

# Flatlands

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

*for Joe*

# Contents

## I.

Humboldt Fault	3
Picking Strawberries	5
Ignition	6
Grassland Antelope	7
One-Room Schoolhouse	8
Radical Blah	9
Physiography	10
Sisters, We Must Claim Our Origins	11
How We Came to the Hill	12
Lover's Leap Butte	13
Radial Plain	14

## II.

Each Touch Leaves an Imprint	19
His Gorgette	21
Crisp Knot	22
Lengthy Silences	23
Roost Her	24
Goldenrod	25
Delicate	26
Unnaturally Attracted to Hills	28
Canyon	29
Running Froth	30
Radical Blah	31
Parting Shots	32
Thug Weather	33

Sisters, We Must Harden Our Own Honey	34
Last Line, Dropped	35
Unstabled	36
Felt Bigger Driving on Empty	37
Light Posts	38

### III.

Dugout	41
Side Effect of Flat Land	42
Surviving On Equations	44
Plain Winter	45
Bitterroot	46
Sisters, We Must Receive Her Gift	48
Import	49
Cutting Dry Hair	50
Radical Blah	51
Lord Knows	52
The Deer	53
Shadow Play	54
Dumbfounded	56
Premonition	58
Solstice	59
Sounds Like Animals at Night	60
Jackalope	61
An Entrepreneurial Mindset	62
Notes	63
Acknowledgments	64

*We agreed that no one who had not grown up in a little prairie town could know anything about it. It was a kind of freemasonry, we said.*

—Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*

**I.**

# Humboldt Fault

As children  
we pirouetted, tipsy  
ballerinas tripping  
through wet grass.

The great fault beneath:  
gap like an inverted lens  
hidden beneath  
square-shoulder fields,

a fact we forgot  
by the end of  
grade school.

Nebraska  
hypnotizes eyes  
with slow lines: straight  
highway blurring  
into horizon.

Lulled in the strand  
of our history, we were like  
the Platte River,  
its mud sluice easy to follow  
out through the plains.

The ready-made disaster  
subtle as a shift in the wind:  
unreadable, all around us.

# Picking Strawberries

One in the bucket,  
one in my mouth. I ate them  
with dirt, ate  
until my throat was raked.

My mother told me I inherited a taste  
for acid, a stinging champagne.

The tender skin of my mouth  
dotted with red pulp, tiny seeds  
burrowed between teeth. A little hardness  
to occupy the tongue.

I would eat more as we left for home.  
I would eat as we washed them at the sink,  
hulled their stems.

Those nights, I dreamt  
I gulped, swallowing  
into a red hangover.

I woke. My mouth open and opening.  
I'd inherited a taste for air.

# Ignition

Fireworks rushed their explosions, stumbling  
flung swatches of drunken color. The sky blurred,  
pink, yellow, red—a whirling slip of lights.

We thought, this must be what adults meant by intense:  
the red flare, a tongue reaching out,  
lapping from the clustered fuse.

The hillside slowly bent under the sky's flame. Scorched  
paper sifted warm over our faces, heads. Tapping  
our shoulders, our parents turned us away.

We tried to shake their grasp, look back.  
In the firelight, ash floated like loose hairs;  
pricking our cheeks in the cooling air.

Riding home, even as we curled  
in the pocket of our parents' stillness, we kept  
the night's heat in our fists, ready to knock.

# Grassland Antelope

He strikes the pose  
of an inquisitive visitor.

Steady legs, craned head.  
A flock of alert lines, still angles.

On the plain, a geometric pattern replicated  
is a row. Divine the organizing principle.

Note: At times, beauty comes complete  
with a roll-back lid.

# One-Room Schoolhouse

We dressed  
as pioneers: long dresses,  
bonnets,  
a pocket slate.

Sketching ships  
across the waves of grass,  
the lesson chalked  
our hands.

Mimicking geography  
we lanced the morning,  
letting sunset seep  
across the plains.

The windows  
reflected our own faces  
back to us,  
such looks of desire,

we wanted to reap  
whatever it was  
the plain dresses  
could sow in us.

# Radical Blah

In every plains town,  
all night trains whistle  
a dark bell sound.

On TV, a pet weasel emerges  
from between the bed and wall  
again and again, body  
like a little brown finger,  
beckoning.

Outside, the leaves wave back.  
The early autumn is  
a basket to weave one's hair into.  
I ask for mine to be pulled.

Open the nostrils, tip the head  
and the eyes bulge  
from their sockets.

Boredom becomes  
a bitter pleasure.  
Over the landscape, then,  
a cold red fit.

## Physiography

Flatlands,  
the pat of a hand  
on your head. A good girl,  
a slicing edge. Like a scythe  
through grass you learn to love  
the sound of cutting hair. An ingrained  
lust for a portion reduced. You flat  
your body like a white wafer  
and you mean it to be religious.  
Like a frontier church,  
you give yourself up to horizon,  
so being put in your place  
is like a cross on your flat back.

# Sisters, We Must Claim Our Origins

Grandma reads the horoscopes  
so our eyes go wide.

There's a white dog like mist  
chained to the back of the garage—  
its bark searching the fog.

The pond is stocked  
with easy-to-catch fish who eat  
table scraps, turn marble eyes up  
through the muck.

Grandma says there's nothing like the taste  
of something you've grown yourself. Her fingers  
and ours glisten with frying oil, salt.

In the old days, the men of the family  
kept stills, carried guns. Now, we drink moonshine  
in the parking lot at the reunion.

My sister's hands shake,  
but the taste is of fruit,  
low register of heat.

We're not children, but it's easy  
to believe in magic. So much of our wildness  
cannot be predicted, though the rust on us  
surely is a lesson to be read.

## How We Came to the Hill

In that time, we walked  
with silver toes:  
a chorus of tinkly chimes.

We were girls, a multiphonic  
band of gong—all echo

and a thrump: the ax slap  
of metronomic heartbeats  
ticking in the deep well of hips.

Though we allowed ourselves  
to be led to the field, willingly,  
we were heart skip, hiccup and up—

that hill, its one stop, its end,  
our reckoning—deep  
and purple.

## Lover's Leap Butte

Early on, I learned to love  
the feel of fingers curled  
in a giant rug, some bison fur,  
horned head reduced  
to a hump.

That beast was quiet,  
but later, when I had my first kiss,  
I knew the sound of dogs  
was what I could expect.

They howled like tongues  
whipping the grass. He and I,  
biting each other  
to keep warm.

I'd grow up, kicking rocks  
softly, then pushing  
the larger ones over the edge. As if  
to test what reaction  
the action of falling is.

## Radial Plain

*As she lay with her eyes closed, she had again, more vividly than for many years, the old illusion of her girlhood, of being lifted and carried lightly by someone very strong [...] She knew at last for whom it was she had waited, and where he would carry her.*

—Willa Cather, *O Pioneers!*

In my 13th year, hanging  
the laundry, the white sheets  
were like blowsy dresses  
and my heartache

was a new  
nostalgia, the plains  
the leavening,

grasses a long cry,  
the hair of my later years  
growing before me.

How I spent that summer  
like Cather, wanting  
the strong arms

of another coming  
round me, knowing  
that this too was a foretaste

of what it meant to be flattened,  
to love like the dirt,  
hard, packed,

how fertile then  
not to know what  
I would become.