



GHOST DANCES

Proving Up on the Great Plains

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and Darwinism; that his ardent Plains piety was unbuffered by rational argument was a tragic flaw as well as a virtue.

I don't know how valiantly my ancestors struggled against the trusts or against corporate patriarchy or war in the years of Populism's ascent. I want to believe they were protopacifist New Dealers. The Plains where I grew up bore only faint vestiges of its progressive past. Politics were increasingly dominated by reactionary figures such as Bill Janklow, and the Christian right kept up Bryanesque campaigns against evolution and legalized abortion (which Bryan, too, would certainly have abhorred) while dropping any trace of his antiwar passion or redistributive economics. I usually construed my parents' politics as nonnative, so tracing a "direct political bloodline" back through our real bloodline affords our beliefs a measure of legitimacy, of cred, that I never enjoyed growing up. Tendentious as it may be, it's reassuring to connect the fragments I have of these ancestors' lives into such a narrative.

Ruth Harris

7.1

Ruth Harris is my living bloodline to Nebraska, to the pioneer history of my Brion roots, and to the Christian radicalism of Populism and the Woman's Christian Temperance Union. For my forebears—Charley and Minnie, and then Clyde—Nebraska was just one stop in a restless pursuit of prosperity, and the next century of our history became a continual uprooting, taking off just when the arbor was starting to bear fruit. Ruth's grandparents, Clara and Reverend George F. Cole, once they landed in north-central Nebraska, stayed there. Plenty in ensuing generations scattered, but George and Clara had laid enough of a foundation that there was something to go back to. Minnie and Charley Davis's side of the family had no reunions (there was little unity to re-create), so we attended Clara and George's descendants' reunion in Nebraska every few years. On the painted family tree they displayed there, the Davis-Brion branch was actually a sapling beside the steady Cole-Brion trunk.

In part it was this symbolic rootedness that drew me to Ruth, my second cousin twice removed. It was also how her

biography intersected with famous struggles for justice in the late twentieth century, with the civil rights movement in the 1950s and '60s and with its global echoes in ensuing decades. Mostly, though, it was that she appeared as an antidote to my loneliness, a parallel to the solitary line I'd drawn of my life as a now-expatriate South Dakotan: broken family, only child, contrarian interests, exiled, and now looking homeward. Identifying with Willa Cather or—why not?—Superman (only child in Kansas, outsider, with a changed name and a secret behind it...) is a way of glorifying one tiny existence inside such huge horizons, turning loneliness into singularity, anointment, promise. But finding a literal cousin who was also a kindred spirit was something new to hold on to. Ruth shone to me as a model for how to live outside as a product of the Plains, a paleoleftist, a commonsense intellectual (not as defensive as Clyde Brion Davis), a generous soul who wears the scars of childhood traumas and secrets with grace and doesn't cover them.

Ruth is the daughter of Clara and Reverend George Cole's youngest daughter, Esther. She was born in 1920 in O'Neill, Nebraska, sixteen years after George died. I'd met her at a couple of Nebraska reunions, and twice besides after I moved east, but it was at the 2005 reunion, when I was twenty-five and a reluctant and confused New Yorker, that she first struck me as a kindred spirit. We were in O'Neill, where she'd graduated from high school in 1937. On the surface, it was odd that I thought of her as my missing Plains link, because it was all too clear how far she and O'Neill had diverged. Ruth, eighty-five years old and never married, now lived in California. She had come to the reunion with her friend Patricia Patterson, whom she introduced in her childhood Methodist church, pulling herself up from her pew, as her "traveling companion" and as

the author of a national United Methodist Women study guide that year. Ruth was visibly distraught over the Iraq War and was praying for peace. She had been praying and working for peace for sixty years.

The church, meanwhile, had acquired a new building since the days when Ruth sang in the choir there, not a wood-frame prairie church like the ones her grandparents planted but a modern, institutional brick affair. When the trim, mustached minister took the pulpit this Sunday, his sermon smugly implied, among other things, that Mahatma Gandhi, not a part of the body of Christ, was presently in hell. He derided the naive openness of a California church he'd visited that had hung a portrait of Gandhi in its narthex. Rural Nebraska today is dryly conservative country, not keen on redistribution of wealth, struggles for liberation, or freedom from exploitation, to use some of the Bryanesque "tions" with which I have been familiar since my *Reagan is a mean man* days, and which Ruth sees as fundamental to Christ's revolutionary teachings. Still, for me, Ruth belonged to that place—the church, the family, Nebraska—more than whatever parson the Methodist bishop had placed in O'Neill those few years. Dad and I gravitated toward Ruth and Pat at the Nebraska reunion as effortlessly as O'Neill's Elkhorn River flows east to the Platte and on to the Missouri across apparently flat and waterless land.

With summers in Portland and Amherst, I hadn't made it to a reunion in fifteen years, since the summer of my parents' custody fight. I was curious to see my fourth cousin Nicole, a spunky tomboy who'd been my best friend that week when I was ten (she was six months younger), out at Fort Robinson, just south of Hot Springs, where I had been about to move. This was the fort where Crazy Horse was sucker-punch bayoneted in

1877, where Scotty Philip worked as a messenger to various bands of Sioux and Cheyenne, and where he married Crazy Horse's sister-in-law Sally Larabee in 1879. On the broad porches of the old fort, Nicole introduced me to the Nintendo Game Boy and inspired an unsuccessful campaign to receive one of my own—sadly the addictive gray box was too similar to a TV. Yet, as if our two skateboards had different bearings, fifteen years later I was in New York playing in a punk rock band, while Nicole was an Air Force navigator stationed in Omaha and Qatar and the wife of a Marine.

After we'd all had breakfast one morning in a downtown O'Neill café, the Harris branch of the family—Ruth and Nicole's branch—held their catching-up session at the Holiday Inn. They sat in a circle and told one another what they'd been up to since the last reunion. Afterward, I saw Nicole rushing to her parents' minivan in the parking lot, her face red and tearstained, hair stuck to her cheeks. I looked quickly away. It turned out that Ruth, her grandmother's sister, had voiced stalwart opposition to the war and occupation in Iraq and had recounted her weekly protests against it in the name of Jesus Christ. This had been too much for a young woman who needed to believe she was risking her life for Iraqi freedom or Middle East stability. Ruth was sympathetic—her grandfather was a Civil War vet, her father a World War I vet, and she had helped her aunt Ethel in her efforts as a state champion scrap-metal-drive organizer during World War II—but she was finally unyielding in her morality.

