child wonders what a “cold wave” is, and imagines how the great mammoths eons ago must have been caught in a cold wave and frozen in an instant. She pictures some kind of flood—

a flood that could race with the speed of liquid one moment and turn completely solid the next, locking forever the great knees bending for another battling step. . . . A cold wave freezing so fast that the bubbles of their last breathing would be fixed like beads in the ice. (67)

Burrowed under her covers for the night, she wonders even at this very moment, whether some cold reflex was now “sending a flood to rise up out of the north, to flow swiftly over her house” (67). Thus she would keep watch, “so if it came it wouldn’t catch [her] the way it had caught the mammoths” (*Bones*, 365).

The next morning the child and her father go to feed the stock. There in the barn, in the corner of its pen, lies the little dead calf. It is then that she realizes the enormous trickery of the universe and what really must have happened to the mammoths of the Ice Age:

One night they had lain down to sleep. . . . The blood under their incredible hides slowed a little, and the warmth of their bodies ascended in ghostly clouds toward the indifferent moon. There

was no rushing, congealing wave; there was only the unalarmed cold sleep of betrayed creatures. (*Reapers*, “The Cold Wave,” 68)

And even through the frozen universe sifts the inescapable scent of the omnipresent dust. The wind blows and blows, sending snow in sculpted drifts across the plains lined with the signature of the dust, now part of the very air itself. The magic and wonder of the new-fallen snow cannot remove the pervasive dust from the earth:

. . . along the crest of every wavelet the wind had left its black pencil line. [She] was sorry to see the dust come and sully the great clean world. When she . . . turned on her back to make a snow angel, she smelled the drought of summer. It was the odor of heat and labor and loneliness and it was stronger than the cold, thin fragrance of the snow . . . . (*Bones*, 336)

The season of autumn on the prairie contains the “wild extremes” of both summer and winter and also a strange exhilaration in the delicious anticipation of the harvest, then the pleasure of storing away the fruits of the year’s labor for safekeeping—safe now from “hail or wind or fatal accidents” (*Bones*, 218). It is the season of the “rush [to harvest] and the sun hurrying the winter and the winter hurrying the people, and the mystifyingly close connections of so many disparate things . . . (288). But autumn is an illusion too, for the sense of plenitude will soon give way to grim rationing. Here is the strange paradox of death in life:

Here was the corn that would go to make next year’s pig, like the one they had just butchered, and the corn that would be ground for . . . the baby turkeys next spring. . . . But even though this corn went to raise so many creatures for death, still the smell of the field was the smell of being alive. (288)

Autumn brings the intensity of standing close to death, yet strangely safe from it too, of knowing from the safe distance of plenitude the “mystifyingly close connection” (288) to want.

These same connections are most evident in the season of spring. They are found in the tragic workings of an ecological system programmed for the destruction of all *roots*: “There were precious few creatures of a field that were on the side of the farmer, that was a cinch” (*Bones*, 79). The blackbirds which descend from the

sky to feed on the grain, and come so thick the “whole sky seemed hardly able to contain their singing” (78) are just “one of the plagues visited upon the helpless earth by the busy sky” (79). The snakes of the field eat the toads which “would otherwise eat a hundred thousand insects” (79). The grasshoppers “loved drought; they thrived on it as the wheat perished from it” (79-80). Only the meadowlark “ate no grain at all—only insects by the millions . . .” (79). But in this Darwinian universe titled against human hopes, the meadowlark becomes prey to all sorts of dangers, its “clever coloring” disguising it from the hawks of the air, but utterly unable to save it from the “rats, weasels, barncats, coyotes, and egg-sucking dogs . . .” (80).

Like autumn, spring is an evanescent time on the prairie, hoped for in one’s prayers or remembered in one’s dreams.

Each winter as the time for thawing drew near, [the prairie child] began to be afraid that the kingdom of the ravine must really have been a dream. (*Bones*, 73)

In her magical eye, the prairie is transformed into a fairyland full of rivers, rapids, lakes and seas. But in an eyeblink, the glistening fairyland vanishes in the wind and then there is not a single place “to splash a rock for another whole year” (73).

