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Personal Geographies: Poetic Lineage of American Poets Elizabeth Coatsworth and Kate Barnes

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the relationship between two 20th-century American poets, Elizabeth Coatsworth and her daughter, Kate Barnes. Both women mined their physical and personal geographies to create their work; both labored in the shadows of domineering literary husbands. Elizabeth's early poetry is economical in language, following literary conventions shaped by Eastern poets and Imagists of her era. Kate's work echoes her mother's painterly eye, yet is informed by the feminist poetry of her generation. Their dynamic relationship as mother and daughter, both struggling with service to the prevailing Western patriarchy, duties of domestication and docility, also inform their writing. This paper draws from Coatsworth's poems, essays, and memoir, and Barnes' poems, interviews, and epistolary archives, which shed light on her relationship with her renowned mother.

Keywords: American poets; feminism; imagism; confessional poetry; patriarchy; mother-daughter relationships

Osebne geografije: Pesniško sorodstvo Elizabeth Coatsworth in Kate Barnes

POVZETEK

Članek se pogloblja v odnos med dvema ameriškima pesnicama 20. stoletja, Elizabeth Coatsworth in njeno hčerjo Kate Barnes. Obe sta snov za svoje ustvarjanje črpali iz svojih fizičnih in osebnih geografij; obe sta ustvarjali v senci dominantnih soprogov. Za Elizabethino zgodnjo poezijo je značilen jezikovni minimalizem vzhodnjaške pesniške tradicije kot tudi njenih sodobnikov imagistov. V Katinem delu se materin vpliv, razviden v minimalističnem slikanju podob, spaja z vplivom feministične poezije njene generacije. V poeziji obeh se zrcali tudi dinamičen odnos med materjo in hčerjo ter soočanje z vlogo ženske v patriarhalni zahodni družbi, ki predvideva ponižnost in osredotočenost na dom in družino. Ugotovitve v članku se nanašajo na Coatsworthine pesmi, eseje in memoar, ter Barnesine pesmi, intervjuje in arhiv pisem, ki osvetljujejo odnos med njo in njeno znamenito materjo.

Ključne besede: ameriški pesniki; feminizem; imagizem; konfesionalna poezija; patriarhalnost; odnos mati-hči

Personal Geographies: Poetic Lineage of American Poets Elizabeth Coatsworth and Kate Barnes

1 Introduction: Coatsworth / Barnes Poetic Lineage

Kate Barnes (1932–2013), formerly of Appleton, Maine, was born into an extraordinary literary family: Her father, Henry Beston (1888–1968), was best known for his seminal nature book, *The Outermost House* (1928), and other works on the environment and man's role alongside. Kate's mother, Elizabeth Coatsworth (1893–1986), began her career as a poet, publishing her first collection, *Fox Footprints*, in 1923. These poems sprang from Coatsworth's travels through East Asia as a young girl in the early 20th century, riding donkeys and camels, walking paths of pilgrims, sleeping in hammocks, and lighting candles at temples. Elizabeth became celebrated as a children's writer, with *The Cat Who Went to Heaven* (1931 winner of the Newbery Medal for children's literature), and dozens of children's books, middlebrow novels, and essays, publishing over 90 books from her first collection of poetry to her final book in 1976, *Personal Geography*.

In *Words from the Frontier, Poetry in Maine*, Kate relates that much of her youth was spent at Chimney Farm in Maine, a farm that “only grew words” (2015, 1). She honors her mother for introducing her to literature: “I've had a great luxury in my life. I was brought up hearing a great deal of poetry thanks to my mother, who read aloud an enormous amount. And read lots of story poems to the children, exciting ones” (2015, 1). Kate grew into her poetic voice through her parents, her education, and like her mother, through travel and wide experience. She published a poem in the *New Yorker* when she was only 18, later wrote three acclaimed collections of poetry, and became the first poet laureate of Maine. Although her work has been shadowed by her parents, it has been praised by well-respected American poets such as John Ashbery, Robert Bly, and Maxine Kumin. Her range of subject matter, from admiring the muscled shape of a black horse between his carriage shafts, to describing a woman leaving an abusive marriage, demonstrates an attentive eye as well as an assertive feminist voice.

Both Coatsworth and Barnes look deeply at their regional landscapes and beyond. Czeslaw Milosz writes that “In old Arabic poetry, love, song, blood, and travel appear as the four basic desires of the human heart . . . thus travel is elevated to the dignity of the elementary needs of humankind” (1996, 73). Travel pushes people from their quotidian routines, and creates disorientation, which may realign one's visionary compass. But travel need not require a passport; travel of the heart may open up sites of resilience and wonder, and thus feed a poet's growth.

The story of mother and daughter – “essential, distorted, misused” wrote Adrienne Rich (1976) – is “the great unwritten story” (Ingman 1999, 1). Since that time, mother-daughter studies have grown from psychology (Gilligan 1982), to neuroscience (Cepelwicz 2016), yet few consider the complexities of historic and generational norms, literary trends and influences, and family dynamics.

