

Past President's Address 2008

THE WESTERN LITERATURE ASSOCIATION'S
OFFICIAL HOME PAGE

“Memory, Desire, and What’s ‘True at First Light’”

Ann Putnam, University of Puget Sound

WLA past-presidential address, given October 2, 2008, in Boulder, Colorado

“Nicholas Adams drove on through the town along the empty, brick-paved street ... on under the heavy trees of the small town that are a part of your heart if it is your own town and you have walked under them, but that are only too heavy, that shut out the sun and that dampen the houses for a stranger.”

These lines from Ernest Hemingway’s “Fathers and Sons” have always haunted me. The story ends with the boy’s wish that he and his father could be buried at the ranch out West. If Nick Adams does not articulate the desire for home, his son does. Home in this story is in the West. Hemingway was so acutely responsive to the power of place, his work depended upon it like no other.

Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, just outside Chicago. He spent his boyhood summers in Michigan. He had homes in Key West and Havana and, finally, in the West, in Ketchum, Idaho. He roamed the world in search of the “good place.” Yet out of all the places he had lived, which place held Hemingway’s deepest heart? Which place, above all others, spoke his name? As in a dream where the dreamer plays all parts, we are always writing of ourselves. And so my searching out of Hemingway’s deepest heart is the seeking of my own. Where is the landscape that calls my name and tells me who I am? I was born in Illinois too. I, too, had spent summers in Michigan. I, too, had moved West. All my life I have been asking that question. I grew up in a little town in southern Illinois sixty miles east of St. Louis, just across the Mississippi River, a name that was always on our spelling lists, and a name we turned into a loopy rhyme we jumped rope to:

M
I
CROOKED LETTER
CROOKED LETTER
HUMP BACK
HUMP BACK
I

But one summer we traveled west to visit my grandparents, who had moved to Washington State. We got up

early in the morning and traveled until midday, took a break, then traveled late into the evening. So I went to bed each night not knowing where I was. *Are we in the West yet? Are we in the West now?* I asked each morning. I had spent every Saturday morning from 10–12 in the West, faithfully tuned in to *The Cisco Kid*, *The Lone Ranger*, and *Wild Bill Hickok*. I couldn't wait.

Then one day I woke to a dark sky turning pink and, in the distance, the jagged peaks of the Rockies, enormous and dark against the sunrise. We took the Going to the Sun Highway through those mountains, and looking down from my place in the back seat of the car, I knew I was truly high enough to be going to the sun.

Several years later my family moved out west and I finished growing up in eastern Washington. But like the stones in Yellowstone, which to my great disappointment were not yellow at all, the West, when I finally came to live in it, was not the West of my childhood dreams. Now that I am living about as far West as you can get without dropping into the ocean, I am still wondering—which way is West?

Eventually I earned a doctorate in Am Lit, with a dissertation on Hemingway's short stories. Soon after, I attended my first WLA conference in Fort Worth, Texas. A horse show had taken over the hotel ballroom. Men in tuxedos were following the horses with silver pooper scoopers. I'm really in the West now, I thought. My paper centered on Hemingway's "Wine of Wyoming" and Hemingway's search for the West as true home. Later it was published in the WAL journal, so I went on record saying that Hem's last best home was the American West. My second year at WLA was in Durango, Colorado. Four Corners. This was surely the West. At that conference, I met Frederick Manfred for the first time, that larger-than-life figure who has meant so much to the culture and scholarship of WLA. *Lord Grizzly*, his story of Hugh Glass, the mountain man who was mauled by a grizzly and left for dead and who crawled all the way to Fort Kiowa to reach safety, was a finalist for the National Book Award. I arrived in Durango on a Wednesday, in a 75-degree evening. Sunday I woke up to a blizzard. The trip home began in a 10-seater plane with a pilot who seemed to be reading a book of instructions as we flew through blinding snow, and I thought of the dream flight to Arusha at the end of Hemingway's "Snows of Kilimanjaro." We landed in a field in the middle of nowhere for no reason any of us could figure out, eventually took off again, and finally arrived in Denver, where it was still snowing. But I had seen the West.

