

LINDSEY DRAGER

## The Shape of Our Lacks: Migration as Method in the Work of Bobbie Louise Hawkins

*Selected Prose of Bobbie Louise Hawkins*, edited by Barbara Henning.  
Buffalo, New York: BlazeVOX Books, 2012.

If we consider an author's oeuvre as a geographic space, a collection of selected works can be read like a map. Recognizing it necessarily reduces; such a collection is only capable of charting the themes and threads that constitute a writer's work. Yet *Selected Prose of Bobbie Louise Hawkins* feels complete, leaving readers paradoxically satisfied and yearning for more, a welcome conundrum in the world of the book.

This collection serves as both an archive of Hawkins's work and a chronicle of her writing life. It contains excerpts from her 1977 novel *Back to Texas*, a series of short works from her 1977 collection *Frenchy and Cuban Pete*, a number of "New Stories," and the entirety of her 1992 novella—printed for the first time in the U.S.—*The Sanguine Breast of Margaret*. Included as back matter are portions of an interview between the author and the collection's editor, Barbara Henning, as well as an assemblage of eighteen black-and-white photographs featuring the author in all stages of her life, from childhood and her travels abroad as a young artist and mother, through her budding career as a writer and performer, posed with such literary pioneers as Michael McClure, Diane Wakowski, Peter Orlovsky, Allen Ginsberg, and her former husband, Robert Creeley.

The logic of the panoramic narrative, as well as the pieces contained within, concern map-seeking and map-following—the stories are set primarily in vehicles and track the movement of bodies across geographic space, drawing correlations between physical cartography and the travel the mind does in the act of memory. The collection is bookended with the two long-form works—it begins with a rich collection of excerpts from *Back to Texas* and ends with the novella. Both

longer pieces are in fact travel narratives themselves, where road trip propels the plot—in *Back to Texas*, the central character and her mother return to their native county, relaying stories from the narrator's youth as they traverse, while *The Sanguine Breast of Margaret* charts a cross-country trip a growing family must endure after the Harvard-graduate father takes a job tutoring the children of a wealthy Mexican family. Throughout her selected works, Hawkins's characters never stay put; they live nomadically, in a constant state of journeying even if they are doing so in circles. Such voyaging suggests home is a welcome stasis, an unchanging portrait of order in the tumult of travel and change.

However, home-seeking, Hawkins argues, does not always end in home-finding, and the result is a life itinerant, where readers bear witness to the exhausted travel that consumes these characters. In *The Sanguine Breast*, maps offer a guide, but are followed cautiously, forever suspect. They are always a tool and never the territory itself, "When there was no one to ask every road they passed might be the one they should have taken. However real their maps were, however much the colored paper implied there was a place where in time they would arrive, Tapalapa was still a miracle when it appeared." The resistance to trust the edifice of the map also speaks to the power of the temporal; with time the terrain changes, such that our thin paper maps become archives of a past-tense space.

The characterization of ruin and monument permeate this collection, always through the concise and lucid prose and the deceptively simple emblems Hawkins employs: the female body as vessel for wound; the book as mechanism for escape; vernacular as indicator of a marked past; pregnancy, birth, and children as vestige for ancestral haunting. In exploring this dark topography, Hawkins adopts a perspective distant enough to render events objectively, therein providing us with a list of the symptoms of ugliness, and requesting readers do the dirty work of diagnosing. In an excerpt from *Back to Texas*, the young narrator recalls one of two times her grandmother whipped her: "I was alone in the house and locked grandmama out. She circled the outside of the house as I circled the inside to be standing there solemnly looking out at every door and window as she came to it." The scene's potency lies not in the silence of the treason, nor in the knowledge of the punishment to come. Rather, it is the emergence of an interior from which the powerless youth claims authority, a scene which can be read as posing the question that drives the entirety of these stories: who is outside, who is inside, and what forces are governing this boundary?

The travel that happens geographically and temporally happens

on the social ladder, as well. At one point in *The Sanguine Breast*, the vehicle in which Margaret and her children are sleeping is broken into. In a moving scene after she discovers the crime, Margaret recognizes that geographic travel prompts class travel, as well: "There might be an equation for it. Direction plus enough distance equals driving from poor to rich. They had driven far enough south to be wealthy and attractive to thieves." This mobility, while seemingly offering opportunity for escape, instead further restricts and confines Hawkins's characters, as status and place become markers always aligning them with an outside.