This paper describes influences and parallels between Coatsworth and Barnes in their lives and poetry. Both held feminist ideologies, though both sacrificed some of their literary craft in the shadow of male literary partners. While the Coatsworth-Beston household may be described as deeply patriarchal, Barnes' marriage descended into domestic violence, described later in a series of poems. Both women were products of their respective generations, in terms of women's roles and literary trends. Finally, mother-daughter connections concerned both Elizabeth and Kate: both wrote poems about this visceral relationship.

2 Elizabeth Coatsworth: Global Travels and Personal Journeys

Elizabeth Coatsworth was born into a privileged family of grain merchants in Buffalo, NY, in 1893. She was the youngest daughter of two, and her parents, William and Ida, loved to travel. Elizabeth was five when the family went abroad for eight months. Even at this young age she later recalled, “I have definite memories of the spa to which we went in Germany, and of how nasty the waters tasted, and of Switzerland, and of Italy. The most vivid memories are of Vesuvius and then of Egypt, so strange and different that when I went there again twenty five years later, it was as if I had been away only two weeks” (*Personal Geography*, 1976, 5). This early indoctrination to the thrill of travel informed the remainder of her life, and her “vivid memories” fed her writing.

Ten years later, Elizabeth writes of Mexico, “how many sites we explored, even Monte Alban, at that time not yet been excavated except for one trench lined with ugly figures which they now say were of dead captives. It was my first long horseback ride, and I loved seeing the world from the saddle” (1976, 6). Seeing the world from various vantages, traveling on camel, mule, steamship, and train, became her visionary and literary opiate.

When she was 19 years old, her father committed suicide, a death recorded as accidental and which she did not name accurately until she was in her 70s. *Personal Geography* lists this event in “General Chronology” as “Father died, gave up home in Buffalo” (1976, 185). In her later years, Elizabeth admitted her father’s death was not an accident and she suffered a great deal from that shock. Kate writes in a letter, “He told her, before he shot himself, how much he loved her, & that she was his favorite child. . . She grieved forever.”¹

At the time of this tragedy Elizabeth was at Vassar, an exclusive women’s college designed to provide “young women a liberal arts education equal to the best male colleges” of the day, which offered courses in “physical education, geology, astronomy, music, mathematics, and chemistry, taught by leading scholars” (Vassar 2016). Aside from a semester off to grieve her father’s passing, her Vassar years (1911–1915) shaped her intellectual and artistic sensibilities. This period also marked the formation of the Imagist movement in poetry, coined by Ezra Pound and hailed by Amy Lowell. Although much of Coatsworth’s work comes later, in it we see principles such as transparent language, focus on image in the natural world, as well as “poetry that is hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite” (Poetry Foundation 2016).

During her Vassar years, Coatsworth began writing in earnest. Yet the principal trigger for her work was travel. During a summer walking trip in England, she “began to write poetry with real zest” (*Personal Geography*, 1976, 185), a craft that continued into her ninth decade. Upon her graduation, Elizabeth moved to New York City to pursue a Masters at Columbia, then returned to live with her mother and sister in Massachusetts. This sojourn at the family home was brief, as her mother had planned an extended trip: Ida took her two daughters across the Far East and to Hawaii. Elizabeth’s summary of 1916–18 includes “Japan, China, the Philippines, Java, Siam... In Korea to Diamond Mountains, with 24 coolies” (1976, 185).

¹ Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, July 7, 1997. Mattern was a close friend to whom Kate wrote several lengthy letters a week, reflecting on her life and sharing her work, for over a dozen years. This author had access to that material during the summer of 2016. In September of 2016 the archive was closed to protect personal information.

Elizabeth was tall (five foot eleven inches) and adventurous. While Ida would rest in the afternoons on their long trips aboard, the two daughters would seek their own games: “While their mother stayed at a grand hotel in Peking or Shanghai, playing bridge or mah-jong with the other expatriate widows, Elizabeth and Margaret traveled into the hinterlands, hiring sampans, camels or horses, and sometimes venturing where no white woman had ever been seen” (*Friends of Henry Beston*). These impressions find form in her first book of poems, *Fox Footprints* (1923).

Fox Footprints shows a break from the rhyming verse of her generation’s traditional poetry, and attention to new Imagist principles as well as familiarity with Eastern poetry. The opening poem, “Moon Over Japan” (1923, 3), sets the tone for the entire collection:

Moon over Japan
White butterfly moon . . .
The waters wash against sacred islands
Where steps lead to the sea
Where neither death nor birth is permitted,
Where the heavy lidded Buddhas dream
To the sound of the cuckoos’ call.

