

MARY CLEARMAN BLEW

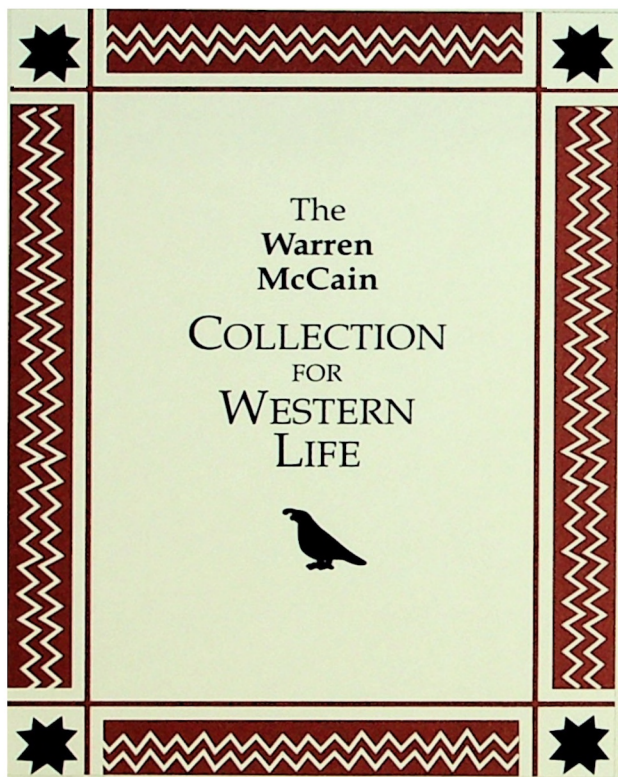
by Evelyn I. Funda



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Mary Clearman Blew

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BIOGRAPHY

Defying the Welch family edict to "Never speak aloud of what you feel deeply," Mary Clearman Blew has garnered national recognition as an eminent writer in the American west by choosing to write candidly about the riddle of her family, their deeply felt losses, and her sense of "the contradictions of double vision, of belonging in place and being out of place" (*Balsamroot* 4; *Bone Deep* 174). Unsparingly honest and accessible in eight books of fiction and nonfiction, in person Blew is, nevertheless, a quiet, dignified, and reserved woman who still thinks of herself as a bookworm, the girl who barely managed to escape from the Montana ranch.

Born 10 December 1939, in Lewistown, Montana, as Mary Rebecca Hogeland, Blew has long had to negotiate essential contradictions between male and female notions about the west. On the one hand, the men of her family represent an absolute faith in a mythology defined by men's "inarticulate strength and honor and courage" as they laid claim to landscape, tamed and transformed it, and perceived it as a locus of male ritual and dominance (*Waltz* 45). On the other hand, the women of her family struggled to make a place for themselves in the exclusionary male west or to free themselves of its power to define and limit them.

When Blew's paternal great-grandfather, Abraham Hogeland, left Pennsylvania and settled in Montana in 1882, working as a surveyor and then homesteader who "convert[ed] landscape into property" (*Waltz* 22), he established a legacy of valuing the land as

a commodity, a thing to be platted, conquered, and owned by men. Blew's father, Jack Hogeland, extended these western notions, though his regional identity was imperiled by an increasingly modern world where he became one of "the lonely, obsolete cowboys, living out the last of their tradition according to their unwritten rules of horsemanship and conduct, their notions of honor, and their immolation of themselves to an ideal transmitted through popular literature and film" (Waltz 83).

Although this "romantic and despairing mythology" hinges on male independence (Waltz 45), the women of Blew's family valued their own brand of emotional and intellectual independence. Demonstrating that women were certainly capable of ranch work, her paternal grandmother, Edna Hogeland, controlled the Montana ranch after her husband, Albert, died when Jack was just three; she was known for shunning the duties of the house and for "her easy assumption of men's labors" in the fields (Waltz 73). Blew's maternal grandmother, Mary Welch, emphasized the necessity for women's financial freedom. When her husband failed at homesteading and insurance sales, she was forced until her seventies to support her family on her salary as an itinerant schoolteacher working in one-room schoolhouses across central Montana. Blew's maternal aunt, Imogene Welch (pronounced by the family as "EYE-ma-gene"), in turn, fostered in Mary intellectual and emotional independence—a willingness to question, to make a home in other places, to refuse to be defeated by tragedy and loss.

Mary Hogeland and her sisters, Betty and Jackie, were raised as though they were boys, working on horseback as soon as they could sit in a saddle and hearing their father declare: "We'll be Jack Hogeland and Daughters" (52). This posed, however, a key dilemma. "I could find no way through the contradiction," Blew writes; "On the one hand, I was a boy (except that I also was a

bookworm), and my chores were always in the barns and corrals, never in the kitchen. [...] On the other hand, I was scolded for hanging around the men, the way ranch boys did. I was not a boy (my buttocks, my vanity). What was I?" (*Waltz* 171).

Home-schooled until she was almost nine, young Mary loved to draw (King 9). However, books were her first love. Her mother complained that she always had a nose in her book, yet Doris Hogeland fought to ensure that her country daughter could check out whatever book she wanted from the town library. Mary read voraciously, delighting in everything from farm catalogues to sentimental fiction to Latin textbooks. Reading showed her that a rich world existed beyond the vistas of wheat and cattle, while western writers like A.B. Guthrie and Mildred Walker also "showed me that the place where I lived could be written about, that all books weren't located in the great romantic Elsewhere" (King 9). Although her father remained a fan of Guthrie, Zane Grey, and Louis L'Amour, Blew ultimately realized those narratives eulogized an inherently male, violent, and doomed tradition. Instead, during her youth Blew discovered what she would call a "mother lode" of western women writers in Bertha Muzzy Bower, Dorothy Johnson, and Mildred Walker—literary "mothers" who helped her locate women's stories "within the dominating western mythology of solitude, questing, conflict, and destruction" (*Bone Deep* 97).

Offering the real-life example of a woman doing just that, Blew's aunt Imogene Welch followed in a family tradition of teaching but left Montana after a near-fatal accident with a haymow in order to teach school in Washington state. Every summer she would return to the ranch to help with harvest. Bringing books and other presents and teaching her dryland nieces how to swim, she embodied—with her cigarettes and salon-coiffed hair—the possibility of women's liberty.

In 1952 when Blew was 12, her father made a personal sacrifice for his daughters by selling the family ranch near the Judith River (near the original log cabin Abraham Hogeland had built) rather than board his daughters out to attend the high school in Lewistown. Blew excelled academically but found that “the differences between me and the town girls felt like stigmata” (Waltz 76). After high school, she entered the University of Montana, where the family assumed she would get her teacher certification in two years and return to teach in the local country schools. However, Blew knew that teachers in the post-World War II era needed a full four-year degree for certification. She sought, moreover, a passage into a larger world.

At Missoula she met and soon married fellow student Ted Clearman. Son of a Helena family (his father was a washing machine repairman, his mother a housewife), Ted originally majored in forestry but switched to English education (Funda). Soon after their marriage, Mary, age eighteen, was pregnant with son Jack, born in 1959; two years later daughter Elizabeth was born. Despite intense pressure from her disapproving in-laws who had hoped she would make a good Nazarene wife (Funda), despite bewildered college professors who were telling her it was her “husband’s education that matters,” not “this sideshow act of mine with babies and twenty-two credits” (*Balsamroot* 130), and despite the binary example of women in literature who either had sacrificed everything or become “really successful and really evil” (178), Blew refused to give up her dreams of a degree. When the couple ran out of money for their schooling, they got provisional teaching certificates for the 1960–61 school year. Mary took a one-year position in a combined fifth and sixth grade class in Winnett, Montana, a boom and bust oil town with only 350 residents, and Ted taught in a nearby rural school. While Blew enjoyed teaching, she chose not to take additional education courses for her permanent teaching certificate (Funda).

Instead, supported in part by financial assistance from her namesake grandmother, Mary Welch, Blew returned to the university the next year, double majored in English and Latin, and eschewed the teaching certificate her family saw as “something to grab and have done with.” Latin, in particular, was her solace from the family conflicts about her education that pitted her in-laws against her mother and grandmother. Although she saw education as an essential part of her “quest for identity,” her broader intellectual ambitions had her feeling “as subversive as a foundling in a fairy tale” (Waltz 166, 165). Blew nevertheless completed her B.A. with honors in 1962, returned that fall to work on a Masters (completed the following year), and then went on to the University of Missouri at Columbia for her PhD (completed in 1969).

Blew has said that graduate school was her way of “disengaging from Montana” (King 10)—something the subject of her dissertation demonstrates. Entitled *Aspects of Juvenal in Ben Jonson's Comical Satyres*, Blew's dissertation combined her love of Latin and Renaissance literature. Demonstrating how Jonson's early plays draw directly upon Juvenal's satires in theme and method, Blew pays close attention to both authors' treatment of corruption in society, in theater, and most especially in women. In Juvenal's sixth satire, she writes, “All women are treacherous, unfaithful, cruel, spoiled,” and, according to Juvenal, “if a virtuous woman could be found, she would be so struck with her own virtue that she would be unbearable” (*Aspects* 48).