Later I asked Ruth if she in fact believed there were *no* just wars. "Yes," she said, "I'm there now. But I've come a long way, because I was born up in a country that—and I now have relatives that really absolutely, you know..." She paused ruefully,

looking off and searching for the right words. "Their children are right in the middle of it. So sometimes in family reunions it gets tough, because I love 'em."¹

7.2

Ruth makes me think of an unshelled almond: a fibrous, sun-spotted exterior with a substantial and almost sweet heart. Not candied but powerfully, earthily sweet. Her manner is blunt. (The word *heart* is problematic, since she's more than a dozen years past a quadruple bypass that was supposed to last ten years.) She's a touch over five feet, stocky, and topped with boy-cut hair dyed the color of a penny—not a brand-new one but newer than she is. And her voice is "husky," as she puts it, thanks to a singing teacher at Morningside College, a Methodist school in Sioux City, Iowa, who "ruined more voices this side of the Mississippi than any other." Her whole range isn't gone, though. Standing next to her in church the first time, I got a surprise: She speaks gravel but still sings a vibrato soprano.

A couple of years after the O'Neill reunion, I flew from New York to Los Angeles, hoping to discover something about the country I passed over in between, feeling nearer to Ruth than second cousins twice removed. Ruth and Pat live in Claremont, California, in a Christian retirement community called Pilgrim Place. Their house is a single-level with river-stone pillars—a sign fastened to one proclaimed, WAR IS NOT THE ANSWER. When Ruth and I first sat down to talk beside the stone hearth, Pat told me to feel free to rein Ruth in and put her back on topic; she gets excited about a story and "says more than you need." Ruth lifted her large hands and said, "Guilty!"

before laughing almost soundlessly. Pat smiled. She is fifteen years younger than Ruth, several inches taller, and wears her silver curls short and natural. I stayed on their hide-a-bed couch in Pilgrim Place for a week, and for a few hours each day Ruth sat in her leather chair with her legs up on a matching hassock (for her circulation), following and drifting from a word-processed chronology of her life she'd prepared.

The first settled hometown of George and Clara Cole's descendants was Emmet, population eighty-eight, eight miles outside O'Neill and just twenty or thirty miles northwest of the old homesteads in Antelope County—toward the eastern side of the great empty room of the Plains. Topographic lines through Nebraska run north-south like the floorboards of a slouching pioneer house, tilting down ten feet per mile east. It looks more or less flat from the ground, but Rockies snowmelt and wetlands in the sand hills west of there will creep across the grassland like a glass of water spilled on the high side of the room.

Emmet sat nestled between the Chicago and North Western railroad tracks and the Elkhorn River. Ruth's mother, Esther Cole, was born thirty miles southeast, in Ewing, in 1898 and was just five years old when *her* father, George Cole, died. But there was still plenty of family around; two ponds nearby were called Grandma's Lake (after Clara) and Uncle Pat's Lake (after Esther's brother-in-law). In the center of town stood a four-thousand-ton-capacity hay barn part owned by George and Clara's youngest son, Guy. Five to twenty-five train cars of hay creaked east from Emmet each day in late summer; in the long-shadowed afternoons, after loading, hay farmers played cards in town until dark and headed home—there was no saloon. Thirty tough years in Nebraska, and the Cole family at last lived well.

In 1915, though, Clara up and left Emmet to take a new homestead near Sundance, Wyoming, where free land remained to prove up on. She was sixty-two and a widow ten years, but perhaps she'd grown so used to frontier poverty that her family's haying prosperity in Emmet made her nervous; perhaps, being Minnie's sister, she possessed that restless gene that wouldn't retire. She followed one of her older daughters west and lived in a one-room hut, sometimes with a dozen other former Nebraskans. Ruth's mother, Esther, was sixteen at the time and desperately wanted to finish high school, to become the first in her family with a diploma. She feared Wyoming would not furnish that chance, but Clara insisted that her daughter come homestead. Of two strong wills, Esther's won out: She stayed and attended first the Catholic boarding school in O'Neill, Nebraska (where the nuns mocked her for being a Methodist), and then a public school in nearby Atkinson.

When she graduated, she got a job teaching, just as her aunt Minnie (who also had a diploma) had done back in New York State. Esther soon met Ross Harris in O'Neill and fell in love. They married at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, in 1918, just as Ross was to ship out for France. He sent her love letters from the trenches. After he returned the next year, they nested in Emmet, Nebraska, in a white frame house with a large front porch, a second floor with multiple rooms, and a broken Victrola that children might try to spin at 78 rpm. After a few years in Wyoming, Grandma Clara returned and moved in down the street to a white two-bedroom house with a chicken coop, and apple trees, corn, and potatoes abounding in her yard.

Like me, Ruth was born to a store-owning family and a fated marriage. When she was born in 1920, Esther and Ross owned the Emmet general store. Ross would hold Ruth sometimes in a

cloud on his lap—she grew to love the smell of cigars—but he often worked late at the store and also perhaps tended to extramarital interests he'd acquired during the war. Nonetheless, Esther was soon pregnant with a second child, busy, and ill. Ruth, then, wandered to Grandma Clara's house and followed around her apron strings.

Clara, by this time tinier than ever, bent by her voyages, had returned in part to shepherd her grandchildren. Despite her diminutiveness and her meek demeanor, she gave pious center to an increasingly dispersed and dissolute family. She still eschewed moonshine, and she kept the family Bible open in the center of her supper table. She taught her grandchildren how to squeeze weeks out of ten dollars and four good meals from a chicken—two days baked or broiled, then chicken à la king, then chicken patties. She paid Ruth pennies to read aloud or swat flies, and cured juvenile ailments by spiking honey or grape juice with kerosene.

"She was one of—my sister Betty does the same thing, they hum or sing or whisper kind of very softly while they work. I don't do that, but they do," Ruth told me. Clara sang "He Leadeth Me," "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," and "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" as she peeled potatoes or spun wool or knit. These were songs of comfort and stability in a life that had been anything but comfortable and stable. "Like I said," Ruth told me after rendering a sweet refrain of each hymn she recalled, chin lifted and soprano intact—*Leaning, leaning, leaning, on the everlasting arms*—"when I was in China and the going really got tough, I found myself, under my breath, singing the same hymns."

In 1926 Ross sold the Emmet store to Esther's sister and bought a bigger one in O'Neill, the Holt County seat, home to

two thousand customers. Esther had had a third child the year before and was about to become pregnant again. All of hers were hard pregnancies, but she helped Ross establish the new store whenever she wasn't sick or tending the children. He worked late a lot, and she and the children would sit around the table waiting for him as their supper got cold.

Ruth wonders if it was the shell shock from trench warfare that led her father to liquor, if he acquired his taste for philandering in the chaos of world war as well. He was certainly drinking and almost certainly running around before the Depression hit, but after the stock market crashed in 1929, he lost his wits. He suddenly abandoned his wife with five children (one a newborn and two chronically ill) and left O'Neill with another woman. The grocery closed without him that winter, and the family had no money, only a root cellar stocked with the frozen potatoes and beans that cashless customers had tendered.