Repetition and image drive the poem, like a mantra, and well-paced lines rely on rhythm rather than rhyme. Three consecutive “wheres” bring the reader’s eye into the scene, as the speaker describes the landscape with the simplicity of a Japanese sketch. Although “waters wash,” “steps lead,” “Buddhas dream” and “cuckoos’ call,” a stasis hangs, as “neither death nor birth is permitted.” The poem continues:

The whitened mists lie adrift among pine trees
And steal the color from the bright-leaved maples
On the mountains where the deer pasture and the monkeys
sleep among the branches;

Subtle internal rhyme (mists / adrift), and brushes of color help paint this picture of quiet isolation, where deer and monkey roam. Coatsworth’s language is translucent, with soft words making a quiet pulse. Only at the end do humans enter:

And in the villages
The houses are powdered with mother-of-pearl
And the white wings of moon butterflies
Flicker down the streets
Brushing into darkness the useless round lanterns in the
hands of girls.

As in many Japanese poems, the primary object of the poet’s gaze is nature. Even domestic spaces are dusted with mother-of pearl, and butterflies extinguish “useless” lanterns of village girls. We can surmise that Elizabeth was familiar with Japanese poetry,² as other poems in this collection

² Three collections had come out during her Vassar years: Basil Hall Chamberlain, *Japanese Poetry* (London: John Murray, 1911); William N. Porter, *A Year of Japanese Epigrams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911); Yone Noguchi, *The Spirit of Japanese Poetry*, Wisdom of the East Series (London: J. Murray, 1914).

illustrate Eastern forms, as well as her commitment to clear language, organic rhythm, and attention to image.

“At the Bridge-of-Heaven” (1923, 9), although four lines, is reminiscent of haiku:

Slantwise along the shore
The low waves break –
Sharp is the sound
Like a quickly opened fan.

The dash recalls Emily Dickinson’s work, as well as the attention to a slant (“Tell the truth but tell it slant” Dickinson poem, 1263). The distillation of a moment, and the juxtaposition of nature and a human gesture, e.g. the waves breaking and the sound of a woman’s fan opening, show attention to Japanese form and poetic oppositions (Henderson 1958, 6).

In January of 1929, after ten years of correspondence, Elizabeth became engaged to Henry Beston, celebrated author of *The Outermost House*. They married in June. Elizabeth was 36 and Henry forty one. “In 1929 came a break in my life. Travel had been my greatest joy. It continued to have a place, but the focus on my life changed. Marriage was a deeper fulfillment, the birth of a child more exciting than any journey” (1976, 109). What follows is a classic tale of domestication: Once married, the couple had two daughters, Meg and Catherine (known as Kate) in just over two years. When Kate was born, Elizabeth was already 39; she and Henry had just bought Chimney Farm in Maine, which would become their literary and domestic center. She writes, “we carried her [Kate] to Chimney Farm...in a market basket padded and lined with rose-sprigged dimity” (1976, 110). This may be a romanticized view of carrying her new born daughter to their farm. The children brought new demands to their household, and they were for Elizabeth alone to bear. Though she writes of this role as a rewarding one, letters from her daughter Kate later reveal a more complex period of adjustment and consistent sacrifice for her husband’s career.

Their arrangement, Kate recalled,

was tacit and deep, and affected all of us. Interrupting my father was absolutely out of the question. He needed quiet seclusion, and he got it, often by having a separate outbuilding to write in. But my mother’s work, as though it were somehow less important, could be interrupted by any of us; and it was, constantly. (*Friends of Henry Beston* web site)

Early in their marriage, Elizabeth writes, “I say that almost everywhere there is beauty enough to fill a person’s life if one would only be sensitive enough to it” (1976, 110). Henry disagrees with her poetic lens: “Henry says No: that broken beauty is only a torment, that one must have a whole beauty with man living in relation to it.” His belief in unsullied nature, recorded in several naturalist books, is seen here. He goes on to tell Elizabeth that of the recent painting exhibit they visited, the only paintings of power were still-lives, without human intervention. (He neglects to consider the painter who arranged the still lifes, chose the colors, and the texture to bring them to canvas). Elizabeth describes one day as they are driving “past run-down residence districts and the wastes for the city dump over the blue bay; . . . I remember the blowing manes of dump horses on a background of gas tanks and blue water. And something in me cries, this is beautiful too, this is strange and beautiful” (1976, 111). Here we hear echoes of William Carlos Williams, Amy Lowell, and H.D (Hilda Doolittle), all proponents of imagism. But we hear something else: a woman asking for her vision to be validated.

Is it because I am a woman that I accept what crumbs I may have . . . ? But Henry will not compromise; more foolish or wise, he demands a harmony of elements, and to this unwillingness to accept the slurred and scratchy outlines of the usual suburban landscape, I owe the weeks at . . . the farm (1976, 111)

Yet the farm and her daughters fed her poetry. In addition to prolific young adult books which kept bills paid, Elizabeth wrote poems detailing rural rituals of plowing fields and bringing in hay, and of her children. In *Advice to a Daughter* (1942), she writes: “To be clear glass, / to be clean water – / That is beautiful, my daughter” (1942, 51). Later in the collection, *Advice to Daughters* (now plural) appears, “Learn soon to hear the sea / that sounds in the sea-shell, / Learn soon to see the sky / In any puddle’s glass” (1942, 57). These lines double as advice to a poet as well as daughters, to be transparent, to listen to nature, to notice reflections. Her use of assonance, “Learn soon to . . .” and repetition illustrate Coatsworth’s ear as well as her eye.

