

## STERILITY

Miles of forgotten houses, leaning barns, rubble. Is this the land where I was born? The quarter section with a white house, an elm tree by the pump, an orchard near the haystack? I played in the shade, shined apples on the seat of my pants. Here I loved more than once. Here I buried my dead again, again, again. The children are parents, the parents are grandparents, the grandparents are dust, all blown away. In '32 I saw the black clouds, sands of the hourglass piled in the window sill and the pattern of the rug erased, dusts of settlers, Indians, and buffalos making a darkness, a preview of today.

I am alone and lonely listening to a faraway echo closing in. The sunset on Elm Creek is a leaden nickel, spent gold. Mud bubbles around the edges. Familiar loves have vanished too soon and left my feet sliding down, down between silt sheets. Too cold. I touch stones skipped on the water, limbs of family trees inked in the Bible.

Is there anyone who recognizes my odd walk, like my father's, or the inflections of my voice, like my mother's, someone to call out, "Welcome home"? Only the dust knows who I am. My name is lost, initials on the mailbox changed and changed, so blurred I cannot read them myself.

Whom can I love and why? The lovers are gone and I am empty like the houses, vacancies unadvertised, not caring to be entered again. Windows are shattered, the stained glass fruits of the vine unsipped, the golden apples uneaten. Chimneys fall brick from brick, the mortar crumbles, sands of the hourglass, shreds of dreams, broken china in the gutter, old bottles.

Afraid to write "To the Third and Fourth Generations," my letters are addressed "To Whom It May Concern" for the land is growing barren of families, houses useless as flesh without love. How will the grandchildren sleep, touch, and be touched, feel the grass under their feet?

It is because I love what the rubble once was that I weep, and after weeping, smile, because I must in order to survive? I move miles away, leave my faithful dog to lie by the gate, to guard the house, the barn, the rusty machinery. His walk is arthritic, his muzzle gray. Though patient, he has learned not to expect me. Only from habit do his eyes search for my coming.

Now I live in a cubicle the size of a hatband. My hands flip pages of the calendar at the unbelievable speed of the twentieth century where streets are paved in cement, not green but black gold. My arms are empty as a sieve shaking sand, a second childhood at the seashore. My body bumps into old trash, littering. I become a street cleaner gathering fragments to throw away. I stick a chicken feather in my hatband, listen to the pounding noise of a new Saturday night live, and dance in my circular room that is empty, vacuumed, too clean, a new sterility.

--Louise Monfredo