Because I knew my talk would be given over lunch, I’ve tried to strike a balance between humor and commentary. A glass of champagne has been my inspiration: I hope my address provides you with just the right amount of bubble and body to make it palatable to most tastes. A lunch-time address is not the time for invective, polemic, or overly dense theoretical prose. I don’t want to upset your stomachs or put you to sleep. And so begins my sundry tale of East and West.

I’m going to let you in on a secret: a little known fact about me outside of immediate family is that I was born in Summit, New Jersey. New Jersey is decidedly not the West. For a quarter of a century, I spent my life meandering around parts east of the Mississippi River. The Great Brown God marks definitive territory for the Western Literature Association: we won’t meet anywhere east of that deep divide through America’s midsection. That’s our conference geography. Though our organization requires no litmus test to determine how truly western we really are, I’ve often wondered what my eastern roots mean to an organization that draws a line at a river. Looking out at you today, I know there must be some others who spent formative years growing up back East. Many of you born in the West have gone to school or now teach in the East. We’re academics, and we’re used to our vagabond existences. Still, here I am in the Western Literature Association (as a number of you have commented over the years, there is no Eastern Literature Association because that’s American literature) and during rare doubtful times I wonder about my “authenticity.” Though we try hard to pooh-pooh essentialism these days, I know some of you die-hard westerners may have already placed me in some Dante-esque circle peopled by frauds and con artists. I’m like that commercial for Pace Picante sauce: made in New Jersey? Forget about it.

From time to time, in subtle and not so subtle ways, I’ve picked up that message at the WLA. Indeed, let me relate to you two real “sundry adventures” that occurred at our annual meetings, one in Denton, Texas in 1990, the other in Salt Lake City in 1994. Indeed, this talk owes much to Ian Marshall’s 1990 talk at Denton on “The Easterner in Western Literature—and the Western Literature Association.” But it’s another session I want to recall, though I don’t recall the title of the session. The conversation turned to a recently published book, Jane Tompkins’ very personal take on the western in West of Everything. Some of you other long-time members might remember this quite heated discussion. On the whole, the most vocal audience members viewed this book
unfavorably. It is irksome, is it not, when the hot critic of the moment, who has never published on the West, writes a book and then everyone is reading it, discussing it, and ordering it for class use. Other scholars, who have spent their lives studying every pocket and corner of western American literature, are lucky to get a howdy-do in the blue-chip book review columns. That was just one issue, and granted some of the criticism aimed at Tompkins was fair. But one ad feminem attack stands out in my memory: Tompkins was charged with being an easterner (read “elite” in that charge) and for some minds in that room, that was argument enough to damn the book and the author, too. As a new and uncertain WLA member born in the East, I stood quietly in the back of the room.

Salt Lake City, 1994: I went to a session on ranching women because my brilliant friend, Dru Wall, was presenting a paper on Elinore Pruitt Stewart. Another paper examined Gretel Ehrlich’s book *Solace of Open Spaces*. The discussion afterward was lively and engaging, but one comment on Ehrlich remains with me to this day. Susanne George Bloomfield, an accomplished horsewoman, argued that Ehrlich knew nothing about horses. I trust Susanne’s judgement on this point; she *does* know horses. If Ehrlich is inauthentic on this count, where else might her narrative be flawed? Where else has she shallowed out? Is it because she came to Wyoming from New York City? I grew up in the shadow of that city and if there’s one thing I know nothing about, it’s horses. In that part of the country, one tends to be wealthy and to ride English saddle if one has anything to do with horses. I once took lessons in dressage, but horses still scare me. To be frank, there’s a lot about life in the rural West I know absolutely nothing about. Ehrlich must have been on a steep learning curve herself, trying to understand the mysteries of sheep, horses, and cowboys after all those years in the big city. I have wondered since that meeting if Ehrlich’s book, a book on the West written by a former New Yorker for an eastern audience, suffers in its estimation for exactly that reason.

When I teach courses on western American, Canadian, and Great Plains literature, I always make Peggy Pascoe’s metaphor of the western crossroads a central issue: western literature reflects a complex traversing. Human migration to the West, across the West, has etched multi-directional trails. Recent histories of the West’s transactions with eastern markets and culture demonstrate a complex interdependency as well. But in our popular culture, in our entrenched mythologies, and in our own experiences, we see that the ambivalent squaring off between East and West remains a singular polarity in the literature and media we study.