7.3

Despite her tough exterior, Ruth is what an ecologist might call a bioindicator, a hypersensitive species that can serve as a bellwether for pollution or climate shifts, like a prairie lichen that begins to disappear when sulfur-dioxide levels get too high. This became clear to me right away. The first night I stayed in Claremont, Ruth and Pat took me out for Italian at the Harvard Square Café. It was late spring, when a "marine layer" of fog grows threadbare and wisps away each noon, uncovering a rainbow of flowers until the dark and desert-cool evening. A mounted fan on the restaurant patio blew directly down Ruth's neck; we asked the waitress to turn it off. Ruth had nearly died

of pneumonia a few summers back and was now vigilant to avoid the chill or bug or fall that could stop her fragile body.

Before our pasta came, Pat ordered a cabernet sauvignon and offered Ruth a taste. Ruth smiled, patient and eager both. "I think I will," she said in a hoarse whisper, nodding and raising her eyebrows. She lifted the glass bulb, her hand shaking, and let a splash of the crimson wash into her mouth. She smiled again and savored the last drops from her lips. From that one warm sip, the daughter of teetotalers and alcoholics took a great joy.

When we pulled up beside the stone pillars back home, it was dark, and Pat strolled toward their little lane and gazed skyward. "Would you look at that?"

Ruth eased out of the passenger seat and scooted through the twilight, aluminum cane in hand, toward Pat.

"It's just a little fingernail of moon," Pat said. It was accompanied by a twinkling Venus. Ruth grinned at me and raised her eyebrows again as if to say, *Did you see that? Wow*—as awed as I would have been if we'd all just seen a moon-size shooting star. The evening prepared me for a week of heightened emphasis and sensitivity.

A few nights later, during our nightly routine of watching the BBC News from five to five thirty, Ruth became frantically agitated by reports of gang rapes by Tutsi warlords in Congo and Israeli air strikes on money-changing shops in Gaza. We turned off the TV and she went to start making guacamole, hushing Pat and me: "I just want some quiet and to make this." Her doctor had advised her to fast from the news, and salt, for the sake of her heart, but she disobeyed every day for the *BBC World Report* and Amy Goodman's *Democracy Now!* On this day she couldn't even watch *Amy*, as she calls it. Perhaps her wonder and empathy are in part generational—I think of crowds

swooning for William Jennings Bryan compared with my jaded reaction to MP3s of his wax-cylinder recordings. Yet much of it is Ruth's temperament, simply: The world and its problems stir her tremendously, and she does not shield herself from them but seeks them out.

Bryan himself once explained, his silver tongue nowhere near his cheek:

I am fond of radishes; my good wife knows it and keeps me supplied with them when she can. I eat radishes in the morning; I eat radishes at noon; I eat radishes at night; I eat radishes between meals; I like radishes. I plant radish seed—put the little seed into the ground, and go out in a few days and find a full grown radish. The top is green, the body of the root is white and almost transparent, and around it I sometimes find a delicate pink or red. Whose hand caught the hues of a summer sunset and wrapped them around the radish's root down there in the darkness in the ground? I cannot understand a radish; can you? If one refused to eat anything until he could understand the mystery of its growth, he would die of starvation; but mystery does not bother us in the dining-room—it is only in the church that mystery seems to give us trouble.²

One evening when Ruth was eight or nine and her mother, Esther, couldn't watch her and her brother Bink (Ross Jr.), Ross Sr. drove the children to a farm outside O'Neill where he and the farmer were to slaughter the beef to be sold the next day (refrigeration had not yet come to the Plains). Ross got out of the car, told Ruth and Bink he would return in a minute, and

slammed the door. They climbed into the back to wait, standing on the seat and gazing out the window, their small, soft arms propped on the dash. They couldn't see the barn in the fading light, but soon they heard a shrieking animal. Terrified, they pounded on the window, but Ross couldn't hear them. The shrieking went on. After eighty years, Ruth can still hear it.

"All of the experience that my life brought me after China was, I became—I'll have to tell you that later, but my job was world traveling," she said to me one day, losing track of the chronological list of topics on her lap and jumping ahead to her late twenties as a Methodist missionary in China during Mao's revolution and the Korean War. "Traveling all over and seeing people everywhere in terrible situations in the third world. And I mean, I really, I couldn't possibly be a Republican, and I just thought Reagan was *terrible*, and when he died last year or whenever it was, I thought, *My God, we still worship that guy because he was a Hollywood star. What is this?*" Her voice began to crescendo, and she batoned the air with her pencil like a choir conductor approaching a frenzied peak. "Aren't we ever going to grow up? Didn't we learn *anything* from the Vietnam War? You know, I hired Pat, I virtually hired her to come and work on the *peace* emphasis of a job that I had in the World Division, and we worked our *tail* off in terms of opposition—that was Board of Missions work, it's missionary work. That's *part* of the Church's work." She was insistent, and her raspy voice climbed into tune. "And it didn't take—we could see all the time, and then this war, I mean, *preemptive war?!?*"

Finally she caught herself, let her arm rest, and laid her clipboard in her lap. I myself was a bit shaken by this. Though Ruth's orientation is dramatically more activist and outward than mine, I, too, felt keenly the depressing truth that a woman

who spent decades of her adult life working toward peace and civil rights would spend her last good years watching a preemptive war and a reactionary era on the news. Perhaps a family breakup at a formative age heightens one's sensitivity.

"You know," she said quietly, "I mean, it's just so painful. And then I go out, and Nicole, and to have her cry all night at the family reunion because I overspeak and let some of my pain hurt. That's part of the story."

7.4

After Ross left, Esther Cole Harris got a job. She had her diploma and experience as a teacher and a teller at Emmet State Bank. Her brother lent his car, and she began taking the 1930 census, accounting for a portion of the 16,509 people in the 2,393 square miles of Holt County, a boiling cloud of dust, and no doubt gossip, trailing behind her. Esther's mother, Clara, came from Emmet to care for Ruth and her brothers and sisters, and Esther's brothers invited her family to Emmet for suppers. She moved her children to a smaller house on the north side of O'Neill, which had no running water, only a pump in the kitchen, despite being right next to the town standpipe. After the census, Esther considered her options. She did not want to get married again; Ross was the only man she would ever love. She did not want to be a nurse or a teacher. In another brave move, she decided to run for public office.

In 1931, Holt County had an open seat for its register of deeds, and despite the fact that Franklin Roosevelt would carry Nebraska with 63 percent of the vote the next year, briefly upsetting the Republican majority of the state that named its

capital Lincoln—despite this momentary *whoa* once the Populists' soothsaying about unbridled capitalism came to pass with the Depression—and despite sexism and the disgrace she felt at her husband leaving her, Esther thought she might win as a Republican woman.