Her recorded memories of her marriage are more restrained. Henry needs his quiet, and Elizabeth works to accommodate this. Kate writes in a letter³ ten years after her mother’s passing,

Mother had once gone to a psychiatrist in Boston when Meg was two or three, seeking advice about whether to divorce our father ‘because’ said Meg ‘of what his rages were doing to me.’ The psychiatrist told her that a child needs a father, that even a bad father is better than none at all. Oh, our poor mother.

This serves to remind us that Elizabeth was functioning in a deeply patriarchal household and culture, a force her daughter would struggle more openly against.

3 Kate Barnes: Travels and Travails of the Heart

Chimney Farm, in Maine, where Kate was carried in a basket, is a bucolic setting with woodland deer and lakeside loon as neighbors. There began Kate’s education as a poet, living among walls of books and the ebb and flow of nearby tides. Though she would leave Maine for boarding school, trips abroad, college and married life in California, she returned to nurse her mother through her final decade.

Daughters Meg and Kate were late arrivals in Elizabeth and Henry’s lives. Henry was turned to the rhythms of his hard-won sentences, not domestic interruptions of fussy babies and demanding toddlers. He would take to his study while Elizabeth would tend the children and write at the kitchen, her sentences flowing easily while his were resistant. Kate describes these contrasting writing habits and rhythms in “At Home” (*Where the Deer Were*, 1994, 26):

My mother, that feast of light, has always sat down,
composed herself, and written poetry, hardly
reworking any, just the way she used to
tell us that Chinese painters painted; first they
sat for days on the hillside watching the rabbits,
and then they went home, they set out ink and paper,
meditated and only then picked up their brushes
to catch the lift of a rabbit in mid-hop.

³ Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, July 23, 1996.

Henry would labor for hours, words coming slowly, if at all:

The hand moved slowly back and forth
and the floor below was white with sheets of paper
each carrying a rejected phrase or two
as he struggled all morning to finish one sentence.

The yin and yang of their writing styles was also the balance of their marriage; the household was tense for the girls, who were swept off to summer camps and boarding schools. Yet at home, Elizabeth's peaceful presence created a stillness that Kate admired: "She was so intelligent, so very kind, and more fun to be with than anyone else in the world. She was always so very alive, so vital" (*Friends of Henry Beston* web site).

Elizabeth passed down the lessons of her Far Eastern travels to her daughters; the zen of trusting observation to inform lines and verse, to create an image. She read to the girls regularly; this auditory education informed Kate's ear and poetry, which is rich in "transforming speech out of resonant quiet" (Creeley, endorsement of *Where the Deer Were*). Elizabeth modeled writing and reading to her children, yet she was modest about her own achievements. In an interview about her literary lineage, Kate recalls, "You know, my mother never, never blew her own horn. But she did tell me once that in 1929 she had more poems published than any other serious American poet... She wrote so much, and so well; the quality was always there" (*Friends of Henry Beston*).

After marriage, Elizabeth switched from poetry to writing more lucrative children's books, occasional essays, and middlebrow novels. Whatever she was writing, she showed her daughters how to incorporate writing into everyday life among the domestic rhythms. In an interview for *The Writers' Almanac* (2015), Barnes reports:

I did have two necessary heart's affections in place, a love of poetry itself and a love of language. I also had, from watching my poet mother, some sense of the way people write what wells up in them and then work hard to bring it to completion. I understood that poems never just flow (or hardly ever), and if one does come that way it's a gift, a recompense for the concentrated work we've already done.

Kate would go off to high school Emma Willard in Troy, NY, a selective girls' boarding school, where she made lifelong friends and nurtured her love of writing, drawing, and all things horses. She had started there a year early, and also skipped her junior year: "Both these things were my mother's idea," she shares in a letter.⁴ She had been given an IQ test, and came out in the first 1%; thus she was deemed fit to begin college.

High school was not particularly challenging, and Kate was not a stellar student. In this she disappointed her mother, or so she believed: She writes, "I suppose the difficulty in school was about her expectation that I would be more like her – the head girl, who loved school and her work, was the best student. I was more like my father in school, all too quick with terrible work habits."⁵ Later in the same letter, she shares that her mother had warned her: "You must guard against the part of you that is your father." Being warned against adopting habits from Henry was harsh, as Kate aligned herself with her mother; she admired her tranquility in her writing habits and in her life. Henry's mercurial nature and labored writing habits made a tense

⁴ Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, July 7, 1997.