It is exactly this opposition that propels the opening narrative in Owen Wister’s *The Virginian*. Early in the novel, our narrator looks at the faces of the cowboys and praises their “daring, laughter, endurance.” A Rocky Mountain saloon is a far preferable place than any New York equivalent; “more of death it undoubtedly saw, but less of vice,” he explains. “And death is a thing much cleaner than vice. Here, among “lusty horsemen” and “youth untamed,” the narrator perceives “a true nobility” and “heroic stature.” In projecting a chivalric luster onto a western landscape, Wister makes this assessment of the East: the East is old, not youthful; tamed, not untamed; impotent, not lusty; unclean, not clean; common, not heroic. The East is where American idealism is dying. The West is where it is reborn. While the eastern carcass lies rotting and decaying, the West rises, the fresh new body of the New World. Indeed, the East has become Europe, and the West America. Fifth Avenue
and Wyoming stand more than miles apart in *The Virginian*. They are moral worlds apart. What a good thing all those cowboys from Maine, Ohio, Virginia, and other states east of the Mississipi came West. Molly Wood from forested Vermont brings to the West the unsullied parts of eastern ideas, transplanting cultural stock into cleaner, better soil. Her contact with western air and ways, with simplicity and directness, proves invigorating. We are told “her good old Revolutionary blood” has been watered down by “the pale decadence of New England.” What a good thing she has landed in Wyoming and has met the Virginian. What a good thing that poet Robert Browning falls off her lap “and lay unrescued” after the Virginian tells her that real men, who are men enough to fight, don’t fall over dead proclaiming “‘I’m killed, sire!’” as they do in Browning’s “Pippa Passes.” This young woman of the East will become in one year’s time “the girl from Bear Creek,” and we are to applaud the change.

I’ve often found the East-West polarity—especially as it mixes with North/South rapprochement—a bit problematic in *The Virginian*, but many writers then as now replicate Wister’s vision. Writers preceding Wister had already remapped the American landscape in this bi-polar way. In 1881, for instance, Frances Hodgson Burnett, a British émigré, published *Through One Administration*, a memorable political novel that exposes corruption during President Ulysses S. Grant’s administration (Hodgson Burnett’s children’s fiction has unfortunately eclipsed her earlier, highly acclaimed realistic novels for adults). Eastern cultural miasma is embodied in Washington society and in Washington’s air, literally malarial in summer months. Like her contemporary Isabel Archer, heroine Bertha Amory has married unwisely, “merely marrying the man who loves her” as the author asserts. Her feckless husband, Richard, uses their salon for political lobbying of the worst sort: fraudulent development in the West. The scandal that festers in this novel has everything to do with an amoral East exploiting western lands and unstable, Gilded Age capital. Under the stress of a loveless marriage and her husband’s schemes, Bertha outwardly performs her part dressed in exotic plumage of unnatural vibrancy while inwardly collapsing and fragmenting. Exhausted, hollowed out, wan, her very body connects to eastern decay and effemeness. Hodgson Burnett’s characters, echoing Baudelaire, constantly comment on how “unreal” their lives are. Their desires blocked, their powers limited, both her men and women seem unable to grasp life and mold it to their personal wills. They are, with few exceptions, all easterners.

The one note of heroism is Colonel Tredennis, an officer in the U.S. Army stationed in the West—the kind of figure John Ford would later celebrate in film. His erect figure stands in contrast to all that primps and mugs around him in Washington society. Like the later Virginian, he answers to a higher code, a moral clarion call that sounds no more in the East. Opposed to Richard Amory’s shameless hucksterism, insisting that public servants owe the people the highest standards, Tredennis counters the prevailing indifference to ethics and decency that has infected Washington operations. He is the man Bertha should have married, and much of her suffering stems from this recognition. She has cast her pearls among Washington swine, and has thus sealed her fate as well. In accord with the pessimistic mood of this novel, Tredennis will die with his boots on in the Indian Wars. We are left supposing that eastern corruption will lengthen its shadow westward. Bertha’s husband escapes to Europe, the best soil for immoral scoundrels; Bertha herself returns to her father’s home dragging her
exhausted body up darkened stairs to her old nursery. Her life has completely devolved.