She had already canvassed the county as census taker, and pitying whispers had surely preceded her. She was also sure to run as Esther Cole Harris, hitching her wagon to a now-established Holt County pedigree. If a woman was going to be elected even to local office in 1931—universal suffrage was only eleven years old, the same as Ruth—it was probably going to be in the West. Of the Plains states, Wyoming, the "Equality State," had given women the right to vote back in 1869, when it was still a territory, and elected a woman governor in 1924; Colorado granted women suffrage in 1893, and Kansas allowed women to vote in school elections from statehood in 1861, in municipal elections after 1887, and generally in 1912; Montana followed in 1914 and two years later elected the first woman to Congress (the pacifist Republican Jeannette Rankin, the only member of Congress to vote against entering both World Wars).³

The West shaped its culture—the austere terrain forced its new white denizens, men and women alike, to become citizens, to work together in communities while simultaneously distrusting organization. The little Methodist church Grandma Clara helped build in Emmet, Ruth's first church, had a female minister, an unmarried woman who preached even though the Methodist denomination wouldn't ordain her. Lest I romanticize Plains feminism too much, I should note that women were initially quite rare in much of the white West—a nineteenth-century writer for *Harper's Weekly* noted that "Wyoming gave women the right to vote in much the same spirit that New York

or Pennsylvania might vote to enfranchise angels or Martians."⁴ Nevertheless, Plains women like Esther often took on traditionally male roles, not out of idealism but out of necessity. Victorian gentility dried up and blew away.

Esther won. Of all the factors pulling for and against her, Ruth attributes much of her mother's victory to a sympathy vote. Be that as it may, Esther could soon support her children as a politician-single mother, a seemingly modern and cosmopolitan combination. They were poor—her salary was \$125 per month—but she tried not to let her children know. "She was just quiet about whatever kind of grief was going on," Ruth told me. "Whoever's shoulder she was crying on, she wasn't crying on her children's shoulder." Ruth and Bink rode on the running boards of the local milk truck each night, pulling bottles out of the back and leaving them on stoops, collecting the empties. The dairy farmer paid them a few cents but also paid Ruth unwanted attention, stationing her young body within his reach on the driver's side running board—"a very unfortunate thing...he was one of those guys." The children collected their earnings in a sugar bowl in the kitchen cabinet for treats and movie tickets at the Royal Theater.

Over the first couple of years after Ross left, he drifted into town erratically to tell Esther he'd made a mistake or tell his children he loved them. Sometimes he let himself into the house and frightened his ex-wife like a sour-breathed ghost sitting there in a wooden chair. After one of his visits, Ruth looked in the cabinet and the sugar bowl of coins was empty. "What kind of a guy is this?" she pleads, slowly shaking her head even three-quarters of a century later. "He may have been desperate—better left unsaid, I don't know."

Soon the prodigal father drifted off for good. Esther bought

a new stucco house, a “castle” with a basement and a furnace around whose register the family gathered in winter. They still lacked a car, but Esther filled a glass-fronted bookcase with a World Book set and a Book of the Month Club subscription (the most memorable month would be when *The Anointed*, by Esther’s cousin Clyde Brion Davis, arrived in 1937, when Ruth was in high school). If Ruth and Bink ran home delighted after the first screening at the Royal, Esther would join them for the replay. The children galloped through dirt streets astride tree branches, imitating the Western movies.

Perhaps because Ruth had grown up marshaling her younger siblings to clean the house while Esther worked Saturday mornings, or because she’d once been mothered by Grandma Clara, Ruth felt somewhat like a younger sister to Esther. The two of them traveled by train to take Ruth’s sister Esther Mary to the Mayo Clinic when it seemed clear she wasn’t developing right. Esther Mary died when Ruth was fifteen, and later Bink, who was always weak after contracting scarlet fever as a child, would die while she was in China—leaving just three Harris children.

Ruth found that her closest friends turned out to be girls from St. Mary’s Academy rather than her public schoolmates. Irish and Bohemian Catholics made up the professional, educated class of O’Neill and usually kept a polite distance from Protestants. Ruth’s friends had more money than she did, even access to a family car. Grandma Cole may have frowned on Ruth’s ecumenism—though her own children had strained the Sabbath rules, playing outside with Catholics on Sundays—but low populations forced a certain amount of interfaith mixing. (Charley Davis thought of Catholic children as “imps from hell” sent to corrupt his own Protestant cherubs, but Clyde played with them undaunted.⁵) In this sorority, Ruth was par-

ticularly fond of Mary Janet Kubicek, a Bohemian Catholic whose name the girls merged into Merj. Ruth and Merj mooned away afternoons speculating about their futures; neither seemed content with housewife.

When they hung around boys the air changed. Some guy would bring a little wine or hooch to get a girl tipsy enough to jump in the backseat. From her father to the dairy farmer and these teenage guys, the predominant masculinity of O’Neill was aggressive and heedless. “It never went through with me,” Ruth told me. The counterexample, her grandfather Reverend Cole, had died before even Esther could get to know him, and that type of pious and sober guy was scarce among Ruth’s peers in those Depression years.

“I think it had to do with the land,” Ruth said. The coarse land seemed to have conquered the settlers as much as the other way around. Within five years in Nebraska, a European immigrant who had once played the violin would become maladroit, hands good only for working. My own dad’s youthful affectations of prairie *where at’s* and double negatives hardened into grammatical calluses I always associated with his suspicion of new technologies and ideas: computers, compact discs, the transgendered. The same hostile land that demanded its women take on male roles, land whose gentle, womanly shape disguised its sometimes vulgar and violent underpinnings—that land brought out vulgarity, violence, hardened thinking, and hard drinking in its citizens within a generation or two. In Mari Sandoz’s Nebraska sand hills history *Old Jules*, a knowing homesteader observes, “One can go into a wild country and make it tame, but, like a coat and cap and mittens that he can never take off, he must always carry the look of the land as it was.”⁶

The Plains are a paradoxical place, where the by-turns

soothing and terrifying landscape begets polite civilities like Arbor Day and can-do reforms like women's suffrage alongside violent heroes like Bill Janklow or the brutal murders of Matthew Shepard in 1998 and the Clutter family in 1959 (the subject of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*). "And Americana," Ruth continued, "oh, no, the Westerns, those Western movies, we grew up on those, too." She loved them in O'Neill but now believes Americana left out a vast variety of the men and women who populated and still populate the Plains. The Hollywood Westerns projected a myth that real cowpokes thought they ought to live up to, imitating the imitation of their forebears rather than learning directly from men like Reverend Cole. This may be a side effect of the land's endemic nomadism: One thing that never moves away is the myth, and without multigenerational traditions the myth takes the place of ancestors or a strong culture.

Religion, Esther and Ruth both came to feel, was the community's only defense against the booze and vice that ran rampant just under O'Neill's conservative surface. "Ruth, Ruth, what would we *do* if we didn't have the church?" Esther would say. "Look where we'd be if we didn't have that plumb line."

Ruth's friend Merj decided to attend Duchesne College, a Sacred Heart School in Omaha, and to become a nun. Ruth became the first in her family to go to college, enrolling in the music conservatory at Morningside College in Sioux City and training to become a choral music teacher.