Back home I read *Lord Grizzly* and several other Manfred novels and their portrait of what he always called "Siouxland." But I never forgot the profound effect *Lord Grizzly* had on me at the time, or the way it lingered in my mind.

In writing of Hemingway, Leslie Fiedler maintains that "the Western ... does not even need an American setting" (355). I, too, had always believed that whether Africa, Spain, or Michigan, Hemingway was always writing the West. Fired by longing and fixed through art, it becomes an image of permanence in a world of terrible uncertainty. Through an imagination driven by longing, certain places in Hemingway fiction become so luminous and attain such significance they become centers of peace and order and light. So Western images abound in Hemingway fiction—the good place at once familiar and new, homelike and exotic, the places H would seek out his whole life—forested islands and sunstruck rivers, the blue waters of the Gulf, the green hills

of Africa. It is the place forever lost and forever found—a place you have always known and the place you have never been, a dream country that creates such longing you miss it before you are even gone. For distance and time made him a hunger artist who sought to regain the places he had loved through the power of art.

But even in such places, how fragile the sense of wonder and how close at hand the sense of dread. Hemingway's works, then, are often a product of the tension between the desire to remain forever in the "good country" and the impulse to leave it. Hemingway possessed through art what he denied in reality. Rootlessness, then, became both a curse and a blessing, for, to a large degree, his art depended upon the very uprootedness which is the blight of all his protagonists, who know that coming home is a dangerous thing and who feel the hazard of place, even as they recognize the value of the nostalgia it evokes. But what of the actual West as true heart?

Toward the end of "Snows of Kilimanjaro," the writer Harry remembers the "the last good country" of the "the silvered gray sage brush, the quick, clear water ... and the heavy green of the alfalfa. The trail went up into the hills and the cattle in the summer were as shy as deer. And behind the mountains [was] the clear sharpness of the peak in the evening light." Long ago I had written that the West in general and Ketchum in particular was Hemingway's last, best home and the place which held his heart.

Then I went to Cuba and saw Hemingway's Finca Vigia. We came into San Francisco de Paula, a sad, sleepy little village on the edge of Havana, and rolled down a narrow road through an arbor of flickering sunlight and heavy green shadows, past sagging little houses on either side, then turned up the dirt road to Hemingway's Finca Vigia: splendid and white against the palm trees and the deep blue of the afternoon sky, it belonged to Castro now. The bus ground into the dirt as we took the hill. There it was, just as we knew it would be. After so many years of being forbidden, here we were after all.

We got out of the bus and stood there in the parking lot looking up at the house before us, then moved tentatively toward the stairs. I looked around. People had tears in their eyes. Tears were pooling behind my eyes too. I knew what it was. It was those words, always and forever, those words placed edge on edge like two stones striking, making such light and surprise you were always coming home to places you had never been. You were never lost in Hemingway. You always knew exactly where you were.

But the Finca Vigia was full of spirits, this great white house surrounded by palm trees and bougainvillea and banyans, where the breeze floats through the unshuttered windows and fierce animal spirits hover just out of reach of the ceiling fans turning languorously in the breeze. Those sharp, dark eyes full of knowing, spirits held forever on those walls—kudu, gazelle, sable, buffalo, antelope, exotic and otherworldly. And totems full of incantations and spells, magic tucked into every drawer. No wonder they guarded this place so fiercely.

I followed the walkway around the house, the late afternoon sun filtering through the canopy of green overhead. Museum proctors stood like sentries in each doorway watching us relentlessly as we peered through the windows and the open doors. Maybe they knew what was in our hearts, how we wanted to touch things, reach out and take a book off the shelf, leaf through the pages. There are nine thousand books in that house, tracks of

his mind at work in the notes and marginalia tucked between those book covers.

There was Ernest's bathroom, books even here. And weights and dates penciled next to the scales on the far wall. Fighting weight, he always said, he had to make fighting weight forever, and so he never did. Here before me was the story those figures told, the ups and downs of the battle against despair and excesses too necessary to resist. Then that final winter, the spring that never came, and the last summer dry and joyless, the weight far, far down, no interest in keeping any records now.