In a recent essay written in the third person, Blew admits the scholarship of those years “grew from her fear of suffocation.” In her choice of subject matter, “she was trying to reinvent herself in a milieu as far removed as she could find from the place where she was born [...]. Years later her gorge still rises when she thinks about the dearth of expectations for her.” She loved, she wrote,

“the sensation of one mind touching another over centuries through words” (“Bones”). However, the more attention she gave to such literary engagements, the more inevitable was a family conflict, and while she lived in Missouri, a serious rift with her father developed out of her “anger that he had tried too hard to keep me tied to a tradition I saw as illusory” (Waltz 54).

After she completed her PhD, Mary and Ted (who had received an M.A. at Missouri in history) moved to the Seattle area, where Ted took a job at a Bellevue junior high school. But Mary felt isolated and alone, without purpose, and suffered what she has since identified as the “bout of depression” suggested in the opening passages of “Bones of Summer” (Funda). When a university teaching job presented itself, Blew returned to Montana to take up a position as professor and Chair in the Department of Languages and Literature at Northern Montana College in Havre. Feeling lucky to find an academic job during a glut in the PhD market, Blew says that at that moment she was “tiresomely naïve” but possessed “a kind of dumb determination” that led to “what seemed to her like the last job in the world” (“Bones”). Havre is 175 highway miles north of where Blew was born and thirty miles south of the Canadian border on what is known as the “Highline” (a reference to the railroad line that traverses east-west for 250 miles through desolate high prairie, built during the homesteading era to bring in would-be settlers). Suffering declining enrollments, the college was unable to support Blew’s continued scholarship in Latin or Renaissance writers, and so she took up writing fiction as a way “of exploring where I was and trying to bring my intellectual and my cultural background into balance” (King 10).

In the summer of 1970, Blew published in the *North American Review* “Lambing Out,” a story that had been previously rejected fifteen times but ultimately earned an O. Henry Award in 1972 before it became the title story of her first short fiction collection,

published in 1977 under the name Mary Clearman. The slim collection shows a Montana of lost dreams, lost people, maimings, murders, grief, resentment, and, to use one story's title, characters who are all "Slightly Broken." The volume is bookended by stories involving birthing scenes; however, these births suggest that hope and innocence are lost, and in their place, the western world has given way to bigotry, death, cruelty, and aberrations.

The decade of the 1970s saw Blew publishing her fiction more regularly and receiving nominations for distinguished fiction in *Best American Short Stories* with "I Beat the Midget" (1971), "The Reining Pattern" (1972), "On the Hellgate" (1974), "Monsters" (1974), "Paths unto the Dead" (1975), "The Grand-Daughters" (1980), and "Forby and the Mayan Maidens" (1980).

In 1979, Blew moved from being department chair to dean of Northern Montana College's School of Arts and Sciences. She published less because administration took so much of her attention, but she became contributing editor to Montana's centennial anthology, *The Last Best Place: A Montana Anthology*, and twice won a Montana Award in the Humanities, once for "continuing commitments to the humanities" (1986), and later for her editorial work on the Montana anthology (1989).

In her personal life, she and Ted Clearman divorced in 1973, after several difficult years. Ted had gone to Montana with Mary and taught in the high school there but hated Havre. According to Blew, he "tried to coax me into quitting my job, left me, came back and tried again" before they divorced and he returned to Helena (Funda). In 1975 she met Robert Blew, a businessman who speculated in oil and a modern cowboy who showered her with gifts and taught her how to pilot his plane (knowledge she would use in several of her short stories). He was a gambler, lucky in business as well as cards, and he had a "jester's license to pull off every audacious stunt I might have longed to try but been afraid to all my

life" (Waltz 208). They married in the summer of 1978, and in 1982, when Mary was nearly 43, and twenty-one years after son Jack's birth, Mary gave birth to Rachel. Their joy was tempered, however, by Bob's diagnosis just months before of pulmonary fibrosis, a treatable but incurable disease causing inflammation and scarring of lung tissue. He refused treatment and continued smoking heavily (which is not a cause of the disease but can aggravate it). As the disease progressed, he became increasingly erratic in his behavior, lost substantial amounts of money in various speculative farming and oil businesses, piled up debts that Mary had to cover, and suffered from paranoia and mood swings that made him verbally abusive: raging and threatening wife and daughter one moment, pleading for love the next.

This personal upheaval coincided with the increasing financial pressures Blew was facing as a dean at the Montana college. When Montana's economy faltered and the then-president of Northern Montana College cut the school's dean positions, Blew chose to leave the state. While she had tenure and could have returned to teach full time in NMC's English Department, she decided, instead, to accept a job offer in Idaho (Funda). The position as Associate Professor of English at Lewis-Clark State College promised her relief from administrative work, and, more importantly, escape from what she would later call Bob Blew's "invitation to waltz with this rattling skeleton" (Waltz 220–21). Yet the move was personally traumatic, as she suggested in an essay set just weeks before she left Montana: "If anything in my experience seems permanent, it is the prairie, with its pale turn of seasons, the quiet cycle of the grasses, the shadows of the clouds; and for a stabbing moment I wonder how I can leave it" (*Bone Deep* 13). By that time, she had filed for divorce, but the settlement was still pending when she and Rachel left for Lewiston, Idaho, in 1987. Bob Blew had already left Montana for Kansas, in order to elude

creditors and, as he was certain, make another big strike in oil. He would, however, die in Kansas of the pulmonary fibrosis in October 1989. At the time of his death, he and Mary were legally separated but a divorce had never been finalized (Funda).

Meanwhile, Mary Blew's new job in Idaho meant that she was free, after many years, from administrative duties and could focus on teaching and writing. Her second book of short fiction, *Runaway: A Collection of Stories*, was published in 1990. The fourteen stories in *Runaway* hinge on the tension between retrospection and anticipation and express her deep sense of exile from her Montana past. With its numerous autobiographical elements, *Runaway* anticipates her movement into memoirs by exploring the family stories and themes that she would later take up without the "screen of character" (Morris 31).

For now, though, the "Juley stories" were Blew's way of writing about a woman facing her ancestral past and her independent future. Before the publication of *Runaway*, Blew had been thinking of these pieces as "sidelong glances at an imagined longer narrative about Juley's exile and reconciliation with the past" (Morris 28). Scattered throughout this collection, the stories "Kissing My Elbow," "Granddaughters," "Sample's Crossing," "Last Night as I Lay on the Prairie," and "Album" trace Juley Ware's teenaged rebellion against gender expectations, and, in her adulthood, her struggles to face the death of her father and the stigma of being the family's first divorced woman. In 1990 *Runaway* won a Pacific Northwest Booksellers award.

Blew has said that at this time, reading Kim Stafford's *Having Everything Right* (1986) and William Kittredge's *Owning It All* (1987)—memoirs written from an insider's point of view of the western experience—made her realize that she had no need to create a set of fictional devices to tell a good story (*Western Subjects* 163). The conventions of fiction with "its masks and metaphors,

came to seem more and more constricting to me, like a barricade between me and the material I was writing about" (*Bone Deep* 4). Questions of method and theme were converging for Blew at this time, as evidenced by her 1986 essay entitled "Growing Up Female in Charlie Russell Country" in which she said that "Charlie Russell country" is both a place and a way of living—a myth—that is inherently "male—individualistic, romantic, dangerous, and despairing" (3), and from within that myth precious little writing, especially fiction, had been published by women. "What happens," she asks, "when the young writer also chances to come of age in a territory where the myth which provides the powerful emotional basis for a male fiction renaissance denies, by its very nature, the female experience?" (4). The answer to that question would lie in *All But the Waltz* (1991), which pits a conventional, male western point of view against a woman's vision of a community-oriented, pragmatic, and enduring west.

Rather than fix on a lone, romantic, male hero—as Russell had in his paintings, as Guthrie and others had in the novels she read as a child—Blew structured her book on competing visions within one family and created what could be called a "family memoir," the first of Blew's family trilogy. Originally subtitled "Essays on a Montana Family," Blew made her intentions even clearer with a revision of the subtitle in subsequent editions to "A Memoir of Five Generations in the Life of a Montana Family." The most far-ranging of Blew's memoirs in time and scope, this book has been characterized by Ken Egan, Jr., as a "complex, troubled, darkly humorous book [...] dominated by questioning, by wondering, by searching," in which "the writer has the unnerving habit of approaching and reapproaching her subjects to dissolve comfortable assumptions and introduce new possibilities" (150).

Publication of *All But the Waltz* proved a watershed moment in Blew's career. The memoir garnered attention, again winning the

Pacific Northwest Booksellers Award, and marked her transition from fiction to life writing. After a promotion to full professor in 1992, Blew moved in 1994 thirty-five miles north to Moscow's University of Idaho, where she became director of creative writing and established that university's Master of Fine Arts in creative writing. In 1993 she was nominated for the National Endowment for the Humanities' National Award in the Humanities, in recognition of her leadership on both Idaho's and Montana's humanities councils as speaker, panelist, judge, and administrator.