7.5

"I never became a musician. I was always a cheerleader in a kind of way," Ruth told me one day, insisting she could never find

middle C reliably. In high school Ruth loved cheerleading for the O'Neill Eagles, drawing out the crowd's effulgence while avoiding the spotlight herself. At Morningside College, whatever she says about her abilities, she toured the country singing Bach double motets with a sixty-voice choir and a few numbers with a swing trio called Two Keys and a Chord. After graduating, she began teaching music, first at a school in Iowa and then in western Nebraska. I couldn't tell if she was being overly modest, but it's true that for most of us music is a medium for other impulses. For me, from shortly after my parents' divorce to now, it's been a way to write, to hammer ideas into intuitive, beautiful, or goofball shapes I can memorize and sing a hundred times. I can perform confident that I won't slip and reveal too much or put my foot in my mouth, even if I sometimes find new significance in old lines. (To describe "Potluck Society" now as quasi-Christian, indigenous Plains radicalism—*Everyone's given a gift to give to contribute to their community*—is to take a bird's-eye view on my original intent, which was earnest political entreaty.)

For Ruth, music's main purpose was social coalescence: The music she knew was choral music, in which the conductor, like a cheerleader, herds a half dozen or a hundred voices together into unison and even harmony. This collectivist impulse would become her life's work even after she largely left music behind. After World War II its scope expanded from a class of music students to essentially all humankind.

Pearl Harbor came six months after she graduated from Morningside; during the war, with other Nebraska women, she gathered scrap metal for the war effort. After Jesus instructed, *Love thy neighbor*, a lawyer asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Christ answered with the parable of the Good Samaritan, who tended to a beaten stranger lying by the road. In her midtwenties,

Ruth began to wonder if the war's casualties all over the world were not her neighbors. At the suggestion of her adult Sunday school leader in Gering, Nebraska—where she'd gotten her second job after college—she applied to teach music through the Methodist Board of Missions at a school somewhere across an ocean. She was accepted just before the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

A year and a half later, in February 1947, she arrived by taxi at Pier 44 in San Francisco to embark on the S.S. *Marine Lynx* for Shanghai. She had no idea what a pier would look like. To her it resembled the long exhibit hall at the Holt County Fair, where farmers and 4-H-ers showed off prize plants and livestock. Indeed it had a carnival atmosphere, and after she and the rest of the passengers (most of them missionaries) had boarded, the pier filled with well-wishers and jazz gospel tunes and confetti. "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus," the band wailed, "Sweetest name I know!"⁷

Ruth didn't care for these tunes ("It sounded like something out of a fox-trot album," she wrote her family), and she avoided most of the frivolous numbers in the Army and Navy hymnal aboard the *Lynx*. Once the ship had left the wharf, she led group singing of *serious* hymns and listened to Brahms's First Symphony on a friend's windup Victrola in the ship lounge as she began her two-week voyage across the rolling grassland of Pacific brine. But her provincial perspective and conservative tastes could not last long in the face of her drive to meet new people and her sensitivity to others' pain. Her letters home fairly overflowed with enthusiasm for the wide world, even as she was confined to a berth on a swords-to-plowshares World War II Navy ship. Her long rows of exclamation points—formed with an apostrophe typed over a period—nearly perforated the tissue-thin airmail paper she folded and sent to

Nebraska. While almost everyone on board was laid low with seasickness, Ruth bounded around on her sea legs, climbing stairs and ladders and eating in the near-empty cafeteria with the Amerasian child she babysat for a seasick Filipina woman who was also traveling in emergency class. "The thin get thinner and the fat get fatter," she wrote home. "Guess I'll have to wait 'til I get to China to lose those pounds. Me, who eats Chinese food by the pound!"

The Sunday before the *Lynx* reached Shanghai, a young missionary on board gave a sermon from Ephesians that emphasized the love and unity for which Christians must strive. The whole body of Christ, St. Paul wrote, "joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."⁸ As she sat in the ship's chapel, Ruth was struck by these words, awestruck by the twenty-eight denominations of Christians on board, by the French-speaking nuns in a sheeted-off berth, the Seventh-day Adventists who didn't eat meat and worshiped on Saturday, the "old Britisher" with the "cutest cockney accent" and strange Cuban-heel shoes. She also thrilled in trying out her Chinese on the ship's crew, most of whom were not Christian, and learned that some conservative missionaries were praying for the souls of mainstream Protestants on board. There was always this sectarian counterpoint within the ecumenical choir, the shooting pain in the body of Christ, that shocked Ruth and dismayed her.

At 4:45 a.m. the next Tuesday, she woke in her bunk, unable to sleep any longer knowing China must be in sight. She clambered to the steel deck in the faint predawn light. "I will not soon forget the sight that greeted my eyes as I walked out onto deck," she wrote her family. Sixty years later she hadn't forgotten. In the misty distance she could make out the gray silhouettes of her

first Chinese junk boats, with their scalloped fan sails. In the mouth of the Yangtze, red and green port and starboard lights of other big ships reflected on the black water. "It was really a China picture, I mean my gosh, you just about can't *believe* this," she told me, thinking back. "Just a perfect scene, like a scroll."

Soon the scroll was ripped by reality. The *Lynx* dropped anchor, and immediately junks and rowboats swarmed the ship. The boatmen shouted up at the missionaries, begging for scraps of food. At first, passengers tossed down crusts and orange peels, which the beggars raced to fish out of the river with nets. Then the *Lynx* crew started spraying any boat that came near with a fire hose. Ruth wrote, "It was so cold that it just seemed downright pitiful, yet I guess it was for their own good in the long run." I can't imagine such an *ob well* from Ruth now. In coming weeks she would see men like oxen pulling massive carts, fifteen-fold inflation in a few months, small bundles left out as trash that turned out to be dead infants. This would all add up to a different conclusion, one she could state bluntly as an octogenarian: "China had to have a revolution!"

"Every single day," Ruth wrote in a letter home, "new things happen to make me overflow with thankfulness that I AM IN CHINA!" The country had been decimated by World War II, and the current political situation was "hopeless": It had become a civil war between the Maoists and Chiang Kai-shek, with the Communists advancing from Manchuria down the coast toward Beijing, where Ruth was staying. But she felt hope. Her first Christmas she led a choir at the ecumenical English-language Union Church, hymns helping to ease tensions between government and business agents and missionaries: "Another witness to my often-sung song that music is a wonderful barrier-breaker-downer," she wrote. Here again was

her impulse, her life's *mission*, toward reunion. It was almost as if she could heal the family of God in lieu of her own.

Above the sofa bed where I slept in Claremont, Ruth had hung a framed silk embroidery of a fluffy-headed bird resembling a brown phoenix. After almost a year in training in Beijing, she moved to Shanghai, farther from the fighting, to teach music in Chinese at the McTyeire girls' school. One of her favorite students gave her the embroidery her first year there, in 1948. McTyeire had shards of glass cemented to its ramparts to separate the mayors' and executives' daughters within from the desperate masses without, but even among these rich students nationalistic folk songs overtook Christian hymns as the Communist forces advanced. In 1949 the student who had given Ruth the silk embroidery denounced her at a Communist rally as an envoy of Western imperialism, "the iron fist in a velvet glove."

