



7-15-1990

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Recommended Citation

Maxson, Helen (1990) "The Newcomer," *Westview*: Vol. 9 : Iss. 4 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol9/iss4/11>

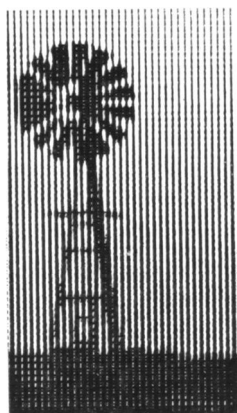
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The Newcomer

By Dr. Helen Maxson

Last summer, I moved to Weatherford after forty years in the Northeast.



I spent the fall fascinated by the landscape of my new home and trying to understand why. I still don't

have my finger on it, but I have collected a number of impressions that the land has conjured up for me. In this region where I spend so much time seeing what is at a distance, impressions may be as close as I can get to understanding my position in all this space.

Impressions, of course, are shaped as much by the person who has them as by the thing perceived. It may be that my acquaintance with the Oklahoma landscape reflects my moving here at the age of forty, with a strong sense of having completed half my life. Dividing it into just two parts makes an expanse of my life similar to the expanse of land I have moved into. Is that aspect of Oklahoma so powerful

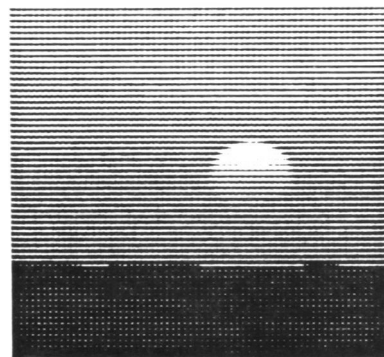
for me because it reminds me of my own experiences? How much do I create my Oklahoma in the image of my own life?

The sense of liberation I find in this land may be related to the liberation I feel at starting a new life. On one hand, I have left behind a great deal that I have loved in the culture, landscape, career, and friends I knew in the Northeast. And I find desolation in the Oklahoma landscape, particularly on a gray day when the endless sky is heavy with low clouds, and seems, especially in the country, to flatten any sign of human sympathy or comfort. On the other hand, a new life at forty is full of opportunity and promise. And there's something about the land down here that is inviting to me. It is easy to move through, on foot, on bicycle, or in a car. Don't you feel tiny down there, my Northern friends ask on the phone. The answer is no. The vertical structures in the land are dwarfed by breadth, so they do not dwarf me the way a Michigan city or a Vermont forest does. Having added to my sense of stature, the Oklahoma landscape invites me to move through it, discovering.

Much of the time, moving through it feels to me like moving over it, looking down. Sitting on a rise

surrounded by miles of wheat fields, I get an impression of the whole earth as it lies under its surface features. I have even wondered if I could discern a curve toward the horizon. It's an absurd notion, given the size of the planet, but I can easily multiply what I see from a given vantage point until it suggests an entire state's worth of space. If I visualize the land going on, much as I see it before me, for hundreds of miles in all directions, the earth takes shape as a huge ball under my eyes. I am seeing the whole—the overview. It is like summarizing about my life: I have lived forty years, I will live forty more, and that will be the whole of it.

The sense of overview I find in the Oklahoma landscape takes other forms as well. When my son and I drive south from Roman Nose State Park at dusk, the headlights on the interstate in the distance etch an east-west horizontal across the rolling land.

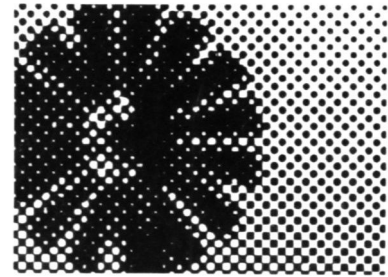


It is so easy to follow their line of travel that we seem to be looking down on them, as from a plane. The effect is repeated driving north at night from Corn, where I spent Christmas Eve with the family of a friend. On the way back to Weatherford, her daughter pointed out how many towns were displaying their lights to us. At that moment, at different points within our 360 degrees, Corn, Colony, Bessie, Clinton, and Weatherford signalled their presence, either in a paling of the horizon or in a nearby cluster of pearls that deepened the darkness. When my guide explained where we would have to be to add Cordell or Hydro to our collection, I felt, again, as if I were in a plane, glimpsing the whole of the earth.

In such terrain, it seems easy, day or night, to step

outside of the tangle of my life, gaining a philosophical purchase on things. Crises seem inconsequential. Worries seem temporary. I know this buoyancy is part of a mental, not a physical, landscape; life in Oklahoma is as entangling and difficult as it is anywhere. But I have a feeling that driving into the countryside around Weatherford will always give me the relief of an overall perspective, even when I am no longer a newcomer at the tidy midpoint of her life; but am involved in the complications of long-term connections and responsibilities.

In getting to know Oklahoma, it is perspective that I am left with, no matter how substantial the land seems. In this state, where the same vantage point can offer sprouting blades of wheat at your feet and suggest the curve of the earth at the horizon, I have



become especially aware that where I stand determines what I see. I suppose my current feelings about my life are common features of a mindscape at forty. I suspect, despite my complaints to the contrary, that I rather like being half-finished with my life; living well takes effort. Still, I enjoy the satisfaction of having tried it. A sense of fatigue, a sense of having made it halfway: for me, the second must involve the first. Looking ahead, I feel an excitement about the competence, pleasures, and fulfillment I hope maturity will bring. And that it would be almost as nice to take a nap as to start teaching next semester. Perspectives, these feelings, on the past and the future from where I stand now. But are they any less real for being functions of my age? No less than sprouts of wheat or the shape of the earth. I look forward to the promptings of this land in the life I will live here, and to the changes that that life will bring to the way I see the land. *

(DR. HELEN MAXSON, after growing up in New England, lived ten years in central New York State and two in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In August of 1989, she moved to Weatherford, where she teaches at SOSU and learns about life from her third-grade son.)



Photography by Katherine Dickey/ Photo research by Greg Fell