In 1994, Blew continued her family's story with *Balsamroot: A Memoir*, which focuses on the physical and mental decline of Blew's Aunt Imogene. A key figure in all three of Blew's memoirs, Imogene is a woman who—to borrow a line from Maxine Hong Kingston's characterization of her own aunt in *The Woman Warrior*—"crossed boundaries not delineated in space" (8). As a teacher who escaped Montana, Imogene resists stereotypes of the spinster schoolmarm in the west and represents instead the possibility and even necessity of crossing boundaries that are spiritual and emotional as well as geographic—even when she is deeply inscribed by the very place she has chosen to leave. *Balsamroot* details the two years during which her aunt suffers a series of strokes, descends into a state of dementia, and moves from Washington to northern Idaho where Blew can care for her.

Balsamroot was followed by the 1999 essay collection *Bone Deep in Landscape: Essays on Reading, Writing and Place*, which could be called a cultural memoir, offering racial, geological, and intellectual history of Montana and Idaho. Readers of the collection may recognize extensions of other narratives: "The Art of Memoir" gives additional background for *Balsamroot* and *Writing Her Own Life*; "Crossing the Great Divide" echoes themes in *Balsamroot*; "Local Legend" and "The Apostate in the Attic" offer stories related to *All But the Waltz*.

Returning to fiction in 2000 Blew published *Sister Coyote: Montana Stories*, where several plots draw on symbolic and literal forms of hunting. For example, "Varia's Revenge" tells of a retired woman whose beloved horse is shot by a hunter, and she takes revenge in a scene that skillfully balances comedy and grief.

Just as *Runaway* includes the "Juley stories," *Sister Coyote* features the stories of two sisters: Laura who left Montana for a job as an environmental lawyer in Seattle, and Val who stays home in remote Montana. Appearing in "Kids in the Dark," "Hunter Safety" (reprinted from *Runaway*), "Bears and Lions," and "Les Belles Dames Sans Merci," the sisters provide the double perspective of the woman who stayed in the rural west and the one who left.

In 2004, Blew published her most experimental work, *Writing Her Own Life: Imogene Welch, Western Rural Schoolteacher*, which combines biography, autobiography, history, and fiction. In *Balsamroot*, Blew had written about the surprising discovery among Imogene's possessions of a set of line-a-day diaries her aunt had kept from the early days of her teaching in 1933 to 1990. As Imogene's dementia worsens, Blew turns to these diaries as a way of understanding her aunt and continuing the dialogue of their relationship. Blew notes the "precious trivial" the diaries contain—days of nothing more noted than good muffins or progress on an afghan, as well as the evidence of Imogene's long-held and secret unhappiness. Blew also recognizes issues of form in the absolute linearity of the diary where narrative "emerges, like a river, continuous, with apparently unrelated details bobbing to the surface and then submerging," and the compelling immediacy that the entries suggest (*Balsamroot* 124–25). After *Balsamroot's* publication, Imogene's diaries continued to tease at Blew's imagination.

"The Art of Memoir," the opening essay of *Bone Deep in Landscape*, offers a glimpse of Blew in the early stages of conceptualizing her next book's fundamental transition, from Imogene's

unhappiness, [to] her gradual, unwilling resignation to her lot, and finally, in her old age, [to] her reconciliation with the lone woman she had set out to be" (8). Having already asserted that "sometimes I think I can see the turning points in the lives of dead men and women," Blew concludes that the haymow accident transformed Imogene's life, and she ends the essay with what would become a central theme for *Writing Her Own Life* and a mantra for Blew's own life: "I will remember that opportunity lies in the teeth of the sickle bar" (6, 8).

While still working on this larger project, Blew paired with colleague and friend, writer Kim Barnes, to edit *Circle of Women: An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers* (1994), a multi-genre collection by both established and previously unpublished women writers. Continuing to promote the work of fellow western writers by editing and writing introductions to the works of Margaret Bell, Grace Stone Coates, Bertha Muzzy Bower, and Mildred Walker, Blew has also edited two Idaho anthologies, *Written on Water: Essays on Idaho Rivers* (2001), and *Forged in Fire: Essays by Idaho Writers* (2005; co-edited with Phil Druker; similar Idaho volumes focusing on wind and earth are presently in progress). She edited and wrote the introduction for *When Montana and I Were Young*, by Margaret Bell, which won Blew the Evans Handcart Award for Outstanding Biography or Autobiography of the West in 2003.

Other professional honors include an honorary doctorate from Carroll College in Helena, Montana, in 1997; a nomination for the Pushcart Prize in 1979 and 2000; a citation as Idaho Humanist of the Year in 2001; an invitation to participate in a White House Symposium on Western Women Writers for 2002, where she and Kim Barnes represented Idaho; and the Western Literature Association's Distinguished Achievement Award in 2004.

Blew remains on the faculty of University of Idaho, where she teaches writing and continues to publish both fiction and nonfiction. At present, she has completed several, to-date unpublished, manuscripts, including *Jackalope Milk: A Novel* about a community of Montanans living on the threshold between tradition and modernism, another novel entitled *Ruby Dreams of Janis Joplin* about “a young woman in a rebel country-western band in Idaho,” and a collection of nonfiction essays about her early days of teaching in Montana (Funda).

Blew's older daughter, Elizabeth, a veterinarian, lives in nearby Colton, Washington, with her husband Brian (to whom Blew dedicated *Balsamroot*), Blew's granddaughter Ali (seen in “The Daughters of Summer”), and her grandson Evan. Her son Jack and his wife live in Helena near his father, Ted Clearman, who has recently retired from teaching. Daughter Rachel and a foster daughter, Misty (who came to live with Blew in 1997 and is also featured in “The Daughters of Summer”), are in their twenties now; Misty recently had her second child, and Rachel continues to cope with the depression to which Blew alludes in *Writing Her Own Life*. At this writing, Blew's life is filled with the elements she describes in “The Daughters of Summer”: “dogs, cats, quilting, writing, kids—except that everyone is older now, and some of the animals have died and others have moved in with us” (Funda).

Such constants in her personal life parallel the thematic constants in her writing. Issues of authenticity and authority to claim the west, of gender and agency (with its attendant focus on monsters or the monstrous), and questions of literary aesthetics weave throughout the entire corpus of Blew's work.

AUTHORITY TO CLAIM THE WEST

As Nat Lewis points out in *Unsettling the Literary West: Authenticity and Authorship*, “we need to recognize that western

literature is frequently, perhaps fundamentally, *about* authenticity" (7). In her essay "The Exhausted West," Blew confronts this issue with the question: "What if I am doomed to inauthenticity?" (*Bone Deep* 147). What if, furthermore, the west of her own past and that of her family has become little more than a living museum where the "scene is already so remote that it must be documented" (146)? Blew's essay, first published in a collection of essays about Thomas Jefferson's legacy in the west, is punctuated by family photos of her ancestors threshing wheat or hauling hay and begins with the assertion that as a child she believed she could pinpoint within her home county the exact geographic center of Montana down to the drainpipe of a certain kitchen sink, a symbol that suggests keen spatial and regional awareness. For Blew, the nagging question is how to write about a place that some suspect might be "exhausted" without the compromising taint of nostalgia—how to maintain authenticity and authority when you question the regional myth that has both shaped personal identity and acted to limit personal choice.

Western authenticity suggests a constant vigilance of the boundaries between the insider and outsider and ongoing challenges about who claims the right to tell the western story. In her work, Blew pits settlers against the original Indian inhabitants, Hutterite newcomers against the descendents of settlers, and newly arrived developers against those who have worked the land for generations. Blew also demonstrates that there are deeper gendered claims at work. Her father's family believe men are the only "real westerners," yet Blew sees for herself that the women are the west's most successful survivors. In terms of her own life, Blew considers some key questions about authenticity: is she truly a westerner when she lives by an academic calendar rather than one based on planting and harvest? Does she have a legitimate claim to the west when she has moved from the Montana of her

childhood and made a life for herself beyond ranching—a move her father believed was an unforgiveable betrayal? Still, Blew pays tribute, usually with a twist, to the expected tropes of western myth: the loner character longing for self-sufficiency, the possibility of second chances, violence (psychological and verbal as well as physical), the west as a place of redemption or loss.

For instance, her story “I Beat the Midget,” in *Runaway*, parodies the traditional western horse-breaking story, but instead of a cowboy taming a noble stallion with a combination of patience and understanding, and in the process forging a lifelong partnership, in this story Jimmy is breaking—or attempting to break—half-wild Shetland ponies his father has bought on a lark and plans to sell for a small profit. Ultimately, in a violent scene where western stereotypes of horse and cowboy are critiqued and overturned, it is “the Midget” who “breaks” Jimmy and provokes him into a wild fit of rage in which he madly beats the horse.