⁵ Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, July 7, 1997.

household: The letter goes on to say, “Home life was certainly difficult... her instincts might well be to get her children out of that atmosphere.”

Kate chose to move far from Maine – to California, to attend Scripps Women’s College. Founded by newspaper entrepreneur and philanthropist Ellen Browning Scripps in 1926, this college was designed to combine art and intellectual engagement (Scripps Women’s College 2016). It’s a long way from Elizabeth’s alma mater, Vassar, but both colleges were, at that time, exclusive to women and highly selective.

In California, Kate’s parents sent her \$30.00 a month for incidentals, a fair figure for the times, yet she used this money to rent a horse and spent her free time cantering through the countryside. “It was a drunkenness of such joy as I had never known ... I just ate that landscape up. I couldn’t get enough” (Payne 2016, 277). It was there that Kate met Dick Barnes, himself a horse man and an aspiring poet. He was also a scholar of Renaissance poetry, a musician, student of theology, and she fell for him – hard. They had a quick courtship and subsequent marriage, arranged with efficiency after Kate’s graduation in 1953: She was only twenty one.

Before Kate’s marriage, Elizabeth decided she and Kate should go off “for a small European fling before she settled down to be a housewife” (Coatsworth 1976, 134). In Scandinavia, Elizabeth and Kate found themselves wandering among the tombs of the Danes. They stopped at one barrow, and “we lay flat, gazing up at the sky. Two skylarks were singing against the blue, straight overhead, above our magic carpet. I remember it all,” writes Elizabeth, “because I was so happy – happy without an especial reason, perhaps the best kind of happiness” (1976, 135). Perhaps Elizabeth knew that once married and settled down as a “housewife,” the mother-daughter relationship would change; there would be less freedom for such adventure apart from the spouses and children who were likely to follow.

After their marriage, Kate and Dick Barnes settled in California where he began a job teaching medieval and renaissance literature at Paloma College. In photos from this time, we see the Bohemian couple, Kate often with flowers in her hair and astride some horse. She had created the life she dreamed of as a child, riding across the mountains and through rivers. Soon she was pregnant with her first child, and regularly thereafter, having three children in four years and a brief hiatus before her fourth.

In a prose poem, “Early Summer,” a draft of which is in a letter.⁶ she describes these times:

When I was a young mother, far from here, I sometimes rode my horse alone in the mountains all day, leaving my children with the cleaning woman. I passed those hours in a kind of solitary ecstasy ... but the landscape was only a box to hold my real happiness, the inner joy I wasn’t even thinking about, the loves I took so for granted – the house I had left, the lively nest, the wide bed, the married name, the shadowy matrix, the door standing open behind me.

The uneasy management of her role as wife and mother, with her independent spirit is shown here; the “solitary ecstasy” at odds with motherhood. The “shadowy matrix” suggests something else, a net or web which inhibits her freedom. The speaker here does not subordinate her needs to her husband and children; she abandons the “ideal mother myth” (Phillips 1991, 190) to explore her own happiness.

⁶ Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, May 22, 1997.

If imagism was the shift in poetry that marked Elizabeth's generation, Kate was awash in confessional poetry and work coming from the Women's Movement sweeping through the United States. Kate cites Adrienne Rich in her letters of this time, quoting lines from *Snapshots from a Daughter-in-Law*: "glitter in fragments and rough drafts."⁷ Experiences particular to women, often omitted or distorted in the literary canon, began to find a place (if only a niche), and Kate Barnes was poised to position herself there. Her letters quote from other American poets such as Sharon Olds, Maxine Kumin, and Susan Griffin, all writing of gendered roles, struggles of mothering, marriage, and myths of womanhood. Like Rich, who explored the distance between her reality as a mother and the myths fostered by medical and social institutions, until this time Kate had found her experiences unrepresented in the literature.

Her marriage to Dick was turbulent and increasingly violent. While she was living a dream of riding into the mountains for long afternoons, eventually she would need to return home and face the husband and children she left behind. It was challenging for her to keep up the pretense of being a happy housewife to her mother. After a winter Elizabeth spent with the family in California, Kate worried:⁸

I knew it wouldn't mix, the way she thought of me – the professor's wife – and the way I really was, a confused messy person in a difficult marriage ... if my mother came, I would have to pretend to, try to give the appearance ... I suffered because I didn't feel good enough for her. Most of the time I wasn't even conscious of that feeling. It was after the divorce that it became conscious.

The marriage and children that Kate had created with Dick replicated a paradigm chosen late by Elizabeth (and the majority of women in their social milieu), asserting the primacy of domesticity and family. Writing and creative self-expression was secondary, and only as it fit around needs of the husband, house, and children. Kate already resisted the ideal mother myth; she also resisted the "ideal daughter myth" (Phillips 1991, 191). She struggled with her weight, she was messy, her marriage was shattering; she dressed in long, flowing tunics, whereas the ideal daughter is "slim, beautiful, heterosexual, successful, well-dressed" (1991, 191). The schism between an unattainable ideal and her harsh reality was hidden for many years, and only expressed later in poems and letters, following her mother's death.