And Miss Mary's blue bedroom, and in her bathroom somebody's portrait of her, with the nose too sharp, the eyes too narrow, a blonde-haired witch, which is what some people said she was. She'd warned the doctors at Mayo's not to let him go, but he'd been too cagey for all that, saying with a wink and a smile and a dippy-do how he was all right now, he just needed to get back to Idaho and that typewriter in the bedroom, though he hadn't been able to write for way too long now, his short-term memory burned away by the sizzle and pop of the currents running through his brain, then drowsy and dry-mouthed and the sense that he'd forgotten who he was.

I drifted down the long stairway leading through the grounds to the pool. I'd just stand there and watch the water flickering in the light. The ferns and palms were washed over with late afternoon sun, a golden light struck with green. In that liquid, sunlit air I was the only Eve there ever was. I stood for a moment and listened for the original stillness—the pause between intake of breath and exhalation, the silence before the need for words.

There was the pool where Ava Gardner swam naked—or so the story goes, as we had heard endlessly. I could understand that. Why would you have to wear any clothes here at all? With that innocent eroticism coming at you every minute out of this light, this heat, this sky. Of course, sooner or later you'd have to put your clothes on. Complications would set in. Nobody could hold onto that chastity of sight forever.

But the pool was empty of everything. No water to keep it filled, no way to entertain the tourists with the real thing. No water in the bathroom, no water at all here in San Francisco de Paula. You could imagine it, though, that wavering blue against a whitewashed patio, a blue square of light shimmering under a vast, Cuban sky. I shut my eyes and listened to the whispery secret of the wind in the trees, the creaking of the bamboo, like some exotic bird shrieking annunciation or alarm. Then I looked up and there they were, wakened out of their cool, dusky shadows for that rush into light, a red and blue and violet scattering of birds, leaving behind a strange and thrilling taste on the tongue, of mangoes and *avocates*, *flamboyantes*, hibiscus, frangipani, oleander.

Then I walked to the stone railing on the other side of the house to watch the sun going down. Somewhere out there beyond the waves of green was Havana.

I stood there for a long time, looking up at the tower, white against the fiery sky. There was the room Mary had built so Ernest could write, though he preferred standing by the bookcase in his bedroom. No wonder. How could you work with that view out the window? This tower where he never wrote but came now and then to

look out at Havana, and maybe once or twice to look down at the fall from it, it would be nothing but a silent rush of green rising to meet him. I watched a shadow pass through the shaft of light coming in that high tower window. So they had proctors even here. Something brushed across my face—a spiderweb in the breeze.

Then I glanced up again and there he was—that familiar broad face, the barrel chest, but look at him now!—the thin, shadowy beard, the tenuous, combed-down hair of that last winter when he couldn't write a thing, the sweater against the Idaho chill, the eyes full of panic and sorrow. To see him like that as he was at the end, fragile as tissue paper. I shut my eyes and tried to resurrect him as he had been. When I looked up again, there was the museum proctor peering down from that tower window, the last of the sun on the red-tiled roof, and then he was gone.

But there is another house. It's July in Ketchum, Idaho, but there is a chill in that house so closed up against the light, so sharp-angled and spare and no way to pretend to coziness. That last, sad house overlooking the Big Wood River. I'd come in the back and through the little kitchen, into the living room, nothing much to photograph here, and made my way up the stairs to the bedrooms, then back down through the living room again. There was Jacqueline Kennedy looking up from the cover of *LIFE* laid out on the coffee table in front of the fireplace.

Oh, go ahead, she was saying, take the picture, it won't matter now. I'd been stealing glances toward that little linoleum entry way that led to the front door ever since I got here anyway. After all, it was the fatal spot. I aimed my camera out the front door and tried not to imagine the blood fanning out across the wall, the red circle widening curiously across the floor. And Miss Mary herself, tripping down the stairs from the bedroom in her bare feet as soon as she'd heard the blast from that 12-gauge double-barreled shotgun she'd locked up in the storage room in the basement.

Imagine finding him there, crumpled over like that, his back still warm through the blue pajamas, the red, red robe. What did she do before she made that first phone call? That house in Ketchum was a house of the dead all right. A shell, a carapace, no spirits anywhere in sight.