Blew deals with more modern western questions about who owns the west and who has the authority to tell its story. She is interested in the landscape of the mind, how the narratives we tell and hear form us, and how depression, dementia, and loss unhinge us. The west Blew sees accepts multiple and even conflicting interpretations because it is multi-mythological.

Bone Deep in Landscape, for instance, is a rich and varied collection that examines the cultural, geological, and ecological history of the west before Abraham Hogeland ever set foot in Montana; additionally it traces Blew’s literary influences. At the end of the collection, Blew describes an assignment she gives her writing students: “Describe a place that holds significance for you, [...] and narrate some of its history” (190). *Bone Deep* is her own fulfillment of that assignment. In an essay about visiting a buffalo hunting site, she writes of a moment of recognizing that “we have been walking all along on a mound of bones”—a line that resonates

symbolically as well as literally (14). She discusses Indian rock art, Indian writers, and Indian history (before and after white contact) and creates a layering of cultures and residents dating back to prehistory and beyond, as in "Local Legend" where she imagines "[t]his film would roll backward" from the recent depopulation of the prairies previously to the Blackfeet and Crow cultures, the ice age, the dinosaurs watching volcanoes, and finally to ancient seas that cover her own Montana landscape (*Bone Deep* 44–45).

Although her book's title asserts her claim to the west—an intimate, physical claim—several essays depict Blew as a visitor, a "tourist" at a buffalo hunting site, at a Nez Percé petroglyph site, at Fort Assinniboine, even at the site of her grandfather's homestead. She considers the phenomenon of tourism in the west as a condition that evokes the perennial theme of the insider and outsider, and cites other historical "tourists" like painters George Catlin and Karl Bodmer and explorers Lewis and Clark—men who claimed and thus forever changed the west.

Conversely, focusing on women's portrayals of the west, portrayals of residents rather than tourists, Blew's "Mother Lode" explores the unmined vein and intellectual ancestry she finds in the work of western women writers Bertha Muzzy Bower, Dorothy Johnson, and Mildred Walker. Like Adrienne Rich who characterized male literary tradition as a "wreck" and worked to trace her literary ancestry to female writers, Blew looks to these women as foremothers who first were able to "find their own stories within the dominating western mythology of solitude, questing, conflict, and destruction" (*Bone Deep* 97).

In the final three essays of *Bone Deep in Landscape*, Blew turns her attention to her adopted home of Idaho and to finding value in her life there. Acknowledging in "Within the Rough-Edged Circle," that "Idaho remains largely uninvented" in western literature (167), she asks, "What, I wonder, would it be like to be a writer in

Idaho, to start all over without connection, without a sense of place, without a tradition?" (159). The question identifies the concerns of any true pioneer: isolation, the loss of landmarks that are both literal and ritualistic, and the fear that this is a place she can never understand. But in short order, Blew begins referring to the residents and writers of the state in first person plural terms ("we" and "our"): "we know," she writes, "we're on the cusp of something" (167). In "Queen Moo of Mayax," she searches for the very first Idaho artists—just as she had gone looking for the ancient Indian stories of Montana's past in previous essays—and finds in the canyons of northern Idaho the Indian rock artists who "connect outward space and inward experience" in a way that speaks to her (172). "If ever art struggled," she insists, "to reconcile subject and object, motion and stasis, permanence and flux, this does; and I, who have long suffered the contradictions of double vision, of belonging in place and being out of place, feel a magnet's pull into that everlasting tension" (173–74). Perhaps, she concludes, the pictographs and petroglyphs of this place "contain coded instructions to open a door through the rock into another dimension" (177).

The other dimension between "motion and stasis, permanence and flux" is one Blew describes in the book's last essay, where she "can almost believe in a life of peace and quiet" that she has found in Idaho (179). Although early in "The Daughters of Summer" she claims that "This isn't my landscape," and she wonders "how deep a connection I can ever feel with the Palouse" (the hilly region around Moscow, Idaho), a transition occurs (180). Montana may still be her homeland, but Idaho has become her homestead—a place claimed by conscious choice rather than by the location of her birth. The essay seems to fully accept the inevitability of such life changes—a new landscape, a new house, a new foster daughter, a new granddaughter, even a new dog. With characteristic

self-deprecating humor, Blew wonders if her three month-old granddaughter, Ali, will be the one to someday “look at me in my dotage and have to decide that the old woman’s got to go” (190). Until then, Blew and family have settled into a new place and a summer routine that offers a sense of peace. “One of the few advantages of growing older,” Blew has said in an interview, “is that you realize that everything changes. [...] there’s a certain comfort in realizing some things are out of your control. The sun also rises, the rivers flow to the sea, and at least I don’t have to run out and try to stop either from happening” (King 10).

GENDER

Thematically even more central to Blew’s writing than the ability to claim authority within the western landscape is the issue of women claiming agency over their own lives. Blew asks: how can a woman raised with the west’s outdated gender mythologies find a sense of personal agency? The theme begins with Blew’s first stories and continues in all her work, across genres.

In *Lambing Out and Other Stories*, in which Blew traces “a progression from innocence to disillusionment” (Morris 30–31), the title story portrays teenaged innocent Nettie Evan as compassionate, responsible, and resourceful on the home ranch and academically bright enough to attend college the following year. A severe blizzard traps Nettie at home with her family, and she must aid her father with the lambing, take care of her young sister, Sylvie, and attend to household duties left undone by a severely depressed mother. When several of the ewes die and their new lambs are brought into the house to be bottle fed, Nettie recognizes how “dependent” and “repulsive” they are because of their lack of will to live (11). Unlike her mother or the orphaned lambs, Nettie has hope and determination, and yet, as the story closes and the Chinook winds promise the coming of spring, Blew does not allow

for a clear ending. Nettie's father expects her to stay on the ranch and assume increasing responsibilities—"Good thing for [Sylvie] you're graduating this spring," he says simply in the closing paragraphs (17). Blew refuses to belabor the significance of Nettie's father's observation or offer any clue about the status of her dreams of college.

"Paths Unto the Dead" further complicates the theme of women's agency in the west. The protagonist, Jean, returns briefly to Montana for her grandmother's funeral and to visit her elderly great-aunts. In an effort to distance herself from these women whom she sees as old-fashioned and parochial, Jean tallies her job, records and books, visits to coffee houses and discotheques, and her three lovers as evidence that she has had "glimpses of what she still thought of as the 'outside world,' if not at first hand, at least through foreign films" (*Lambing Out* 66). However, as Jean and her great-aunts page through a family album and stories unfold, Jean recognizes that her female ancestors have experienced passion and despair that she has not known: death of children and lovers, heartbreak, and even a murder. Pointing to the collection's move toward disillusionment, Blew has said, "Jean doesn't want to believe she will experience the old sorrows. In breaking with the past, she persuades herself that she can evade the human condition" (Morris 28).

"Slightly Broken" completes the move from a girl's perspective to that of a grown woman. Drawing upon the early days of Blew's relationship with Bob Blew when he was teaching her to fly a plane, the work centers on the theme that there is no automatic pilot for life in the story of Rita, who confronts her fears of learning to fly, her husband's meanness, and her paralyzing self-doubts.

Self-determination is taken up again in the collection's next story, "The Reining Pattern," in which Johnnie MacReady, an intense, young woman fresh out of high school, is preparing for an

advanced reining competition at the county horse show. Although engaged to a local cowboy, Johnnie “was built like a sixteen-year-old boy, breastless and hipless” and “had always been enough her father’s girl, anxious enough to keep his comfortable approval, to deny any betraying yearnings after femininity” (22). She despises the thought of sex and romance, or “nonsense,” to use her mother’s term, and she thinks of her cousin Donna—her antithesis—as “that bitch” and one of the “Shameless hussies!” with her pink-painted toenails and aspirations to become an airline stewardess (24, 26). Within the culture of ranch life, Johnnie battles her way at every turn, but within the show ring, she is confident and capable. Triumph in the ring has her thinking “*not stupid marriage after this,*” a sentiment her fiancé seems to sense as he offers a plan to postpone their marriage indefinitely. Unlike Nettie, Johnnie escapes, for now, the constraints of western womanhood.

Despite its title, the women of Blew’s next collection, *Runaway*, seem better able to claim lasting control over their own lives. In “College Bound, 1957,” high school senior Margaret longs for a chance to attend the large university in Missoula. Of her Blew has said, “I was interested in Margaret’s comic energy, her naïve and undeflectable purpose, as she bumbles after a fantasy that is more vivid to her than the everyday world” (Morris 27). Margaret faces obstacles of money, guilt over leaving her parents to work the ranch without her, expectations that she will marry a good but dull local boy, a warning from her father that “If there’s a spot for her at teacher’s college, why should she take up somebody’s else’s spot at the university” (9), and criticism from a high school counselor who warns her that she may not be cut out for the big university and sabotages her efforts to apply for scholarships.