When the Communists finally took Shanghai, McTyeire students and teachers watched the "fireworks" from the roof. Afterward, the Party allowed the school to continue operating, without religious education. But the climate grew more nationalistic, and it became dangerous for any student to be openly friendly with Ruth. In 1950 the Korean War broke out as a proxy war between the Soviet Union and China on one side, and the United Nations and the United States on the other. Through global events around her, Ruth became a representative of the enemy. Now she says she had "seen how desperate the need" in China was and that "God used people power" in the revolution, but the rift with her students grieved her horribly at the time. It was in those years that she found herself singing Clara's favorite hymns, such as "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms," under her breath.

In 1951, Ruth finally had to leave China, where she'd once

thought she might spend her whole adult life. With two friends she traveled home the long way, through Southeast Asia, India, and newly occupied Palestine. By chance, they took a taxi tour with a Palestinian driver who pointed to a horizon and said, "You see way over there? You see that place? That's the home of my family for five hundred years." Ruth's voice strained as she recalled his pain and fury (an American Indian guide in her childhood could have given a similar tour in Nebraska or South Dakota). "I have a question for you," the Palestinian man said. "Why didn't you give them Texas?"

The last stop on their world tour was Europe, and Ruth ended up in Geneva at the brand-new United Nations. By coincidence, Eleanor Roosevelt was also there, drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Ruth went to watch from the observers' gallery one day and stayed for a week. Here a strong, pious American woman was assembling a choir with men and women from all over the world. "My soul was hungry for their words," she recalled.¹⁰ Eleanor Roosevelt hadn't been popular in Nebraska as first lady; Ruth had heard her criticized as a nosy do-gooder. But, she told me, "I really always felt that my grandmother and my mother had both lived that kind of life, that they *were* activists in a certain kind of way, too. I had a sense of pride about it, because I really loved them and admired them." When I visited Ruth's house, the old glass-fronted bookshelf that once held my great-grandfather's Book of the Month Club selection alongside the encyclopedia set now held at least a half dozen biographies of Eleanor Roosevelt.

The United Nations was a global choir, modulating toward some form of universal harmony. After China, and even the brief visit to Israel and Palestine, Ruth told me, "I just had a vision of, somehow or another, how could we ever get back together?"

7.6

At Pilgrim Place, Ruth and Pat's community in California, twice a week before lunch, a dozen Pilgrims gathered for a twenty-minute silent vigil around the flagpole, as they had each week since the war in Iraq started in 2003. It wasn't for outsiders, like the demonstrations they frequently staged on an island in a busy Claremont intersection (Ruth and Pat stored everybody's picket signs in their garage). It was just between the Pilgrims and God. When the three of us went together, the marine layer fog was gone, the late morning heating up, and the white-crested flock of doves already assembled. In a loose ring about the pole were a plaid-trousered husband resting a hand on his wheelchair-bound wife's shoulder; a woman in an electric cart wearing big dark cataract sunglasses; the late-fifties couple who looked ready to hit the driving range after the vigil; an Austrian friend of Ruth and Pat's, half Catholic and half Jewish, whose parents had sent her to England as a child to escape the Nazis; blue cardigans, slumping backs. Their faith inspired a refusal to accept the violence and division in the world—no *Alas* or *I guess it was for their own good in the long run*—or to stoop to the slightest Machiavellian wiles. It was just geriatric soldiers of Christ straining osteoporotic joints in surging heat and praying beneath Old Glory and Ruth's beloved light blue flag with a white globe wreathed in olive branches.

In further pursuit of communion, Ruth and Pat lined up two cafeteria lunches for me with Pilgrims who had grown up in Plains states, skimming the bios of all the residents to find six Nebraskans and Kansans. At the first, we ate with a quiet

Lutheran couple from Nebraska who had served as missionaries in Japan for many years. The Dales looked much like the older people I went to church with as a child: Ken had almost transparent Swedish skin, and his wife, Eloise, had short brown hair and wore a pink Chanel-style skirt suit. They hardly spoke a word, but it came out that Ken had organized a large e-mail newsletter against the Iraq War. Our other lunch companion was a younger woman, Linda Vogel, a Methodist theologian from Topeka who had recently retired from a seminary professorship in Chicago. At one point she mentioned her fellow Topekan, the Reverend Fred Phelps of the infamous "God Hates Fags" church. "God can't take him soon enough as far as I'm concerned," Linda said. "And I have a feeling he's in for a surprise."

"We all are, I suppose," Eloise added wryly.

Both Ken and Linda lent me copies of their family histories to bolster my Plains research, fragments of an archive of homesteading history scattered in local libraries, museums, and family genealogies like the stories passed to me about Charley and Minnie Davis and George and Clara Cole.... A prairie dugout wall caved in on Albert, Theodore, and Frank Andersen's shared bed while they were sleeping, and their father had to pull them out by the legs.... Hilda Gustafson brought a trunkful of fine clothes and trinkets from Stockholm to Nebraska and gradually gave them all away to young brides when she realized she didn't need them.... The Reverend C. F. Erffmeyer heard the call to move from Wisconsin to Kansas in 1878, and he served in the Methodist itinerancy as a "preacher-on-trial" and a sky pilot planting churches....¹¹

At a second lunch, we ate with two more Kansans, both

women from the Wichita area. Laura Fukada was another missionary, who had married a Japanese-American man and then worked in Japan. Elise Gorges was eighty and so beautiful I kept gazing at her placid blue eyes, silver-blond hair, and Santa Fe jewelry. In her twenties, Elise had taken a vacation from an office job to visit a friend at the Grail, a Catholic women's center in Ohio; she mailed her resignation letter back to Wichita. The third plainswoman at the table that day was Ruth Thomson, a Nebraskan. Born in 1913, the year Willa Cather published *O Pioneers!*, she made Ruth Harris a veritable spring chicken, and her blunt declarations made Ruth Harris seem demure.

"I'm kind of a rebel here," Ruth Thomson said loudly over her chicken and rice. She was hard of hearing and had to keep reminding me to speak up. Before retiring to Pilgrim Place, she was not a minister or missionary but a YWCA social worker. Way back, shortly after national suffrage, when she was in fourth or fifth grade, she had complained to her country-school teacher about the exclusively male pronouns for God. Hers was a strict Methodist household, no drinking or dancing—"no *playing* cards until I was in high school!" But her parents were egalitarian: Her mother had studied for two years at a teacher's college and her father was a socialist doctor who voted for Norman Thomas, a Presbyterian minister and perennial presidential candidate, even against Franklin Roosevelt. After graduating from the University of Nebraska and teaching in rural schools for fifty-four dollars per month, Ruth moved back to Lincoln and took a job with the YWCA.

