



10-15-1985

An Act of Translation / Primitive Customs

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Recommended Citation

Glancy, Diane and Carpenter, Yvonne (1985) "An Act of Translation / Primitive Customs," *Westview*. Vol. 5: Iss. 1, Article 20.

Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/westview/vol5/iss1/20>

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An Act Of Translation

By Diane Glancy

*What can I give you? I have nothing
to give. You enter my hands;
words are born. I send them to you,
but my handwriting is like the flight
of a small flock of birds.
High on muted Western Oklahoma plains, north
to gyp hills,
grasses wave like feathers or stand
silent as haystubbles after field-
flight.
A chickenhawk rises in the hush. I have
nothing but the inarticulate grasp of it.
What can I give?
Words are what you have been to me:
a circling flock of geese
above the cornfield. But they change
when I give them back to you.
A white dog rides in the back of a truck,
the tail-gate down; he holds himself
stiffly.
How can I give my words to you?
He gave them first to me; your meaning
stirs within. What can I give?
A child not of bone nor ear
but one of words and duration. A vision
of white-tailed geese
in the winter haze between us.
I see your world as whole and
give it back to you in different form as
an act of translation.
Decipher the stubble of my words.
Bring flight up unfamiliar steps.
Pull roots of our being
as though the moon twirled in the sky
like a slow dancer or a white Brittany
dog.*

*My words follow as you hunt in fields.
Cover my pain with your love,
flush quarry from the dogwood bush,
rise to flint hills.
Old council ground for Indians wreathed with fiery
vowels burned of their consonants.
Blackened fields: my words are the
remains of cornrows.
I walk on wounded leg, interpret the under-
growth of fences.
The lines of words I give you
wobble like tread-marks of tires in mud.
Fields smell of black powder
with the recoil of rifle.
White dog in the cratered field looks
back to moon with distant,
similar face.
Somewhere in the void I scrape hollow hills
with the gnawing heat of motion,
hold you on the hunting knife with quarry.
I relate to the space between us,
reach to you with separation scraped clean.
What can I give you? I have
nothing but words.
They dance steady and distilled as the hawk
that circles above the road.*

Primitive Customs

By Yvonne Carpenter

*Sahara's Wodaabe women measure their wealth
by the number of ceremonial clay pots
carried through the desert for display once a year.
How foolish! Everyone knows wealth is measured
by the number of circles of yellow metal
which encompass the appendages of your body.*