Significantly, the politics of migration are always rooted in the "us"/"them" dichotomy, where travel like touring and commuting are modes of movement founded on access and permission and are privileged with certain return. Conversely, the impetus for migration is founded on a linear trajectory driven by the act of seeking an elsewhere. It is in this way that migration is inherently narrative, as embarking and arriving, understood broadly, characterize the narrative event. The well-known adage in narrative theory that all stories derive from two plot structures can be summarized in the dichotomy of departure and return: a hero leaves home or a stranger comes to town. In short, all fiction can qualify as travel literature, as movement is a necessary element in the enactment of tension and resolve.

"Nothing in my life ever happened that was as important to me as learning to read," the narrator of *Back to Texas* notes on the first page of the collection. That Henning chose to initiate Hawkins's selected works with this claim hints at the intimate relationship between movement and the narrative event that hovers in Hawkins's prose and is further explicated in her interview. Hawkins reminds us that the past, too, is a space to be traveled, and when it is we call it memory. It is in this terrain where fact and fiction do not have blurry boundaries but are transposed. It takes looking hard enough through one to find the other, while recognizing the possibility of failure; the explication crafts the story and the narrative frames the report. Her work speaks to the arbitrary task of dictating genre by truth factor and endorses a bridging of fact and fiction, of myth and history.

The "New Stories" most clearly collapse this distinction, and Hawkins has adopted this method of transposition in her forthcoming work *Gossip*. The idea is to harness and transcribe the stories that were generated by the intersection of others' lives and her own in a way that pays homage to the tale without branding it fiction. It is clear that story possession and the sanctity of authorship are concepts of concern for Hawkins, ideas that could be a product of her own strug-

gles with balancing her identity as a writer and her identity as the partner of Robert Creeley. At one point in the interview, she describes the challenges she faced:

When Bob and I were first together, he had three things he would say. One of them was, "I'll never live in a house with a woman who writes." One of them was, "Everybody's wife wants to be a writer." And one of them was, "If you had been going to be a writer, you would have been one by now." [...] That pretty much put the cap on it. I was too married, too old, and too late, but he was wrong. Anne Waldman asked him once, "Why are you so against Bobbie writing?" He said there was only room for one writer in a house. After we were no longer together, someone in New York asked me why I insisted on continuing to write when I knew it upset Bob so much. I remember being at a reading Bob was giving and he started reading a story about the Sufis crossing the desert and being eaten by Ogres. It was a story I had read earlier and elucidated on out of a Sufi book. The woman I was sitting with turned to me and said, "That's your story." And I said, "Not now."

Hawkins goes on to explain that while she lived with Creeley, she was enmeshed in the "business of writing secretly," in which she extracted her typewriter from its hiding place in a closet and wrote in brief surges when she knew he was far enough away from their home to deem writing safe. The anecdotes provided in the interview only begin to illustrate the history of the work offered in the book proper; for the rest of the history, one must read the stories themselves, not as fiction but as memoir.

"Almost all my writing is autobiography because it is almost all the outcome of conjecture," Hawkins notes. We are only custodians of the past, she seems to say; we may think it can be owned, but memory, like land, cannot be controlled. Both may be ours to claim and tend, but we are incapable of preserving without perverting. It is in this way that any translation of the flesh fails—the conventions of the narrative event require a battle between the mediator and the mediated, where the guise of the narrator is never mapped exactly over the I. Hawkins's prose reminds us of this necessary tension, and illustrates it poignantly throughout these selected texts. In one of the most potent examples, we are offered a description of a beach that has gone missing. The shift in terrain happens overnight. What is rich here is not the sudden absence of the beach but how it lives on

and out in a space utterly elsewhere; the question is not where has it gone, but rather, "Who is using my beach now?" Possession—whether of land, memory, or tale—is a dark hoax; nothing is ours alone.

"I could spend the rest of my life saving my past from its future," Hawkins says, and in saying makes transparent the misty, mystic business of the narrative act. To reduce her characters to victims in need of saving would be a mistake; their plot arcs are rooted in a brand of seeking that sanctions possibility. One agent of salvation is the self, Hawkins reminds us, even if the act invites risk: "No wonder we go crazy. Not out of our heads but into them, where everything is provided for. Where we imagine the shape of our lacks and fill in the gaps and bring the furniture in and live there." Finding home may mean traveling the space most estranged: the human mind.

*Selected Prose of Bobbie Louise Hawkins* serves as a legend in both senses of the term: it is at once the epic story of her own past dispersed through a myriad of women while simultaneously the key offered to chart the emblems and themes at work in her complete corpus. We read this prose as not a plot but plotting, as not a quest but questing, portraits of a life bound to gerund form, and therefore inevitably incomplete. Through the course of her narrative cartography, Hawkins suspends our disbelief in the way only the most powerful fiction can, such that we forget we will never reach the destination. Seduced by her characters' optimism, we follow her plural departures hoping to arrive.