*The Bones of Plenty* opens in the promise of hope of spring and ends the following spring with the failure of all hope to come to pass, and finally the abandonment of the prairie dream altogether. George, the father, is working the field, digging stones out of the earth and hauling them to a pile he has accumulated over the last nine years. And what George is imagining is a house built of great stones. Now, coming toward their little grey wood-frame house which holds back neither the scorching sun nor the blasts of arctic air nor the suffocating dust, he imagines how a house of stone would look—“how solid and eternal [it] would look there, set beneath the thin black crisscrossing limbs of the grove” (*Bones*, 4). But he is jarred out of the dream when the horse stumbles into a hole. Miraculously they pull her to safety and she has not broken a leg. But the foal she had carried for eight months, the new colt which had been part of the hope of spring, is lost. “It was a light

little thing, seemingly perfect,” (10) and George can hardly bear to look at it. Thus comes the death of one of the promises of spring.

The other is the new strain of wheat George has staked his future on: “Ceres, goddess of growing things,” the “name that had been on his mind all winter long” (*Bones*, 58-59). But wheat, like humankind itself, is vulnerable to all sorts of things—a hundred, a thousand species of tiny creatures. And dust storms, and wind, and air—even rain itself, if it comes hard enough. George had paid for seeds “treated” for smut. But when harvesting comes, the smutty smell from the wheat fields fills the air.

Thus the seeds of the harvest are doomed, by the greed of men who sell promises they do not keep, but also by spring itself which nurtures other seeds and eggs—

a multitudinous embryonic hostility—in the wombs of rodents, the egg sacs of birds, and the laid and unlaid eggs of insects. Even the impeccable air was at this instant drifting over [the] field[s] the spores of ruinous disease. . . . (*Bones*, 81)

Like the savage division of cells in the grandfather’s body, the laws which govern an orderly and just universe seem to have been derailed—re-ordered for the sole purpose of extinguishing the fragile roots of human existence.

The last spring on the prairie ends in an explosion of dust. George is plowing the fields when the sky begins to grow black with the darkening wind. Inside the little house, with the dust sifting through every nook and cranny, George looks out across the yard toward the barn. Trapped inside the house like that

it was hard for a man to shake off the feeling of being buried alive. . . . How far back into his head and how far down into his lungs could [the dust] go anyway? . . . all he could see was flying topsoil. [He tried] to imagine how many particles of dust passing between him and the barn it took to blot that barn completely out of sight at a quarter of one in the afternoon. . . . There was nothing out there but screaming blackness. (*Bones*, 399)

And so the world was inverted. Earth has become sky, the sky has become earth.

Now there is nothing to do but to sell what they cannot carry and leave the prairie for good. The fields, the fence, the well, the animals, the barn, the swing in the backyard tree, the porch—the importance of possessions becomes poignant almost beyond bearing when time has run out on them all. On auction day, and spread helter skelter about the yard under the glare of the noonday sun, the objects of their lives look pitiful and useless. Yet these worthless possessions, now worthy beyond price, come finally to attain their highest significance.

For possessions *attach* us to the earth, rooting us in security and permanence:

Without the big stove there to be always walking around in the tiny room, to guard babies from, to stoke and shake and clean, to bake bread in and boil washings on—without that Monarch ruling her life [the mother] felt more *weightless* than ever. . . . (*Bones*, 427, my emphasis)

And the porch? “There were years of investments fixed in the paintless boards of this porch” (428). But now strangers passing by this porch would never know that people had lived here who had been “willing to labor and sacrifice for roots. The strangers would never be able to know about the porch” (428).

Like the deep root-system of the prairie itself, which has been devoured by the wind, the people of the prairie have lost their hold on the land that had once sustained them. “The pitiless sky” has finally “blown them out of their shelter” (*Bones*, 423). Like the land itself, there is nothing left to hold these inheritors of the prairie to the ground.

Like so many others, the collision of earth and sky has blown them away like the thistle which rolls aimlessly across the prairie. As they journey from the house for the last time, the prairie child looks back and catches sight of the window which has broken during the dust storm and was patched over with cardboard, now the emblem of their heroism and their defeat. Thus they leave the prairie and journey West, insisting still upon an independent life lived off the land. Their dream of a homestead in Alaska is dim, but they will journey West anyway, leaving roots behind in hopes

of some day putting them down once again. In this final gesture they become both pathetic and heroic as their little cart of possessions is pulled slowly over the crest of the first long hill.