The female body in our popular media reveals much about when East meets West. Since stereotypical eastern men tend to be feminized, overly fastidious, and far too particular about fashion in popular imaginings, one concludes both genders suffer from their eastern connections. As with the goose, so goes the gander. Eastern women are weaker than the norm, and eastern men become . . . women. All we need to see is the dainty boot emerging from a stage coach in a movie or t.v. show to know a woman’s origin. Eastern women have tight curls and elaborate hats, impeccable gloves and fully laced corsets if it’s a nineteenth-century story. In Molly Wood style, they read Emma and “Pippa Passes.” Eastern women shy from horses, tend to faint, or go mad, as does the fragile heroine, Emmeline Berryman in Pam Conrad’s historical novel, *Prairie Songs*. When we first meet Emmeline, arriving on the barely settled Nebraska grasslands from New York City, the narrator tells us, “She was dressed in the most magnificent violet dress I could ever remember seeing, and across her lap lay a sparkling pink parasol flounced with lace and eyelet.” She is also “slumped in a faint” against her husband, ashen grey and in shock. Are we at all surprised later when she goes crazy? As the Beach Boys attest, those “East Coast girls are hip,” but they are hot house lilies that quickly wilt under western skies. Flash forward a century, and the eastern woman in film and text still exudes a near-exotic sophistication when she appears in the West, but unless she adapts, throws off her underwear, and learns to use her muscle, she will rarely thrive in western spaces. She must transform, emotionally and physically, or die. Think of the legacy of eastern-born women writers who in their lives or fiction have presented this transformation to us: Helen Hunt Jackson, Mary Austin, Mary Hallock Foote, Ethel Waxham Love, Willa Cather, just to name a few. [A comparable transformation occurs for many male writers and protagonists all the way to contemporary times; the West transformed Theodore Roosevelt as well as Owen Wister’s narrator, who loses his fastidiousness along the way; a recent popular recycling of this male transformation takes place in Billy Crystal’s City Slickers movies, for instance.]

One wonders how eastern audiences have absorbed this criticism of eastern culture—perhaps the deepening of regional writing in New England and the South in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is partly resistance to the wide damning brush strokes of eastern critique (though decay is certainly an interest in this regional fiction). Effete, corrupt, dried up, dying: these adjectives apply to one version of the East. Why does Carol Milford Kennicott in Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* want to flee Gopher Prairie? When she must return to her husband after a stint in Washington, D.C., we understand deeply her diminishment. Why do so many Cather protagonists leave their Sand City’s, Holdrege’s, Black Hawk’s, and Hanover’s, all fictional versions of Red Cloud, for cities east of the Mississippi? In Cather’s “A Death in the Desert,” Katharine Gaylord longs for “a whiff of the Jersey ferry”—*my* New Jersey—for it “would be as flagons of cod-liver oil to me,” she explains. Boston, Massachusetts, Hartford, Connecticut, New York, New York, Washington, D.C.—these eastern cities have welcomed many western-bred writers. The fact is, the West is no moral utopia. There’s more than Trampas, that archetypal snake in the garden, hiding out in the hills. Problems that have historically dogged the East—labor and racial unrest, industrial pollution, inequality, extractive industries—have dogged the West. For
instance, I don’t buy Judge Henry’s arguments in *The Virginian* that Wyoming hangings are somehow more decent than southern lynchings. Add to all that moral complexity the isolation of small towns like fictional Gopher Prairie or Hanover, Colorado, and their distance from quality entertainment, fashion, museums, the vertiginous bubble of new ideas; figure in low wages, mediocre doctoring, failing farms and ranches; the list goes on. These challenges have encouraged many a young, ambitious person since Mark Twain and Willa Cather over a century ago to leave western towns for eastern promise. My state of Nebraska is not the only western state deploiring the continuing “brain drain” from our landscape. There are now counties in Nebraska with essentially one functional town. Young people past and present have left their western towns for eastern opportunity. Yes, this eastern promise can be illusory, but is Nick Carroway running back to his hometown at the end of *The Great Gatsby*? Does the green bosom of America exist there? I think not. At the other end of the East/West scale, we see that Gotham and the like exude an irresistible glamour, a pull on the cultural imagination that to this day makes my Nebraska students ask me why I’m in Omaha. Wasn’t it better, more interesting, back East? As one of my Nebraska born friends has pointed out to me, there is no song about Omaha that exuberantly declares, “If you can make it there, you’ll make it anywhere.”