Blew’s Juley stories are squarely situated in feminist issues, as we see in this volume’s “Granddaughters,” where in the opening paragraphs, Juley asks her younger sister, “Are you a liberated

woman?" (65). Recently divorced (the first in her family), Juley surveys the lives of her sisters, mother, and grandmother at her cousin's wedding. As guests express shock at the bride's deep red dress, Juley's attention is turned to her elderly grandmother, after whom she was named. Female defiance of tradition must be a family trait, she suggests, as she notes how the elderly Juley had been among the first women to vote in the Montana territory, had endured the criticisms of neighbors who claimed that she had driven her husband to the asylum and had "avoid[ed] the salvation of what Everybody Else did, the comfort of doing what was expected of them, the reassurance of the enduring forms" (62). In thus connecting her own life of defiance to the women of her family and specifically to her grandmother, she accepts her legacy of liberation.

The issue of female agency remains front and center as Blew moves into memoir. Ordered thematically rather than chronologically, the essays of *All But the Waltz* scrutinize individual family members in self-contained chapters, moving from a male-centered perspective in the opening chapters to a female-centered one in the last half. Blew demonstrates how the men of her family become increasingly rigid in their adherence to western mythologies. "Reading Abraham," for instance, challenges the authority of Blew's great-grandfather Abraham Hogeland, who came to Montana in 1882 as a surveyor, his homesteading and occupation resulting in the displacement of the original inhabitants. Similarly, "Dirt Roads" tells of Blew's father Jack Hogeland's tough adherence to old cowboy ways, his inability to accept change, and his mysterious death.

Beginning *All But the Waltz's* move to the female vision, "Auntie" offers young Mary the example of female self-determination. In contrast, "The Unwanted Child" tells the parallel stories of Mary's first pregnancy and her mother Doris's unshaken belief

that she had been her mother's "unwanted child." "January 1922," however, reasserts the possibility to prevail in its account of Blew's grandmother Mary Welch, mother of four daughters, who took up teaching in rural schools because her husband was broken by his own failures at homesteading.

By defying chronology in her organization of these separate chapters, Blew recreates the way the family stories contradict, assent, argue with each other. Such conflicting perspectives are the most noted elements addressed by critical analyses of Blew's work. In the chapter in which Blew reads the writings of Abraham, we see, writes Linda Karell, "the multilevel collaborative reverberations that roll through *All But the Waltz*," and as Blew engages with her great-grandfather's letters, "he emerges as both an artist and an oppressor [...] trying to construct an identity for himself and to understand that identity" ("Collaboration" 134–35). Such examination of personal and ancestral motives, says Krista Comer, "charts [...] a very searching and responsible course for someone who, like her, is born and bred into white spatial prerogatives and (to a lesser degree) white national prerogatives" (*Landscapes* 224). According to Melody Graulich, the family photographs in the book "present cultural interplay and conflict as dynamic, with no fixed or static meaning" (389). Blew "uses photographs to slide one reality over another, like a transparency" that "superimposes the present over the past without erasing it" (403, 406). Negotiating for her own authority in these conflicting prerogatives of gender, race, and ancestral title, Blew implies that no single mythology can claim jurisdiction in the west.

This theme of multiple western mythologies is evident in the memoir's opening chapter, entitled "The Sow in the River," in which Blew recounts a vivid childhood memory of seeing a sow and her suckling pigs huddle precariously on the flat top of an ait as a flooding Judith River roils around them. Years later, when

she mentions the memory to her father, he claims it couldn't have happened: the river never got that high, pigs could never have climbed up the sandy sides of the ait, the pigs were always kept penned up, and a sow in danger would have had enough sense to lead her offspring away from the river. Jack Hogeland's logic seems inescapable, and yet the memory persists, in opposition to the authority of her father's voice. By opening the memoir thus, Blew takes a profound risk, for if the reader chooses to follow her father's logic, there is little reason to keep reading. Everything that follows should be, according to him, suspect. After all, she admits, "My memories seem to me as treacherous as the river. [...] How can I trust memory, which slips and wobbles and grinds its erratic furrows like a bald-tired truck fighting for traction on a wet gumbo road?" (3-4).

But Blew does manage to overcome doubt—ours and her own. Despite that opening, readers never seriously question Blew's right to tell this western family story. "That story," writes Karell, "evoking risk, abandonment, and the treachery of competing truths in a framework of uncertain meaning—is combined with others' stories to form the memoir's critique of rural nostalgia and rural life's limited and limiting opportunities for women" ("Collaboration" 133).

The sow, says Barbara Meldrum, is Blew's "icon of faith" and "the embodiment of her truth, lacking glamour and romance, but unmistakably female and positioned for survival in an uncertain, changing, dangerous world" (64). Despite Jack Hogeland's insinuations that his daughter does not belong in the outside world, this bookish girl creates a meaningful life for herself—a life of the mind—outside of the family structure. Blew also uses the sow in the river incident as an implied point of reference to interrogate the quality and function of memory throughout the book. Whether or not the narratives we tell ourselves are empirically true, they

nevertheless form us, something Blew reiterates throughout the memoir. In "Reading Abraham" we see that her great-grandfather's memories of an eastern landscape and of male authority mean that he sees nothing wrong with taking land from native peoples and transforming it into property—something Blew sees as a destructive use of memory.

Her father's life parallels the cowboy stories he reads in classic westerns, but he fails to see that the lone cowboy is a thing of the past as illogical in the modern world as the pig on the ait. He tries to escape or ignore agribusiness, drought, and the changing cultural landscape of Montana by holding tightly to that mythology, even until his death in a part of the state where he had never been but that resembles land around the original family homestead as it was during his childhood. Although he dies of exposure, Blew implies that his death was a matter of choice, an "acquiescence to that romantic and despairing mythology which has racked and scarred the lives of so many men and women in the West" (45). In her Juley story "Last Night as I Lay on the Prairie," Blew fictionalizes her father's death, and blames it on his inability to cope with changing times when "Even the wheat diseases are different" and farming has become a business dominated by mechanization and production charts (*Runaway* 166).

The title essay of *All But the Waltz*, the last in the collection and the most centered on Blew herself, is about Blew finally claiming the authority of her own perspective. Tracing the dissolution of her second marriage to Robert Blew, the essay details her husband's illness, financial ruin, and deep depression; however, Bob Blew refuses to believe anything but his declaration that "Hell, I'm the luckiest son of a bitch I know" (207). He dismisses the severity of his illness and remains certain his finances will soon take an upward turn. Having learned her grandmother's lesson well, Mary confronts the facts of Bob's financial disaster and his declining

physical and emotional health. Despite his threats of physical harm and his shouts that “*I can’t tell you a goddamn thing. You think you know it all. But eventually you’re going to find out*” (221–22)—words reminiscent of Jack Hogeland’s accusations early in the book that she “*somehow got the idea in her head she knows something, but by God she don’t know a goddamned thing*” (36)—Blew draws the line. She refuses to acquiesce to a controlling male perspective. Instead, she associates more fully with her grandmother, thinking of herself as “another dry-eyed woman named Mary” who stands over the open grave of her husband (223).

Arguing in her next book that her aunt Imogene’s life history parallels her own in efforts to gain independence from the ranch, Blew uses Imogene’s dementia and its “dissolve[d] connectives” of language and memory as a trope to question how we shape—or choose not to shape—the environment that surrounds us and how those choices form us as individuals (69). In pointing to the “altered geography” of Imogene’s mind, Blew indicates how much the memoir’s rhetoric is deeply engaged in the environmental issues of the west. For instance, she challenges the advertising brochures of the early twentieth century that promised settlers independence and “*An empty prairie made productive by your labor,*” retorting “Do you really dream that you can impose yourself on this landscape?” (103). *Balsamroot*’s opening sentence, then—“My aunt had chosen her place well”—is a significant statement of purpose for the work that alerts us to issues of both attachment to place and women’s agency. For Imogene, Montana is “the smell of alkali and sagebrush, with nowhere to get out of the sun, with no sense of the future” (15), and Blew repeats images of suffocation, saying of the family’s original homestead, “I have never liked being down here. I feel the suffocation of the early dusk closing down on the cleft, and I want to claw my way up to the rimrocks, where I can see what is coming” (100). But as Imogene and Mary move

westward, Montana gives way to dramatically different landscapes and different ways of imagining the self. The memoir's opening recounts how Imogene settled ultimately on a "scrap of land between a rain forest and the Pacific Ocean," on the "very outermost reach of the Olympic Peninsula," a promontory overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca, where behind her the massive peaks of the Olympic Mountains close her off from the rest of the continent. With the "distance and gray water and the solitude of her own house and wild garden between her and her family" (6), she finds success and independence. She has no urge to cultivate this landscape, and likewise, no need here to manipulate her own identity to fit the expectations of her family.