Thus they become another of the many prairie families to join “the caravan of destitute nomads who sought the western ocean” in search of a place where there would not be “so many enemies of roots” (*Reapers*, “The Water Witch,” 81-82). “Only nomads,” Hudson writes,

can live in the wastelands of the sea, sand, ice or dust, where the figures of men are forever out of scale. If we had all been birds we could simply have forgotten a lost generation and migrated to the next nesting site. . . . Only they are not encumbered by the idea of human permanence. (81-82)

Though cursed with the desire for human attachments to places which will not allow it, Hudson’s characters bear their displacements and remember the “fresh and green fields” of their past with grief and love.

They journey to the Washington coast, where water is abundant, but where people do not know of the “perfidy of wells” and thus assume that their displacement must be the result of “a lazy shiftlessness” (*Reapers*, “The Water Witch,” 81). Now the struggle occurs on a different landscape, in the prairie child’s search for connections. In the stories which follow, Hudson tells of the child’s search for the connections that will root her to place and define her existence. When one is displaced, how does one know where she is? By the prairie stars? By footprints in a prairie snow circle when there is no longer any prairie sky or anything so permanent as snow to mark one’s path?

Now the image of displacement becomes the coastal fog which envelops everything—a coastal fog hiding all boundaries and edges, a fog so dense it is like “an Arctic white-out,” where people go mad “because there is not even any up or down.”<sup>4</sup> The prairie child and her mother make their way home, each hanging a flashlight out a side window, each looking for an “edge,” a boundary which will tell them where they are. But it is the mother who finally is able to “center” them, who “floats [them] back toward the center”

of the road. "It is as if she loves the stars so much, she always knows where they are" ("My Mother Waiting in the Fog," 34). For the prairie mother who had loved the stars, and for the child who had learned from her how to count them, the fog becomes an image of what it means to lose one's place in the world, an image for utter, total rootlessness, turning *place* into the terror of enveloping *space*. And it becomes the metaphor for our inability to see the end or the beginning of the circle of our lives:

I think we must be accustomed, like birds and animals, to getting our bearings from all sorts of landmarks which we are never conscious of noticing, and when we are . . . deprived of [them], we are set totally adrift. ("Fog," 33-34)

The desire for connections—to places, to persons, to things we love—becomes a tragic sort of necessity for Hudson because her characters can see neither the beginning nor the end of the circle their own lives make, cannot see the pattern their lives imprint upon the new fallen snow. What we do recognize "in all that space that is between us," Hudson explains, are the shining points of light which are the "dots of our own kind" (*Reapers*, "The Loop in Time," 172).

In the story "The Loop in Time," the children look to the grown-ups to tell them who they are, even as the grown-ups look into the faces of their children for exactly the same thing. In this story about grandmothers, Hudson presents the image of the "loop in time," a recess game played in the prairie snow. The children begin to make a circle of tracks, "feet following and followed by other feet" until "nobody knows anymore . . . where the last boot tracks met the first" (*Reapers*, "The Loop in Time," 149-150).

We think it is our grandmothers who have made the first set of tracks, that they are the "set that will close the circle" which will tell us the true story of our beginnings. However Hudson writes,

During all those years when I looked to them to show me the loop in time, they were looking at me for the same thing. They had been watching me for my secrets, expecting to come around a corner and meet themselves in me. . . . [believing that] it was the ones coming after them who would understand. (*Reapers*, "The Loop in Time," 172)

Again and again Hudson's characters experience the tragic limitations of human knowledge. Having lost place, Hudson's characters live in danger of losing time as well. The prairie children watch the first winter snow begin to fall, afraid it will stop before recess begins. They race to their games, and have "scarcely begun" before the recess bell rings. "There was so much more space than there was time. Every recess they forgot about this one imbalance. They believe that if there is space enough there will also be time enough" (*Reapers*, "Loop," 150)—time enough to prove that they are unique, time enough to establish connections and root them to place, time enough to find the spot at which the first set of footprints meets the last.

Hudson writes that her mother could not bear to have her daughter miss her "turn" at living.

. . . I see the shape of my life in turns—it was my turn for this transcendental moment or that catastrophic one. If it was my turn to be a cruelly poor farmer's child growing up in the Great Depression, it was also my turn to have a mother with an exquisite eye for serendipities. ("Fog," 31)

The difficulty of discovering when it is "my turn" takes the dimension of rootlessness from space to time. Yet she begins to understand her life by its "turns," which binds fate to will and joy to dread.