Around that time a new Walgreens opened in downtown Lincoln. The first time she walked into the soda fountain, on a warm day in 1941, she saw two friends from the Y sitting

uneasily in a booth. They were black. When Ruth joined them they told her they had not been served in an hour.

Ruth promptly demanded the waitress's attention: "Listen, we haven't been served." She ordered ice creams all around. When the waitress delivered, without a word, their order, the black women's scoops were crusted with salt and pepper—a bitter symbol of desegregation. Ruth fired off a complaint letter to Walgreens headquarters, and her friends apparently never had trouble there again. (Another Plains precedent to the lunch counter sit-in movement occurred in 1958 at Dockum Drug Store in Wichita, Kansas. Black students occupied the lunch counter every day for three weeks before the manager relented and served them.)

I should interrogate the appeal these fierce prairie women hold for me. Their fierceness takes various forms, from the delicate, just-so assuredness of licking an envelope and sending a resignation letter back to Wichita, to the fightin' instincts of Ruth Thomson—in the 1990s she was the first person to petition to move to Pilgrim Place with a same-sex partner—to the sensitive communitarian enthusiasm of Ruth Harris. (The two Nebraskan Ruths are quite opposite women despite their political affinities; Ruth Thomson a warrior and my Ruth a peacemaker.) But they're all straight-spined, and brave. This is one of the great tropes of the Plains: Alexandra Bergson in *O Pioneers!*, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Ma Joad, Dorothea Lange's *Migrant Mother*, or the ruddy-faced mother looking to the horizon as she cuts wildflowers in the South Dakota painter Harvey Dunn's work *The Prairie Is My Garden*.¹² In a tough land she is an unwavering alto beside the erratic bass of the high-heeled cowboy, a stable force like Esther Cole Harris when the man vanishes.

In my own case, it was my mother who vanished. After a promising start as a forceful South Dakota woman, the decisive business manager at Prairie Dog Records ultimately decided that *life is not meant to be tolerated with an attitude of "I'll just get through this."* The stoicism she refused is ultimately an essential stance if one is to stay in the Plains. All the women at Pilgrim Place also left the region, as did Laura Ingalls Wilder, Willa Cather, the migrant mother, and Ma Joad. Mom kept a little prairie grit, but she wasn't with me all year. In the absence of a full-time mother, it seems I've adopted myself to freelancers an hour or a week at a time.

So Ruth Harris, in addition to being a sort of sister, was a mother figure as well. Our temperaments diverge, choir leader versus songwriter, but we share a desire to build communities, to *get us back together*.

7.7

It happened that the world in the 1950s was in dire need of community, and that an impulse derived from Ruth's personal pain was of great use to others.

When she returned to the United States from China and Europe, she docked in New York City, trying straight off to land a job at the United Nations. Instead, she was hired by the Methodist Church to introduce congregations from around the country to the UN. She would work in various Methodist and ecumenical positions over the next forty years, most of them in the "God Box," the blocky limestone Interchurch Center in Morningside Heights, Manhattan—far, far from her alma mater, Morningside College, but only a few blocks

from a walk-up apartment where I would live for three years. She would no longer be a literal choir director, but her ardent efforts to achieve harmony continued.

Ruth began working with Christian college students in 1954 and soon expressed concern about the “establishment of stereotype personalities” among them.¹³ Her time amid the Chinese revolution gave her experience to guide students through the political and spiritual unease many of them felt. “Nuclear fallout, trials in Cuba, the status of Berlin, Sputnik and Lunik, Apartheid, Little Rock, Cyprus, Mao Tse Tung—what does it all mean?” asked the United Student Christian Council’s newsletter, *Communique*, in March 1959. “It cannot be that God is, and that he is not active” in this troubled time.¹⁴ Ruth helped organize the quadrennial Ecumenical Student Conference on the Christian World Mission in 1955 and 1959 as an opportunity to make sense of all this.

The Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. spoke at the 1959 conference in Athens, Ohio, at ten o’clock on Wednesday morning, December 30; *Communique* mentioned his visit only in the last sentence of the conference announcement. I don’t know what he said, but the conference theme was “Frontiers of Mission,” and he gave a “Frontier Address.” Undoubtedly he recommended civil rights as a frontier of Christian mission; a backdrop of Jesus on the Cross displayed behind him reminded students that “as men have created barriers between races they have crucified Christ anew.”¹⁵ It’s hard to imagine this demigod just shy of his thirty-first birthday—halfway in age between Ruth, who was almost forty, and the students she advised—pounding the pavement like William Jennings Bryan at little chautauquas and speaking to a thousand people at a time. Two days later King would be at the Virginia capitol protesting a

school district’s all-out closure to avoid a federal desegregation order. “Never underestimate what you are doing today,” he’d tell 2,700 black protesters in Richmond. “I can assure you that it will have far-reaching effects.”¹⁶ As a young minister, he was coming to Athens to ask Christian students from all races, from seventy-eight countries, to join the struggle.

Together with the rest of the Athens conference, his speech flipped the students’ calendars from the ’50s to the ’60s. Ruth was delighted as she walked the hallways managing logistics to see clusters of students gathered around Jim Lawson, a black seminary student who had studied Gandhi’s nonviolent strategies as a Methodist missionary in India. Within a month or two, in early 1960, student civil rights activism took off, beginning with sit-ins at whites-only lunch counters across the South. Two thousand students, most of them black, were arrested in the first half of that year. According to Ruth, almost every sit-in included at least one student who had been at the Athens conference.

It’s not difficult to trace the branches of the Cole-Brion family tree to Ruth’s frontiers of mission. Her grandparents had traveled to a hostile, amoral frontier to plant churches and thereby civility. Her mother was an elected official. Ruth, at least third in a line of strong, pious women, has worked to extend the frontier of civility across the globe. The word *frontier* suggests a particularly energetic sort of border, a landscape of motion: It’s a French word that sounds terribly American, and it sports that industrious final “eer” sound like *engineer*, *pamphleteer*, *pioneer*. One young culture forges itself as it overruns an older one along a frontier, and almost a century later a nearly grown-up nation reinterprets its past, its constitution, to include blacks and Indians and others as equal members on a

legal and cultural frontier. Skin itself—the surface of civil rights—is a sort of frontier between a self and the world; it changes and moves in response to movement both inside and out. I'm thinking of my cousin Nikki's red, tearstained cheeks after Ruth's sermon on Iraq, or the multicolor, bruised, and bloodied skin of the Freedom Riders. On the scarred skin of prairie earth I can make out a line from Clara's Ladies Aid suppers to the March on Washington.

August 27, 1963, found Ruth standing beside her Methodist student leaders as one by one they phoned their parents to announce they would be busing to Washington, DC, the next day for that very march. When moms and dads panicked at the turn Bible study had taken, Ruth took the receiver as a Methodist authority and reassured them that this was an excellent reinforcement of leadership training. "I thought, *For heaven's sakes, the students should have that experience,*" she told me. The March on Washington turned out peaceful, the multitudes listening to King's dream and, Ruth recalled, "sharing their sandwiches in a Sunday school picnic atmosphere."¹⁷ Potluck society, indeed.