After her divorce from Dick in the early 1970s, Kate avoided communication with her mother. Over a decade later she writes about this relative silence: "One reason I got so bad in those last years was that I had always felt acceptable in my role as a professor's wife. I did not feel acceptable to my mother as a divorcée."⁹ Yet she returned to Maine in 1977 to help care for her mother, who had been diagnosed with leukemia ten years before, but had been managing her illness drinking violet leaf tea (an alleged natural treatment for cancer). She achieved a remission that lasted until her death at the age of 93. During Elizabeth's last nine years, Kate spent time with her aging mother, and found peace in whatever distance the years had cleft. This proximal availability, at a point in both women's lives when they were unencumbered with wifely duties, may have returned that state of happiness they shared on their trip to Europe before Kate's marriage, enjoying picnics and each other's company. Barnes writes:

⁷ Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, April 17, 1996.

⁸ Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, July 7, 1997.

⁹ Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, July 7, 1997.

I am so grateful for those last nine years. In old age we often see – and appreciate, love and the naked spirit. But during those years the part in me that winced and defended itself from her (silently) was still there. Now I'm like someone knocking down an old wall that sometimes comes apart stone by stone – and other times in an exciting avalanche of rubble.¹⁰

Yet it may have been the liberation of her mother's passing that fueled her literary output. Margo Perin, editor of *How I Learned to Cook* (2004), writes how she herself struggled to find women writers who would agree to have their work included in her collection: many "said they couldn't tell their stories until their mothers were dead" (2004, 2). Fear of disappointing her mother, or perhaps living in the shadow of her mother's enormous light, Kate wrote very little from the time she was married, until after her mother's death in 1986. Nevertheless, she writes that Elizabeth's "dearest wish was that I should be a writer as she was – but I didn't, couldn't, get a book out while she was alive. That's so sad."¹¹

In the mid-1990s, Kate began work on a series that delves into her marriage matrix. Twelve linked poems, titled "The Rhetoric of Fiction" (in *New England Review*, 1994, and *Kneeling Orion*, 2004) describe a tumultuous relationship which follows a narrative arc beginning with courtship and ending with separation. A third person speaker shapes the narrative, with limited perspective from the woman's point of view.

In the first poem, "The Lion," (Barnes 2004, 107) "a man and woman / were walking under the oak trees." The woman is swept into his spell and thinks "that an angel visiting earth would talk / exactly like him." The infatuation foreshadows her subsequent devotion. "Then he bought a bottle / of sweet, cheap muscatel / ... and they sat down to drink it / in the fresh grass by the stream." (The alcohol also forecasts a frequent unwelcome guest in their relationship.) Later, after they get up to leave, "An owl, further up the canyon, / shrieked among the leaves," / and the blood on the grass told its own story."

Blood will leave a stain in later poems, as the marriage devolves. But first there is neglect: The fourth poem, "Early Sunlight," (2004, 111) opens: "Married so few years, she begged him to stay home at night / a least sometimes – maybe three times a week?" The woman pleads, while the man goes out to Mexican bars that she tries to imagine: "the gritty wind at the street corners / the old snapshot of copulating donkeys stuck to the mirror, / the barmaids."

Meanwhile, the woman sits at the piano with her oldest child on her lap, "the next / hanging onto the bench, / the third poised / inside her, head down, ready to dive / into this world." Soon the next baby is born and the woman nurses him by the window, watching crows and cottonwoods:

The baby makes
his tiny whimpers of pleasure. She looks over
at her husband lying asleep across the bed.
No fear of waking him – he's just come in.
He is restless lately, and he seldom
gets home before dawn.

¹⁰ Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, July 23, 1997

¹¹ Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, July 17, 1997

The language is translucent, nothing extraneous, nor cloudy imagery. The reader can see the domestic scene, but something is not right. The mother breast-feeds her infant while her husband is passed out in the morning light. Later, “In the eaves of the house, the little children stand up / in their cribs in the next room, the horses walk / across the slope throwing long shadows.”

The contrast between light and dark, between starting the day and ending the night, between innocence and tired knowledge, builds. The infant’s content whimper and his father’s drunken sleep are vectors connected by the nursing mother. By the seventh poem in the series, “The Rat in the Wall” (2004, 116), the quiet woman can no longer pretend life:

When she was thirty, X felt as though she had died.
 For the place she came from there were many words
 such as *blowing curtains, ash trees, weathervanes, stars.*
 For the place she went into there are no words.
 The people cannot speak, they shriek or mew.