Even inanimate objects can feel the pull of the East in western American literature. Even a simple Can o’ Beans can roll itself all the way to New York, New York. In Tom Robbins’s outrageous novel, *Skinny Legs and All*, Ellen Cherry is, as her parents’ put it, “fixin’ to live in New York City,” close to the center of the art scene, but from her parents’ perspective, too close to “Perverts. Puerto Ricans. Muggers. Terrorists. Whatta ya call ‘em: bag ladies.” Driving east from Seattle in an Airstream dressed up as a large roast turkey, Ellen and her dumb husband, her own version of the Virginian, Boomer Petway, go in pursuit of her dreams, to become the new Georgia O’Keefe. If love for Boomer might ultimately fail her, “art would see her through,” Robbins tells us. “Give her the big time. Give her a big break. Give her Manhattan. The Bronx and Staten Island too,” his narrative croons. Somewhere near the corner of Idaho, Utah, and Montana, Ellen and Boomer have some pretty rocking sex in a cave, with unexpected results. Awakened by “the sexual intercourse of Mr. and Mrs. Boomer Petway,” Dirty Sock, Spoon, Can o’ Beans, Painted Stick, and Conch Shell miraculously stir and find themselves gripped in Ellen’s desire: they, too, must follow her East, and then East of the East to Jerusalem. For every Huck Finn lighting out for the territory, one can find a Sister Carrie or Ellen Cherry or even a Can o’ Beans striking out for the East, for the chance to make it big, to be a part of IT.

Desire plays a huge role in the representation of East or West. Desire can pull one either direction. Sometimes, as in *The Virginian* and *Skinny Legs and All*, one reaps rewards from this desire; other times, as in stories like *The Great Gatsby* or *Day of the Locust*, desire ends in frustration, violence, and grief. One can end up singing for kings, like Cather’s Thea Kronberg, or swimming with the fishes. You can go bust in New York, Hollywood, or all points in between. The East has power: the power of money, the power of politics, the power of myth. Vishnu-like, this power can both create and destroy. This power can translate into a colonizing stranglehold in much western American literature—and we can thank Native American and post-modern studies for reconfiguring a post-colonial West for us. The West as contact zone has a long, imbricated history. Population
and political pressures from the East pushed many native tribes West and then into reservations, and
disenfranchised Mexican Americans as well; eastern growth into the 20th century would then encourage
settlement, immigration, and further transformation of the West. One of the ironies in western American
literature is how quickly the settlers themselves came to view the East they may have come from with a mix of
suspicion and awe, of resentment and dependence. In some contemporary accounts of the modern West, the
progeny of settlers now feel themselves colonized, disenfranchised: the East wants to turn their rural lands into
garbage dumps; multinational corporations want to run off family farms; the interstates connecting urban
centers have gutted western main streets. Rose Wilder Lane’s pioneer protagonist, David Beaton, speaks for
western townsfolk then and now when he complains, “Back east they’ve been raising all they need to live on for
a long time and they’ll go on doing it, barring some accident like must have happened to their turnips this fall.
A man out here can’t compete against ‘em in their market and pay freight charges.” Another homesteader
declares, “It’s them eastern trusts that’s bleeding us to death [. . . ] It’s manufacturers and railroads, grinding us
down with their protective tariff.” All of these men believe that “every man’s got to lift himself by his own
boot-straps”; but bloodsuckers back East have already set the rules of the game against them, and no matter how
hard they work they cannot get ahead. At the end of Wilder Lane’s Free Land, David declares to his father, “I
started with as good as fifteen hundred dollars and I put five years work on top of that and sunk it. I couldn’t
sell out today, every jot and tittle I own, and pay over half what I owe. But it’s good country. I’ll be right here,
father, when this farm’s worth something.” Down the road, many of the children and grandchildren of men like
David Beaton abandoned his dream. High stakes, unstable markets, eastern money and politics, bad weather:
big dreams in big country can go down in just a generation or two. The bloodsucking East has played a role in
the rise and fall of western economies, but it has also been a convenient bogeyman in our literature as well.