Two years later she joined King's Selma-to-Montgomery march, crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge on King's second try, then drove ahead to prepare accommodations for the marchers in Montgomery. No picnic: To avoid being lynched for ferrying blacks into Montgomery, she had them crouch on the floor of her car's backseat.

After 1965, Ruth's work at the God Box became more international. As a church executive, she traveled to dozens of third-world frontiers to support Methodist involvement in the global student Christian movement and to boost political and eco-

nomic solidarity in the Christian mission at large—often in countries revolting against colonial rule. In 1971, she hired Pat, who had been a missionary teacher in Japan and worked with Christian groups in Korea, to work with her at the Methodist Board of Global Ministries. A few years later the two of them started a mission intern program to train a new generation of missionary activists with a sense of solidarity, of listening rather than preaching—as far as can be from the old picture of missionaries harvesting heathen souls and throwing them in the thresher of Western capitalism, *the iron fist in a velvet glove*.

The '80s brought liberation theology, which in a sense codified what Ruth had believed for decades: that Christianity must always align itself with the economically and socially oppressed rather than with their oppressors. This was another iteration of a ghost dance, enlisting supernatural help for liberation, but instead of Apocalypse and afterlife it worked for revolution and equality in *this* world. Through this theology Ruth supported the antiapartheid struggle in South Africa, as well as resistance to the Marcos regime in the Philippines. In 1987, when she was already eligible for Social Security, she flew to Manila with a committee on agricultural missions to discuss opportunities for helping rural peasants. As it happened, the Peasant Movement of the Philippines was negotiating for agrarian reforms at the same time and held a protest outside the presidential palace, now occupied by the ostensible reformer Corazon Aquino. Ruth brought her American colleagues out to see the stakes of their work on the ground. A mass of ten thousand protesters crept toward the military line on Mendiola Bridge, and suddenly the police and military began teargassing and then shooting at the crowd.

"I was scared to death," Ruth recalled. "I had all these church women there, and [the soldiers] were shooting." One member of her group was injured in the stampede, more solidarity than she'd bargained for. Thirteen Filipino farmers had been killed; here was a modern incarnation of the Wounded Knee massacre, of power overreacting to protect itself against a liberation theology.

Once she retired and eventually moved to Pilgrim Place, Ruth began to reflect on theology in an abstract sense and became interested in a school of thought called "process theology," which envisioned God luring us all forward toward harmony like a choir director or a cheerleader. God isn't omnipotent but exerts a positive pull on all people in moving toward a—as Ruth and Pat put it in their Christmas card one year—"radically inclusive and justice-centered commonwealth of God."

7.8

Ruth, Pat, and I pulled up to the Claremont United Methodist Church on the seventh Sunday of Easter, the Sunday after the Ascension—also known at this particular church as Reconciling Sunday. This was the week when the congregation celebrated and reaffirmed its 1993 decision to become a "reconciling congregation," to break from Methodist doctrine by welcoming gays and lesbians. As we walked slowly from Ruth and Pat's little white Toyota to the angular, modern church building, we passed seven flags, one of each color of the rainbow, sunk into empty Costco laundry detergent buckets. In the narthex hung a political display—not a picture of Gandhi but close enough: a galaxy of silver stars, each one representing a coalition soldier

killed in Iraq. Around a small altar, a pile of pebbles represented the tens of thousands of Iraqi victims of the war.

Ruth and Pat looked the part of elderly church ladies, Ruth in a brown polyester suit and SAS walking shoes, Pat in navy polyester. An earringed, middle-aged man held a basket of rainbow ribbons for us to pin to our shirts, and his partner led us to our pew. "They're a gay couple," Ruth whispered to me. When a woman with a flattop hairdo and denim shirt read the scripture, Ruth leaned over to me and whispered again, "She's a lesbian." She raised her eyebrows expectantly, and I raised mine in response and nodded as if she were telling me something I hadn't surmised or even suspected. Behind the pulpit, giant windows looked out on green spring foliage—glorious, unstained glass.

In her sermon, the minister recalled crying angrily after one of the many Methodist conventions at which the worldwide denomination reaffirmed *its* nonreconciling policy of rejecting gay and lesbian clergy. Though she herself was straight, she had thought of leaving the church until it changed its policy but then realized, "If God waited to love us until we were perfect, well..." The congregation chuckled appreciatively.

After affirming officially that we sought "a world where all people are welcomed, and where silenced voices are heard," we placed our bulletins on the pews and shook hands with those around us with the two-handed clasp of diplomats, saying, "The peace of the Lord be always with you," or just, "Peace." Though Claremont United Methodist Church didn't slant quite as old as Pilgrim Place, I was still something of a novelty as a young guest of Ruth and Pat. They were honored and active members of the church, and Pat had again written a national study guide for Methodist women, this one called *Shalom, Salaam, Peace*, to

help build a culture of peace among Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The whole scene had a surreal perfection that sparked skepticism in me, the same way I came to feel about Portland and Amherst as I grew older, like I could find alienation in the most agreeable environment.

The second hymn of the service was "Rise Up Shining," new lyrics set to the cascading arpeggios of a traditional hymn. Ruth didn't need sheet music for the tune: It was "Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus," written by Charles Wesley in 1745, the kind of foundational Methodist hymn Clara had sung softly while Ruth hovered around her, back in Emmet. *Come, thou long-expected Jesus, / born to set thy people free, Wesley's ode began; from our fears and sins release us, / let us find our rest in thee.* This was the message of hope and deliverance that had comforted Clara through the frontier years in Nebraska and then Ruth during the Chinese revolution. Now, the three of us stood up and followed the new words in our bulletins, Ruth's warbling voice jumping up the register: *Rise up shining, sons and daughters, summoned as the light of earth! / All created in Love's image, manifest creation's worth. / Gay and lesbian, straight or searching, bi, transgendered: called by name. / Blessed uniqueness, sacred bodies each enkindled by God's flame.*

By the middle of that first verse, I was having trouble following along without giggling at the incongruousness of the kind of tune that I knew from my own childhood churchgoing, a major-key melody that unfolds unchallenged by the slightest dissonance, paired with fantastically unhymnlike words such as *bi*—not to mention that I'd never heard a hymn with anything as steamy as bodies "enkindled by God's flame." At the same time I felt the poignancy there, looking out at the green through the unstained glass and wishing I could summon Wil-

liam Jennings Bryan's reverence for the sunset's colors wrapped around a radish.

The wide-eyed welcome of Reconciling Sunday was a diorama-scale achievement of what Ruth had been working toward across sixty years, a momentary harmony. These congregants weren't innocents; they had probably suffered more than I, and had come to embrace the silly and the sacred of God's green earth. "This one speaks prophetic challenge, that one hears a priestly call," we sang. "Singer, healer, counselor, teacher: of Christ's body members all."