I thought of her mostly now as that tiny figure bending over in her nightgown, touching his shoulder. Don't go, please don't go. Jackie would know how she felt soon enough now, though neither of them knew it then. That summer in 1961, when there was everything to look forward to, day after golden day, the missiles of October, the ride through Dealy Plaza in the open air, light-years away. What neighbor or friend came that morning with sponge and pail and mop while Mary lay in bed, dumb with sedatives, her face buried in the pillow?

It was a ghost house. Hemingway was no westerner and neither was I. The ground shifted under me. Hemingway was as placeless now as I was. The West was no more home to him or to me than other places he'd lived. There was no deep abiding sense of identity here, no place that called his name. Maybe the West wasn't the last best hope, but the biggest disappointment of all. "Harry knew at least twenty good stories from out West, and he had never written one." Harry had not written those "twenty good stories" and neither had Hemingway. I had already read all the Hemingway there was, and there was no more West to be found.

A few years later *True at First Light*, Patrick Hemingway's edited version of the African journal, was published, then several years later the scholarly edition, *Under Kilimanjaro*. But I read neither, afraid of what I would find, faithless soul that I am. Then, against better judgment, I accepted an assignment to write an essay on the African book for *The Hemingway Review*. So in a rainy December light, I took it off the shelf and turned the page. And there was Hemingway's West all over again. In Africa, in 1956, Hemingway had remembered the West.

In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," written in 1936, Hemingway had described how Harry had gone "down through the timber in the dark holding the horse's tail where you could not see and all the stories he meant to write." It is the very story he finishes in *Under Kilimanjaro* twenty years later: "You had remembered how wonderful [the horse] had always seen in the dark and how you had hung onto his tail to come down trails when you could not see at all." But he betrays the horse in the African book as in "Snows" he had betrayed the "half-wit chore boy" on the ranch. "So you had brought [Old Kite] up here five days before, because someone had to do it and you could do it, if not gently, without suffering. ... Good-bye, Old Kite. ... I know you'd do the same for me. I thought I could keep him from seeing [the gun] but he saw it and his eyes knew what it was and he stood very still trembling and I shot him."

This memory triggers an extended recollection of how he shot the three eagles which came to feed on Old Kite and the guilt over selling the eagle plumes on the reservation and how "he reached out and touched the tails and stroked the plumes very lightly." And the two bears he killed who had come down to eat off the horse; and the bear claws he had sold along with the eagle plumes: "there had been no grizzly claws for many, many years and you made a good trade." Memories of guilt and regret over the Native Americans on the reservations are linked to the Africans on the reserve for whom he is now responsible.

"In Africa a thing is true at first light and false by noon," Hemingway writes in *Under Kilimanjaro*. Home is the place which is "true at first light," the place where identity is shaped by geography. "First light" is "the chastity of first sight," as Hemingway had described it in the coda to "Big, Two-Hearted River." Seeing things at first light, with the chastity of first sight, is seeing things for what they are in themselves beyond all prejudice and advantage. It affirms Hemingway's profound sense that seeing has a moral quality to it and with it the moral obligation of the writer to forever and always "live right with his eyes."

"This looking and not seeing things was a great sin," Hemingway writes in the African book, "and I thought that we did not deserve to live in a world if we did not see it. ... Now here in Africa there were beautiful birds around the camp all of the time ... and I only half saw them as moving bits of color. ... I could not think how I had become so stupid and calloused about the birds and I was very ashamed. ... I realized I had only paid attention to the predators ... and the birds that were good to eat and the birds that had to do with hunting" (225).

In *Green Hills of Africa*, Hemingway had written how, in the dazzle of the noonday sun, you could look across a "sun-baked salt plain" and see a "lovely," "weed-fringed lake" even though it isn't there. The noonday sun is a trickster and nothing to believe in, for it can hold "the nightmare at noontide" just as well. Even the Sea of Galilee looks "stagnant and dreary"—and no water to walk on now. The dazzle of the noontide sun casts false

shadows against the hills that blight both memory and sight. Everything is fading and subject to the “remorseless rush of time.” But at first light, a clarity which holds perfect truth comes to the wondering, wandering eye like an epiphany, though it cannot be sustained in the full light of day.