Balsamroot gradually suggests that Blew too "had chosen her place well"—neither in Montana nor Washington. Blew's move to Idaho—though initially unsettling, given her failed marriage and the end of her job in Montana—began a spiritual and professional renaissance for Blew that we can trace in her interaction with northern Idaho's natural environment. Idaho is transformed from a place of exile or limbo to one of reconciliation, and the Continental Divide between Idaho and Montana has Blew wondering:

Perhaps the frontier can be redefined as the meeting point between conflicting narratives, and perhaps those narratives conflict within ourselves as often as with others. [...] But here on the western side of the Bitterroots, [...] I am not the person I was on the prairies of the eastern front. Still, I cross and recross the divide, where the rivers change direction and the stories strike sparks like stones. What is a divide, if not for crossing? (*Bone Deep* 38–39)

The Divide is a symbolically loaded landmark where the critical moments of *Balsamroot's* personal transformation take place, where Blew realizes her relationships with her second husband

and later her ailing aunt have fundamentally changed, and her alliance to Montana shifts. The way back across the divide is treacherous, but return remains possible.

Throughout *Balsamroot*, Blew draws our attention to the confluence of the two rivers in Lewiston, representing reconciliations, understandings, and a series of unions/reunions of conflicting impulses and competing landscapes. This is clearly not the site of treacherous memories and competing claims to story that Blew once associated with the Judith River in *All But the Waltz*. If that early memoir juxtaposes competing family stories of western identity, *Balsamroot* traces a confluence of relationships, including Blew's reunion with her oldest daughter, Elizabeth. *All But the Waltz* is dedicated to Elizabeth, as a gift of their shared family past, but in *Balsamroot* Blew admits to a strain in their relationship and wonders, "So is distance normal, estrangement inevitable? 'We're not a family that shows our affection,' Auntie told me years ago" (136). And yet, in that same year that Blew confronts Imogene's dementia, Elizabeth also comes to live in Lewiston. Helping Blew care for Imogene, confronting their shared past, reading together Imogene's diaries and talking about their own failed loves, they come to some kind of reconciliation. As mother and daughter ride on the bluffs above the Snake River in a climactic scene, Blew thinks "I feel the fragmented parts of my life are settling together." This line, later repeated, transforms estrangement's inevitability to a feeling that "hearts have to be earned"—and, more importantly, *can* be earned, something Blew demonstrates on their ride "toward the confluence of rivers in the deepening twilight" when she says that she and Elizabeth have managed to "salvage" an essential connection (211).

Blew's descriptions of the natural environment and the rivers' confluence also reveal a reconciliation with herself. In 1992, says Blew, the governor of Idaho ordered that the water level of the

Snake River be drawn down to its pre-dam water levels so that the salmon might survive their migration to the ocean and back to their spawning grounds. While Blew acknowledges that the issue is politically complicated and no one even knows if the salmon can survive the daunting barrier of the dams, she nevertheless finds a symbol in the salmon, one premised in migration. Salmon live in multiple environments, including ocean, mountain rivers, and high country basins; to return to the place of their origin is right but fraught with danger. To return is not acquiescence, any more than leaving was a betrayal. Moreover, the “reemerging landscape” of the drawn-down river offers Blew an epiphany:

But, as the river gave up its secrets—a car that had been driven into the current for reasons best known at the time, a crashed airplane, the thousand-year-old sites of villages and burial grounds mentioned in the Lewis and Clark journals, the partial skeleton of a man gone missing from the Nez Percé reservation a few years ago—I found myself increasingly preoccupied with the reemergence of the river itself. For five years I had been driving to work and home again along that broad platinum flow, so still and so deep that it barely seemed liquid. [...] Now I saw that, beneath that molten surface, buried under those tons of slowly moving water, a tough western river with real gravel bars and a real current had been flowing all along. (194)

Despite the fact that she has proven herself compelled by history in other writings, Blew’s attention is not drawn to the artifacts. She notes them, but ultimately, none of these historical relics—so evocative of man’s history and the men in her own life—are really the point. She doesn’t wonder at the cause of the plane crash or directly associate reckless flight with Bob Blew; she doesn’t make judgments about the white male settlement or link that to her

grandfather's role in Indian displacement. The artifacts are parenthetically mentioned, while the sentence's main clause is about Blew being "increasingly preoccupied" with the river and how it proves itself to be "a tough western river [... with] a real current" flowing under the placid surface all along. In this recognition Blew most fully claims both her own westernness and her power as a writer. Haunted by the family legacy of stoicism, Blew's writing is an act of defiance against the placid surface of her family—a refusal to be quiet about what the west has meant for women. In a passage where she accepts the "mean current" of her individuality by talking back to those who would accuse her of defection and selfishness, she writes,

I have never been worth a good goddamn at self-sacrifice. Never. I'm the girl who got married at eighteen so I wouldn't have to go back to the ranch. Then I refused to go to work to put my first husband through college, went to college right along with him on money borrowed from my grandmother, even though it nearly killed his parents—*You're willing to trample on anybody to get where you're going*, hurtles the accusation after me through the years. *You're hard as nails! You're selfish! Selfish!* You're goddamn right I am. [...] And now, after all these years of resisting the voices, here I am in Idaho, in my safe, private space. (75–76)

Critic Ken Egan, Jr., writes that while *Balsamroot* is a "kinder, gentler book than the Montana family chronicle" (152), Blew's work does not "always make for easy reading, especially for a male. There's an anger here, a bitterness. [...] What can motivate such venom?" (153). Blew has elsewhere admitted "I think rage lies close to the surface in many Westerners, men and women" (Morris 29). For Blew, however, accepting her own rage in *Balsamroot* and recasting it in a positive sense means returning to

what she had written in her dissertation when she discusses the Latin term *indignatio*, which “was regarded as a kind of elementary and basic emotion, a righteous anger. [...] It was believed to be genuine, an outburst from the heart” (34). She puts this concept into action in “Varia’s Revenge” when Varia’s grief gives way to “pure, pure rage” that is an “elation” and “intoxication” (*Sister* 191). *Balsamroot* claims that only in accepting her own “righteous anger” can Blew find her “safe, private space” and the ability to determine the direction of her own life.

The family memoir trilogy of *All But the Waltz*, *Balsamroot*, and *Writing Her Own Life* consistently addresses women’s agency and authority, and, as if emphasizing this unifying theme, the end of *Writing Her Own Life* harkens back to the beginning of *All But the Waltz* where claiming—or not claiming—the right to believe in the validity of your own memories was so important. As Cassie Hemstrom has pointed out in her perceptive thesis on *Writing Her Own Life*, Blew’s final chapter creates an echo of the sow in the river episode (85). When Blew asks her daughter Rachel what she remembers about their trip to Tenino, Washington, to allow Blew to research and retrace the steps of Imogene’s early years teaching, Rachel makes no reference to Imogene, replying, “The dandelion [...] growing in a crack in the sidewalk outside the library. Nobody had picked it. It was just—there. You don’t remember that?” Blew doesn’t remember the weed, but neither does she deny that the dandelion was there, or even deny that it *could be there* because the grounds of the city building were well manicured. She gives her daughter the authority to find significance in her own memories—an authority Blew’s own father never afforded her. She honors Rachel’s private memory by including this exchange in her account.

This conversation takes place in the context of Blew handing the book manuscript to Rachel, asking, “Ought I show it to anyone

else?" and "It doesn't seem to you an invasion of your privacy?" (254). Rachel's response is to encourage her mother to publish the book in its entirety, complete with the description of their trip and Rachel's depression. Such mutuality in these dual, generous offers honors private stories, memories, and meanings, and proves that they have broad, public significance. What Blew emphasizes with her title and this ending is that multiple women have been able to write their own lives—something Hemstrom suggests when she claims that Rachel's story "exists in conjunction" with her mother's and aunt's and that no one story is "privileged or takes precedence" (85–86).

MONSTERS

Writing Her Own Life ends triumphantly because individual perspectives collaborate rather than conflict with each other; however, evident in Blew's fiction and nonfiction are dark undercurrents when characters do not negotiate agency well, and violence and "monsters" are created by efforts to inflict personal will on others. Self-reliance—for Blew, an absolute necessity—always has the potential to become perverse, selfish isolation, and such impulses are evident in Blew's consistent reference to monsters and the monstrous. In *Bone Deep*, she writes, "By definition, the monster must be singular, isolated, lonely. Because it is the only one of its kind, its threat to the common herd is the fascination of the mutant." Blew suggests the monster reflects a secret in the soul of the hero, "for whom murder is a sublimation, a denial of those impulses in himself that are indistinguishable from the impulses of the monster he slays" (56).

Carrying out these thematic concerns in the final, and perhaps finest, story of the *Lambing Out* collection, "Monsters" follows Gary Jeanmarie, an American Indian and Vietnam veteran, who now works on a ranch for the spiteful former county sheriff, Babe

Boniface, a bigoted bully who had once beaten Gary and coerced him into enlisting in the Air Force or face being charged with illegal possession of drugs. Citing his childless marriage, Babe unconvincingly claims he was hard on Gary because he thought of him as his own son. In a scene described in unflinching detail, the two men help birth a calf that has two heads. Repulsed by this “monster” Gary believes has resulted from men interfering in a natural process with artificial insemination, he moves to bludgeon the calf to death; however, the biological oddity fascinates Babe, who stops Gary and points out that the cow is mothering the aberration. Next, the current sheriff calls on Babe for assistance in what at first appears to be a kidnapping case: the baby of Shelley Abber, a white girl who had been briefly involved with Gary before he went to Vietnam, is eventually found stuffed into a water culvert. In a scene echoing the calf’s birth, Babe pulls the dead child out of the pipe, as horrified bystanders call Shelley “some kind of freak,” and she irrationally weeps, “*I just wanted to put it back!*” (97). Gary, who recognizes the death of innocence in the world, sympathetically thinks that it seems “more comprehensible to put it back than to bring monsters into the world” (97).