Three of these five lines end with periods, giving a sense of exhaustion. The juxtaposition between descriptive language (i.e., the poet’s task) and its substitute: a shriek or mew, both reactions to fear, offer another contrast in the series, further separating the man and the woman who opened the tale lying down by the river. In the second stanza “She can’t help trying to talk,” although her voice is ignored. Others hear “only the faint squeaking of a rat in the wall.” She is an annoyance.

How will this story end? Badly. The next poem, “The Glass Breast” (2004, 117), shows the woman with a grocery list, while the man

is driving off to teach with a brandy bottle
 in a paper bag for breakfast. His tenure
 has been postponed for a year. (Too much swearing
 in class.) He is not happy. He breaks
 furniture now and then, he puts his fist
 through a wall, it does not seem as though
 he enjoys his home life much.

The escalation of violence is not surprising to the reader, yet the woman has come to expect it; she may not have noticed the temperature rising to a boiling point. The parenthetical aside, like a whisper to the reader, shows us his outbursts have leaked into his work. With his teaching career in jeopardy, instead of saving his job, he decides to change it:

He tells his wife
 he thinks he’ll get a job
 operating heavy equipment. Fuck teaching. He almost never
 gets home before three in the morning.

At which hour,
 his wife is astonished to find herself
 pretending to be asleep.

The turning point for the woman is feigned sleep; she has learned her passive defense in pre-dawn hours. Meanwhile “she goes on planting / thyme and lavender in the sandy soil / at the edge of her rock garden” maintaining a creative impulse against all odds.

By the tenth poem in the series, “In the Corner” (2004, 120, 121), blood is again a result of their interaction, but this time:

They are off in the corner
of the bedroom floor, red tiles
ten inches square, and he is banging
her head on them.

She has gone
limp, she has learned better
than to struggle –
but she lets
her sobs escape, trying instinctively
to rouse his pity.

The man has no pity to rouse. As in many abusive relationships, the roots are deep and wide, the object of abuse often a substitute for another rage. The use of white space here, the breath between the words, adds drama to the scene,

As he hits her,
he yells in her face, over and over, be more
submissive, dammit, be more
submissive,
and she
can say nothing. She thinks,
but I am utterly
submissive.

It's not
true. She has never given up
a stubbornness, an unthinking assumption
that she exists, something she doesn't even
know she has – although he
seems to have noticed it.

Although the violence has peaked with physical blows, the woman's spark flames. She won't allow him to obliterate her spirit; her autonomy lives in a quiet place, where it is safe. Her language has returned. This poem moves the monosyllabic or two-syllable words of earlier poems in the series, to deliberate diction: “stubbornness” and “unthinking assumption.” The scene ends with him passed out, her crawling slowly to bed:

her eyes wide open,
staring at nothing, her thoughts

veering in all directions –
 like the last gusts in a storm,
 full of torn off twigs and leaves.

The series' narrative climax drops and resolution is swift. The eleventh poem, "Inside the Engraving" (2004, 122), is only twelve lines, and shows the woman driving a cart across a ridge above a lake, with light-streaked clouds. This is her new landscape, where she is safe, in a hymn, "for ever and ever, amen." The description mirrors Barnes' farm in Maine, where she moved after leaving her marriage in California. Here, she is both inside the engraving, and looking at it.

The final poem, "The Dining Car" (2004, 123, 124), moves into the future: "The curtains close jerkily, this particular play is over / . . . the illusion / of a green heaven, all the painted landscapes, the clouds in tatters / trailing off down a river valley – we will have no more of it!" (2004, 123). Tying back to the title of the series, "The Rhetoric of Fiction," Barnes now refers to the whole love affair like a play which has just concluded the final act. The "illusions" of the woman have now been recognized, and there is not even a tiny applause. But it's not really over; we still have the act of the imagination, which never takes a final bow:

... they might meet again, even just once (perhaps
 in the dining room of a train
 crossing the Rockies), and they,
 two gray-haired people, might sit at a clean, white tablecloth
 a last time across from one another.

The romantic notion of meeting on a train, away from a domestic anchor, is suitable for this tumultuous couple. The public arena of the dining car would likely shield her from hostile behavior. Their gray hair signals age, perhaps wisdom, and certainly time which allegedly heals all wounds, and suggests a potentially peaceful reunion.

At first, they are astonished
 to run into one another like this.
 He orders coffee, she tea. They begin speaking
 of old friends, then they talk a little
 about their grown children, avoiding everything painful
 in their lives. "Let's not start blaming
 anyone," she tells herself, let's listen
 charitably.

