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One Degree West: Reflections of a Plainsdaughter

Julene Bair
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“When I walked through the ditches on my way from the pickup to a waiting tractor, no grasshoppers clacked aloft to startle me. As a child, I had grown oblivious to their landings on my breastbone. The snake population had diminished as well, making such treks across ditches less foolhardy, but I missed the edge of adventure in the landscape,” writes Bair, raised on a sheep and wheat farm in northwestern Kansas.

As consistent as the seasons, this collection of elegantly written essays traces Bair’s childhood on the farm, her departure at age eighteen to her annual summer sojourns as an adult. Eleven luminous meditations ponder (among other things) the role of a daughter to aging parents and the hardships of being a single parent of a teenage son.

Bair excels at appraising the iconic function of even the most familiar objects. Admiring her mother’s needlepoint reproduction of J.F. Millet’s “The Gleaners,” Bair muses: “The hunched women reminded me of my parents, and of Bruce and me. Of us. Ours was once the wealthy family, but now, even though we still owned the land and threshed the wheat with big machines, we’d become the gleaners. Our harvests, no matter how many bushels piled up in our bins, or how many dollars accrued in the banks, could not replenish our emptiness.”

This is a readers’ memoir, a perfect example of what the literary form strives to be. Each sentence is perfectly crafted: we are on the farm in 1959 watching “dust devils churn down the gullies in the summer fallow across from the house,” we stand behind the author, unobserved, as she helps harvest her father’s last wheat crop “the one he planted but will not reap.” We mourn the loss of an elder brother killed in a bicycling accident on California’s Highway One, “so far afield.”

Bair left the farm for a career as a writer and teacher, making homes in Iowa and Wyoming, writing fiction and non-fiction along the way. One Degree West is a remarkable book by a highly skilled author.
REBECCA MAKSEL (April 15, 2000)

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