In Blew’s novella *Sister Coyote* the “monstrous” becomes a national problem. Set in December 1972, during the closing days of the Vietnam conflict—which, in “*Varia’s Revenge*,” Blew had called “the real trauma of our generation” (*Sister* 202)—the novella takes place just as President Nixon had ordered what would be known as the “Christmas bombing,” the most intense campaign of the entire war with 100,000 bombs dropped on North Vietnam. A month later, on 23 January 1973, Nixon would make his famous announcement that the nations had come to agreements that would “end the war and bring peace with honor.”

Although Blew is explicit about the date of the story, she does not outline these historical details, yet this escalating tension in

the Vietnam conflict is a vivid backdrop for the violence of *Sister Coyote*. By 1972, the war had become part of everyday life, and television news broadcasts seemed so unreal, writes Blew, that the main character Beth Anne Vanago thinks the news commentator is just “a flash on the screen. She doesn’t have to take him seriously” (112). The widespread violence endemic during the era, however, is something Blew does take seriously. Rejecting the notion that life in small-town Montana was entirely parochial, her novella suggests how broadly felt are the effects of the war and mirrors the events taking place half a world away with a pattern of war images and scenes of intense violence: the beating and sexual assault Beth Anne suffers, the “quivering mass of bleeding ewes” that have been attacked by the coyotes until “Movement at the bottom of the pile is spasmodic” (153), the gunning down of hundreds of coyotes from the door of a plane, the businesses in town that have filled in windows with brick and mortar because of break-ins until “The fortified windows give the town a look of siege” (115), the gunshot Beth Anne takes at the girls who break into her apartment to steal money, the ubiquity of the green soldier toys her son has scattered in her apartment, the casual drug use to numb loss and grief, and the detached manner in which Beth Anne entertains the thought of killing her own children. The horrific events of coyotes, women, and a nation under siege are interwoven in the novella without emotional accent and portray Blew’s sense of a nation benumbed by a monstrous war. The novella offers the strongest evidence of Blew’s political awareness, despite the fact that she has claimed, “I don’t see myself as a political writer at all, except in the respect that I try to write honestly” (Morris 28).

The figure of the monster in Blew’s work, however, is not just a one-dimensional, politicized figure. Oftentimes, she directly associates monsters and monstrous behavior with women’s growing need

for independence. Calling monsters a “threat to the common herd,” Blew says that “*Monster*, from the Latin *monstrum*, means a prodigy or a portent. Applied to humans, it is likely to imply monstrosity, as in *monstrum horrendum* or *immanissimum ac foedissimum monstrum* [i.e., horrendous monster or savage and foul monster]. Applied to animals or events, it is likelier to imply the wondrous or the marvelous” (*Bone Deep* 56). In the transitional world of the modern west, Blew’s monsters—those women who defy—can either be aberration or prodigy.

Perhaps no work better suggests the unity of such opposites embodied by Blew’s monsters than her novel presently in manuscript: *Jackalope Milk*. The western icon of the jackalope is an unlikely genetic mix that is both ridiculously funny and dangerous. In lore, a jackalope, despite its diminutive size and its Bugs Bunny demeanor, is a terror, a horrible threat. Such contradictions are at work in Blew’s main character Corey who thinks of herself as a monster because she seems half woman/half man, proves herself to be intelligent but painfully naïve and innocent, and possesses both ridiculous ineptitude and a fierce will to survive.

Just as “monstrous” as Corey is Juley Ware in “Kissing My Elbow” (*Runaway*) who confronts the conundrum of being her father’s “boy” while watching her body change into a woman’s. After Juley is taught to shear sheep by a Hutterite shepherd who had mistaken her for a boy, her angry father banishes her to the house to look after the shepherd’s daughter. With her “hunched mute figure” and her sheep-like nose, she epitomizes the feminine meekness Juley despises (139). In a mock rape scene, Juley and her ultra-feminine cousin strip the mute girl of her matronly Hutterite garb and wrestle her into a pink, billowy dress. Later, when male cousins remind Juley that she had once tried to kiss her elbow because she thought it would turn her into a boy, she realizes the depth of her dilemma as a western woman: “If you’re

not a boy and won't be a girl, what are you? [...] I have wished and half-believed there was another alternative" (144). However, until Juley can make peace with her womanhood, she is left to imagine the monster Blew calls "a kind of third sex" (Morris 28).

AESTHETICS

Prompted in a recent interview to describe her life in terms of one of her quilts, Blew replied,

I guess the quilt currently on my bed would tell my story as well as any. It's a Flower Garden, which isn't done much any more, because its hexagons can't be cut with a rotary cutter or pieced by machine. [...] it's faded from all the launderings and starting to fray in the middle from the animals that sleep on the bed with me. I'll hear one of the dogs scratching to make himself more comfortable and think that the poor old quilt won't hold out much longer, but so far I haven't replaced it. (King 8)

A traditional woman's craft, often performed in the company of other women who might otherwise be isolated, an art that preserves the mundane as well as the significant and transforms disparate scraps into a carefully designed product that has utility as well as beauty, quilting has been aesthetically important to Blew in developing her own literary craft. Patchwork quilting preserves history with the fragments of a beloved dress here, a well-worn apron there. It represents thrift, ingenuity, and endurance—values Blew was taught to respect. As in her quilting, Blew works with traditional patterns and themes (the stories of a spinster schoolmarm or lone cowboy, for instance), but just as she demonstrates in *Writing Her Own Life*, she is willing to change the quilt pattern—and the story—to make it her own at the same time that it honors the patterns of other people's lives.

Seeing Blew's writing in terms of quilting, however, is not to say that her art is quaint or old-fashioned—anything but. Her work ranks with the best of her contemporaries, placing the story of the individual and the family within a larger cultural and community context as does N. Scott Momaday in both *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1977) and *The Names: A Memoir* (1996), and challenging deeply held western myths about gender as does William Kittredge in *Hole in the Sky* (1993) and race as does James Welch in novels such as *The Death of Jim Loney* (1987). Like the best of her female contemporaries writing about the west, her prose is as unadorned and unsentimental as Judy Blunt's in *Breaking Clean* (2003) or Kim Barnes's in *In the Wilderness: Coming of Age in Unknown Country* (1997).

Rather, quilting offers a revealing analogy for Blew's literary aesthetic. In *Balsamroot*, for example, the narratives Blew heard repeatedly from local Montana women form "a kind of communal novel, with twenty or more voices contributing their fragments of the known voices, [...] and one of the voices mine, retelling and revising" (111). Nowhere is such narrative collaboration more apparent than in *Writing Her Own Life*, where Blew's story is stitched in alongside the story of Imogene's desire to become a writer, her coming into her own as a teacher, her mixed emotions about men in her life, her father's history of mental illness, and her escape from a landscape that has inexorably shaped her.

Ultimately, *Writing Her Own Life* is not so much a story about Imogene—or even Blew drawing strength from Imogene's story—as it is a story about Mary Blew as the reader of Imogene's diaries; it is a memoir about the craft of life writing, a meta-memoir. With its sepia-colored cover portrait of Imogene, the book confronts how memoirists and biographers interpret photographs, letters, and diaries with compassion but without the gloss of romanticism. Blew extensively excerpts her aunt's diary and interweaves those entries

with comments on her aunt's character and values, notes on historical contexts, family history, related experiences in her own life, and meditations on her role in telling her aunt's story.

Blew's title announces her intention to give Imogene agency in this cooperative effort. She recognizes that as a "recovered text" her aunt's diaries would not have stood on their own, either as literary autobiography or as a primary text of women's history. But Blew is allowing Imogene to "write her *own* life" in a work that is "at the very least, multi-authored" (11). The book becomes, as Hemstrom has called it, a "collaborative autobiography" written by Imogene, Mary Blew, and Blew's daughter Rachel, in keeping with, says Hemstrom, autobiography theorist John Paul Eakins' notion of "relational selves" (86).