The cordial nature of the imagined interaction shows the careful negotiation of topics and words. Keeping the conversation neutral, avoiding "painful" memories, acting "charitably," shows amicability in the dining car sanctuary. But she cannot drop her true nature:

She would still love
 just to mention the warm stars like white match flares
 over the Sonora desert, each one clearly
 a universe in itself (2004, 123)

Swiftly the speaker returns to the starry-eyed romantic girl, who believed the man was an angel sent from God: “But never mind that, never mind / the hunger she has carried for years / for some kind of blessing from him, a last word / that’s a kind word.” She wants to revise their final scene, rewrite the ending, replace fury with kindness. She imagines him pouring a big splash of brandy into his coffee (she has not completely lost sense of his reality), his admittance, “those were good days / I never forgot them” but it’s all a fantasy:

Could that be true?
Or course not! Has he ever forgiven anyone
who turned him down? He is really
more bitter than ever. He’d like to make a last gesture,
all right, he’d like to belt her one –

The woman remembers the abuse of their relationship. Lively punctuation informs the tone here: two questions bookend an exclamation. The only gesture he’ll grant her is a blow. Yet, her desire for beauty will not be eclipsed by violence; after all, *she* left *him*, and their imagined reunion ends with her vision (2004, 124):

Meanwhile,
all around them, the stars continue their unbroken dancing
still, as if nothing had ever changed, could ever
change. Much farther than the farthest reaches
of any imagination, they trace their intricate patterns
in a balance that is always shifting,
and always perfect.

This is the true poetic vision of much of Barnes’ work, finding beauty in unexpected places, by looking deeply at patterns in the natural world which trump human imperfections. She is able to share her life experiences via her poetic craft, and make art from both joy and despair.

4 Coatsworth – Barnes: Topography

All mother-daughter relationships have generational distance, and a “relationship of the two generations cannot, and need not, be steadily harmonious” (Neisser 1967, 308). The generational hallmarks for Elizabeth and Kate signify remarkable changes in women’s roles. Elizabeth’s childhood and grooming in the 1920s and 1930s, the interwar period, positioned her to be a grateful wife and dedicated mother. Though women had just gained the right to vote (1920) and the women’s movement was active, Elizabeth accepted Henry’s reign in the household and carried on calmly. Kate came of age in the 1950s, and in the 1960s she was swept into the fever of her generation for change. Feminist gains in the U.S. brought birth control, women’s groups, and questioning of status-quo patriarchy. By the 1970s, divorce rates were soaring and the stigma of single parenting was dissipating. These new cultural norms allowed Kate to leave her marriage and carve out an independent life.

As far as writing goes, both Elizabeth and Kate were poets of their times. Much of Elizabeth’s work is emotionally restrained and rarely questions allegiance to her patriarchal household; Kate’s work is deeply personal and evidence of how one can transform emotional pain to poetic

art. The rise of confessional poetry and the second wave of the women's movement may have been a necessary shift to give Kate's work a place in our literary legacy.

A few ironies punctuate the comparison and contrast. Elizabeth kept her maiden name of Coatsworth for her writing career, thus preserving her literary autonomy. Kate used her married name for the rest of her life, without even a hyphen, though her ex-husband remarried and their relationship was, in all facets, severed. A surname is part of a writer's legacy. Elizabeth kept her Coatsworth namesake; Kate kept her married name, Barnes.

Both women were second-born daughters who grew up to choose difficult husbands, but while Elizabeth rarely complained, Kate chose to exit. Ironically, both women spent their last decades living with cancer, and prolonging their lives with alternative medicine: violet tea for Elizabeth; massive doses of vitamins and Chinese herbs for Kate. Both women left ashes behind. Elizabeth's burial place is marked by a small stone fox, near Henry's massive stone. Kate's place nearby is yet to be memorialized. All remains rest at Chimney Farm, Maine, where Kate was first brought as an infant in a padded basket.

5 Conclusions

Mother-daughter relationships are often fraught with emotional tides of emancipation and connection. Add to this, the complexity of literary lineage, artistic temperaments, two drastically different generational codes of behavior, and we have a sense of the tangled threads that inform the writings of Elizabeth Coatsworth and Kate Barnes.

One could argue that both women created their own literary paths, and were subversive in their own way. Elizabeth kept her maiden name as a writer, and thus didn't concede entirely to Beston's reign. Moreover, she lived a full life of travel and literary success before choosing to marry at age 36, and have children. For a woman of her generation this was unusual; we might conclude that she was ready for a partnered, domestic life, after nearly twenty years moving about with her mother and sister. Kate was more traditional in the sense that she married young and had children early; she also put her writing aside for decades. Kate's eventual route to her own voice, after her divorce and literary parents were both gone, shows the distance she traveled from being a love-dazzled newlywed to a woman poet alone. She is as much a product of her generation as her mother was.

The bond between the two women continues after their corporal lives. The ripples of Elizabeth's presence continued to guide Kate in her later years. In a letter¹² she shares: "I feel how my love for my mother underlies my whole life, my feelings about the world. I know she loved me – us – and that she would always keep her promise." In one of the last poems of Coatsworth's life, she writes (1976, 173):

Oh the ties that bind mother
and daughters together!
And the knots in the ties! . . .
The ties are there. It is their
nature to knot,

¹² Barnes, K. Letter to Eleanor Mattern, July 24, 1997

our nature to struggle with them.
And often our fingers touch.

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