But there is another way in which the narrator of the African book seeks the same kind of knowledge that comes with the first light of dawn, or straight from dreams. It is in the solitary moonlit walks he takes that are set against the same sense of the “remorseless rush of time,” which drove the blood hunts of GHA twenty years earlier. There is something he needs to learn and so little time in which to learn it. It is a sense that carries both transcendence and death, for death is at the end of this tale, and though never mentioned, it hovers over the manuscript like an unspeakable word. “No one knew the night. But I was going to learn it if I could alone and on foot. ... I did not want to share it with anyone.”

So he leaves the camp behind and sets out: “the moon was over my right shoulder and I started off. I checked the bushes and trees that had cobra holes and hoped that I would not step on any of them if they were out hunting. I heard a lion ... [and] ahead, on the plain I could see something asleep in the moonlight. ... There were many night birds and I saw bat-eared foxes and leaping hares. ... The moon was well up now and gave a good light and I went along the trail happy to be out in the night. ... I could see the mountain high and square topped and wonder-white in the moonlight and I hoped I would not run onto anything to kill. So I walked along in the moonlight hearing the small animals move and the birds cry. ... I could hear a leopard hunting in the edge of the big swamp to the left. So I turned back to camp looking at the mountain and not hunting at all” (361–62).

It is an extraordinary image. The solitary hunter wearing his whisper-soft moccasins, armed with only a spear and a phantom dog at his knee. And later, in *The Garden of Eden*, he re-creates the elephant seen by moonlight and betrayed by noon. He is more Natty Bumppo in old age than Deerslayer, but the quintessential American Adam even so. To forge the boundaries of personality against this most beautiful and yielding world; but more, to merge with it and see images and shadows of the self reflected there: “I put a bone fragment” from the marauding leopard [I] had killed “in my mouth and bit on it and tasted the new blood, which tasted ... like my own. There is no explanation [for] that. I did it without thinking.”

Where do I belong? Who are my people? Who am I, stripped of all known points of reference? Here is the existential self, seeking knowledge beyond knowing. The solitary self stripped of all accompaniments. Now there is no wife, or hunting companions, or gun bearers, or hunting guides, guns, equipment, or truck, as before. The West as actual place remains a repository for memories of longing and regret, which fuel the imagination and then are forged into art. But beyond this, as with the clarity of “first light” or “the chastity of first sight,” Hemingway creates a deepening sense of the West as an epistemological terrain and a metaphysical destination.

“What do you have to do it for?” Mary asks on her return from Nairobi. This going by moonlight alone. “*I want to find out things*,” he tries to explain but cannot. “But why do you go out ? ... You’ll kill yourself doing that.” “Because the time is getting short. ... How do I know [I’ll] ever get back?”

Then Mary tells him what she wants for Christmas: the sight-seeing flight over the Belgian Congo which, as we

know, is the occasion for the two plane crashes which signal the beginning of the end.

In 2004, I went to Cuba one last time. On that last visit I drifted into the living room and slipped my camera silently down and photographed books at random on those bookshelves so that later, when I am gone from that Cuban dream, I could see what was really there. I had permission now to do this because I'd made great friends with one of the curators. It isn't until months later, when I finally download the pictures, that I see it there on the top shelf. *LORD GRIZZLY* by Frederick Manfred. My friend Nancy writes a poem for me, called "On Finding Lord Grizzly in Hemingway's Library." "They could talk awhile about the lay of the land, the isolation, despair and hope. They would recognize a brother." And so I have come full circle.

Memory and desire create a sense of who we are as it is manifested in a sense of place that both haunts us and gives us peace. For Hemingway, this place was the West—a landscape which is both as familiar and unknown as the landscape of our dreams. The West became a place reminiscent enough of other good places to spur the longing that was so essential to his art. And if it was not a place Hem could easily write about, as no place in America really was (the West, by then, had become too actual to spur the force of memory or the longing of regret), then it became the still, quiet place out of which he wrote. But any reader who goes looking for it, will find the West at first light, hovering in the background, like the outline of some distant mountain seen through morning fog or purple against the rising sun. Hemingway was a "westerner" after all. And so was I.