The most compelling aspect of the work is Blew's engagement with Imogene's elliptical diaries, a process she likens to the traditional task of finishing another woman's quilt after her death. Finding the blocks for a Stars and Flowers quilt in a drawer after Imogene's death (in much the same way she had found the diary itself), Blew sets out to complete the quilt; "but pastels are not for me," she writes. "I chose a midnight blue cotton—actually went out and bought it, with my mother's voice hammering at me for my extravagance when the whole point of quilting is economy—and I snipped the dark blue fabric into tiny diamonds and began to set up Imogene's quilt by hand" (*Writing* 12). Like the quilt, *Writing Her Own Life* is shaped by two separate writers who are potentially working at cross purposes, something Blew admits:

Choosing another set of excerpts, it might be argued, might shape a different story, or an infinite number of stories, like infinite parallel universes which Imogene might have inhabited. On the other hand, it might be argued that, in omitting portions of Imogene's diaries, I have co-opted her work and

imposed my concept of story upon a text that does not contain story. Even my concentrating on the diaries Imogene kept during World War II might be seen as a distortion of a text created over fifty years in a dozen volumes. (11)

Blew makes the evolving struggle of what to make of this material an integral part of the story. Originally, she thought she “could trace Imogene’s road through heartbreak and disappointment to independence and acceptance, and that I could convince myself that I was following the same road” (8-9). Concomitantly, she believed she “could make a modest contribution to the ongoing recovery of ordinary women’s stories during an important historical event” (9). But the process was not without difficulties, as Blew admits: “I got as far as a first draft. But the book resisted me, as though it did not want to be written” (245). In this confession, Blew demonstrates her epistemological process. If collaboration itself isn’t enough, if historical context is not sufficient, then what else is there? Drawing on her skills as a scholar, she expands her research to include postmodernist readings of diaries and letters, which leads her to recognize the “new territory” in which Imogene has begun “to spin a new narrative about herself [...] reinventing a harder, more self-assured persona” (89); this leads Blew into her own autobiographical territory where she makes us aware of her authorial choices to include fiction.

Like the dark blue diamonds in the completion of her aunt’s quilt, the fictional scenes Blew uses to fill in gaps left by the diaries may not suit the autobiographical purist, but they help Blew make sense of Imogene’s transformation from a woman grieving that she is unmarried to one who seems grateful to be unfettered by the demands of a husband and family. Never deceptive about her entry into the narrative as a fiction writer, Blew, in fact, makes her readers hyper-aware of the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, fact and speculation, by referring to her fiction

writer persona in the third person as a figure who “materializes inside the apartment as though she herself is the ghost” who can know Imogene’s unspoken thoughts about Montana and how “the smell of baking bread brings back the best memories” (109).

While Blew’s method is experimental, her approach to fiction within autobiography is not new to western memoir. Wallace Stegner openly inserted a novella entitled “Genesis” into his autobiography *Wolf Willow*, justifying it by saying, “If in inventing this individual I put into him a little of Corky Jones, and some of the boy Rusty whose mouth organ used to sweeten the dusty summer shade of the Lazy-S bunkhouse, let it be admitted that I have also put into him something of me” (138). Blew takes a similar tactic, but often side-steps or evades the reader, who must actively watch for Blew to reveal herself, as she does when she worries about her own motives interfering with the integrity of her aunt’s story by asking herself, “Where, after all, is she getting this thread she is spinning, if not from her own guts? What does it have to do with Imogene’s diaries? Why doesn’t she speak for herself?” (117–18). When Blew states, “The fiction writer, of course, knows something about emotional limbo” (111), we recognize Blew has revealed something about her own life and perhaps the aftermath of her second failed marriage. But only on occasion does she declare herself more directly. Making a transition from third person to claiming her personal engagement with the diaries, Blew writes,

Whether she insists that every word she writes is literal truth, or whether she denies the possibility of absolute truth, she will claim that first-person pronoun for herself. I am I! Mary! The very one who scrutinizes the lines that her aunt scribbled in her diary sixty years ago, who parses those cryptic sentences and speculates on what they reveal or conceal. [...] If she can’t avail herself of the fiction writer’s power of invention, what she can do is assert her authenticity. I am I!

I am Mary! And, reader, I assure you that I can guess how Imogene hid her feelings because I grew up as she did, learning to stand outside myself, watching and hiding my feelings. (123)

After this, Blew increasingly allows herself as fiction writer to enter other minds, for example, those of Imogene's friends or her sister, and she does so without apology. Creating a dialectic between fiction and creative nonfiction, Blew takes license in numerous places in the book and self-consciously confronts the issue of what, in fact, we set out to do in life writing.

Within a literary culture in which memoir has sometimes been accused of being narcissistic, Blew is challenging the genre itself and testing its boundaries. *Writing Her Own Life*, and to a degree *All But the Waltz* before it, distinguishes Blew from some of her contemporaries, western memoirists like Kittredge and Barnes, or like Mark Spragg in *Where Rivers Change Direction* (2000) and Terry Tempest Williams in *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* (1991), who discuss their lives within a family context, but focus, ultimately, on the first-person narrator and how that singular life evolves. Blew's method is reminiscent of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1989), a family memoir in which women's roles are central, and an aunt plays a key role in the formation of personal identity. Kingston writes about the moment early in her schooling when she first reads the English first person singular pronoun; the very look of the simple and forthright word surprised Kingston because "The Chinese 'I' has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American 'I,' assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? No, it was not politeness; 'I' is a capital and 'you' is lower-case" (166-67). What Kingston suggests, and what Blew

echoes, is the notion of personal identity as a compilation of influences and emotional experiences stitched together in a manner that defies the simplicity of a single, first person perspective.

The multiple voices and perspectives in this book are a part of what make it the most experimental—even, perhaps, the most important—of all Blew's works. Theorist Caren Kaplan would count it among what she calls an "out-law genre in autobiographical discourse," which "mix[es] two conventionally 'unmixable' elements—autobiography criticism and autobiography as thing itself," and which "require more collaborative procedures" between individual authorship and the discourse of autobiographical tradition" (208).

In a book concerned, as Blew says, with the "simultaneity of past and present" (253), there is also a simultaneity of voices: first, of course, Imogene, the diarist, "writing her own life," but in addition the many versions of Blew the narrator. There is Blew the historian, offering cultural and social history gleaned from library archives and written histories; Blew the member of a family, who offers insights into the dynamics of her family life; Blew the feminist, contributing to the publication of ordinary women's lives; Blew the biographer, who struggles with the ethics of being true in her portrayal of Imogene and Rachel; Blew the fiction writer, shaping the mundane events of the diary into compelling narrative; Blew the autobiographer, searching for her own answers about independence, love, identity, landscape, and family; Blew the scholar, who quotes autobiography theory, writes proper endnotes, and engages in the dialogue of how readers make sense of diaries; and Blew the writer and teacher, reflecting on how to best compose a life and bring it to a conclusion that is satisfying in both literary and literal ways. Rather than focus on how these various roles might be essentially contradictory in the patchwork of the book, Blew refocuses attention on the pattern as a whole.

Multi-authored and multi-genred, *Writing Her Own Life* defies expectations of memoir, and as such, it has proven perplexing to critics. The reviewer for *Publisher's Weekly* calls it a "well-meaning but heavy-handed biography" in which Blew "pokes in silly asides" and "makes proclamations about Welch that reveal nothing more than her own desire to force a clear narrative onto her aunt's complicated life." Referring to the final chapter that includes Rachel, the reviewer concludes that writing the book has "served, in part, as a distraction from her daughter's mental illness, and the revelation will leave readers feeling that Welch got shoved into the margins of her family yet one more time." But this is a misreading that fails to recognize the bold experiment Blew undertakes. Only Linda Karell's review in *Great Plains Quarterly* recognizes that this is a "riskier" book than Blew's previous memoirs and recognizes that it is "Blew's meditation on the risks of such an attempt" (133).

Placing Blew alongside Gloria Anzaldúa, Sandra Cisneros, Joan Didion, Louise Erdrich, Pam Houston, Barbara Kingsolver, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Leslie Marmon Silko, critic Krista Comer writes that western women writers succeed in turning a "revisionist impulse" toward issues of working-class culture, environment, racial identity, and the imperial conquest of the pioneers, and they "take for themselves a large measure of the freedom white western men have historically enjoyed—sexual freedom, freedom of mobility, freedom from child rearing, freedom to challenge authority. At the same time they retain many of the values traditionally associated with female culture: ideals of family, community, interpersonal relations, and caring for the sick and dying" ("Feminism" 18, 23). Comer counts Mary Clearman Blew among the "bad girls" of recent western literary history, "those who talk back, act up, show off, break rules of all kinds, succeed on something of their own terms without self-destructing" (*Landscapes* 59).

No doubt, the woman who once wrote about Juvenal's vision of all women as "treacherous, unfaithful, cruel, spoiled" would be honored to earn this badge of a western "bad girl," for Blew has since found solace in the defiance of an apostate and the fierce independence of her women relatives. She remains captivated by the horrific, ridiculous, and sublime vision of woman as monster and is preoccupied by the various facets of anger that include righteous indignation—*indignatio*—as well as blinding rage. Even in her most recent essay, "What We Keep," Blew portrays memories animated by anger and offers a new understanding that her mother's fury had not been caused by some failure in Mary herself, as she had always thought: "The task of my later years," she concludes, "[...] has been to unlearn what I thought I knew" (301). Her words function as a pardon—not just of her mother but of all those "bad girls" of the west whose lives have been misunderstood and misrepresented in western American literature.

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