Hudson's search for permanence becomes, at last, the search for the prairie mother whose face she cannot see. She tries to resurrect this mother who had once shown her the prairie stars, who had once used the invisible prairie stars to guide them home in the coastal fog. When the prairie child had slipped into the car seat beside her waiting mother, she had felt the "miracle of matter producing energy, the warmth her body [had] spread for me" ("Fog," 33).

Yet now as she attempts to find her mother once more, the narrator admits that it is "impossible to come up with separate, clear memories of a face that has always been there. I can never really see her face unless I look at a photograph" (36). But to see her prairie mother once again, the narrator who is now the artist must find the image which will bring her back. She remembers

how her mother had called her to the window before dawn one prairie winter "to share in a secret of the universe"—to see the new fallen prairie snow, "pure and fluffy, spread over everything with cosmic even justice"—before the wind has a chance to sweep it into "dirty hard drifts rippled with black dust" (31). The prairie child had studied every post with its snow cap, and the "long, long shadows" they cast, "serene, vibrantly blue," and the child who has now become the artist sees what her mother had wanted her to see: "'We are truth and grace. We are what she wants you to understand'" (31).

In this last story, the "fresh and green" prairie fields become the very fields she seeks in the clouds as she travels to reach her mother, who has died. She is flying from Denver to Seattle to her mother's funeral, and looking out the window into "glorious fields of brilliant clouds" ("Fog," 35), it is difficult to say which of them is now in heaven. For the moment, her mother's death has left her utterly without "landmarks" (34).<sup>5</sup>

Still she searches for the face she cannot see. The "physical particulars" defy her attempt to see what she remembers. In the end, however, the grown child is redeemed by the very "surprise" which she is denied in her "second existence"—redeemed by the "serendipities" prepared for long prairie nights ago by a mother who could read the stars. At the close of the story, the narrator walks in a November fog as "impenetrable as a glacier," and senses a change in the "texture" ahead. Suddenly, she finds herself in the

presence of a tall golden cottonwood, gathering light from somewhere, from all that light set loose at the beginning, glowing with that ultimate mystery of the place where matter and energy are one. . . . ("Fog," 37)

And it is here, in the very fog which obscures "landmarks," and is the very image of rootlessness, that she finds the image she has been seeking from the start—the image which holds her mother waiting in the fog.

It is a moment of such "inner clarity" that it is beyond "physical particulars" altogether, and accessible only to the deeper recesses of the heart and imagination. Loss of place is in truth loss of

time, and both are recovered at the end of this last story. In the search for permanence begun when the child left the prairie and concluded in the search for the lost mother, a center is found. The narrator sees the beginning of the circle, if only for a moment, in the unspeakable joy of the surprise reclaimed from her "first existence." It is a vision of such "inner clarity" and truth that space and time become one, and for the moment, she is rooted once again.

#### NOTES

1. Lois Phillips Hudson, *Reapers of the Dust* (Atlantic-Little Brown, 1965; St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), 97. All references to this work are from this latest edition.

2. There is very little critical commentary on Hudson's works, although both *The Bones of Plenty* and *Reapers of the Dust* were reviewed widely at the time of their first publication. To my knowledge there are three masters theses on Hudson's works and two critical articles. I list them here:

Roxanne E. Peters, ". . . And Ridiculous to be from North Dakota." Masters Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1974.

"Lois Phillips Hudson: Reaper of the Dust," *North Dakota Quarterly* 44 (1976), 18-29.

Jean Albert Peyrouet, "The Farm Novel as an Interpretation of North Dakota." Masters Thesis, L'Universite de Bordeaux, France, 1968.

"The North Dakota Farmer in Fiction," *North Dakota Quarterly* 39 (1971), 59-71.

Susanne Elisabeth Sturzl, "Fertility and Infertility: A Study of the Use of Myth in *The Bones of Plenty*." Master's Thesis, North Dakota State University, 1984.

3. Lois Phillips Hudson, *The Bones of Plenty* (Boston: Atlantic-Little Brown, 1962; St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1984), 206. All references to this work are from this latest edition.

4. Lois Phillips Hudson, "My Mother Waiting in the Fog," *South Dakota Review*, Autumn 1982, 33-34.

5. Compare the descriptions of the "fresh and green fields" in "When the Fields are Fresh and Green," *Reapers of the Dust*, 92, and "My Mother Waiting in the Fog," 31.