So what to make of this face off between East and West? How to erase what Neil Campbell has called the old
binary thinking that divides the world into “‘and/or’, ‘them/us’, ‘North/South’, ‘male/female’”—and I will add
East/West? Annette Kolodny, honored at this meeting, has argued that we must develop a “more inclusive
interdisciplinarity” in which “both geography and chronology must be viewed as fluid and ongoing, or as a
continuously unfolding palimpsest.” The East and West—and Canada has its own form of this mythic
geography—have long been involved in a process of “transculturation.” As historian Richard White reminds us,
“[history] forces attention to movement, to contact, to exchange.” Both the West and the East are “products of
relationship,” not just with each other but with global cultures and geographies. We need to get beyond a
reductive, gendered, and stereotyped understanding of East and West that plays out like some surreal celebrity
death match: in this corner, dressed in silk boxers, a dandified, kid-gloved East; and over there, in the opposite
corner, wearing tooled leather boxers, a masculinized, Stetson-hatted West, snorting like the Raging Bull he is.
If we made these characters female, the result would be the same, wouldn’t it? The West kicks ass.

I don’t mean to turn this address into a whining easterner’s rant. And because we are the Western Literature
Association, I will end with an image that privileges the pull of desire westward, because that’s why many of us
are here: we are meeting here in Tucson, Arizona not Trenton, New Jersey, because we as an organization gaze
West, not East. Before I moved to Nebraska, the state decided to commission sculptures from respected artists to grace our interstate rest areas. In a sense, Nebraska has an extended sculpture garden all across the state. Near Grand Island, in the eastbound rest area, sits *Erma’s Desire*. In his second collection of essays, *Back in Keith County*, biologist John Janovy Jr. opens up with a celebration of this piece by artist John Raimondi. When these sculptures were first set into their rest areas, not all Nebraskans were thrilled. Many questioned the money spent on perplexing abstraction; others questioned the artistic value. *Erma’s Desire* inspired some heated invective years ago, but time has confirmed the wisdom of those visionaries who directed this public arts project. Here’s Janovy’s description of big, bad, bold Erma and the desire that has worried and pleased her detractors and admirers over the years: “There are three sharp spires to Erma, set at angles on trianguloid bases. The spires make different angles with the horizon, face different directions of the compass, cast reflections of different lengths in the small lake near where Erma sits, apart from the rest stop buildings. The distance from the buildings must have some meaning, almost as if she had placed herself there, away from the pet exercise area, the drinking fountain, the rest rooms, the picnic tables, the sum totality of trophic behavior [...]. The points are, they must be, her desires. They are sharp, as desires must be. The largest one, set at the most insistent angle, points back west, back to Keith County.” The eastern spire points east and upward, into the skies. The longer, western spire, points “at a low angle, heavy and sharp,” west. Janovy has traveled this interstate artery countless times to get to his field area in Keith County, Nebraska, north of Ogallala. From his perspective, the eastern spire urges him to “keep your ties with security, with the east, but never let them suppress your determination to move into the unknown, into that world in which your own skills and your own decisions govern your fate [...]. In motion, as I move at highway speed, her eastern spire, her faith and remembrances, remains almost stationary, steadfast.” The western spire is something else. Longer, stronger, pointing sharply, it suggests “some overriding determination, some commitment to a totally new and unknown horizon.” To the west is wildness; to the west is “the gutteral resonance of sandhill cranes.” To the west are the Sandhills themselves, where Janovy’s scientific imagination is free to wander. But Janovy ultimately resists this polarized version of East and West. *Erma’s Desire* as a whole suggests “positions of relative importance that depended on their angle of view, a shifting, changing, intellectual experience, from which a single message emerged, at least for the time.” In her spires, one finds “no jockeying for positions of power”; one perceives “the flow of unhindered thoughts open to all interpretations.” *Erma’s Desire* is East and West, both at once, a “combination of points and directions, emphases and bases, settings and an infinite number of ephemeral contexts,” Janovy explains. Janovy might ultimately claim his own preferred understanding of her embrace, but he knows that others will find their own direction in her spires.

For me, *Erma’s Desire* embodies the many directions my own life and career have taken: an easterner come West; a Victorianist returned to the American fold; the necessary push and pull of home and journey; the partners I have loved, east and west; the beginnings and endings and beginnings again of any life, of my life. *Erma’s Desire* reminds us that we have whirling compasses inside ourselves, for identities are complex and our desires never-ending. She also stands for the thing I love most about our organization: we are many people, representing multiple geographies, perspectives, and cultures. Like Erma, our spires point in several directions
and dimensions. That is our strength, that is our richness. Erma reminds me that just as there are many Wests, there are many Easts, and the twain does meet, here, with us today, as we commemorate another year together and look forward to many more, somewhere west of the Mississippi.

This address was delivered at the Western Literature Association Awards Luncheon in Tucson, Arizona, on October 10, 2002. Copyright Susan Naramore Maher.

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