Fear Falls Away and Other Essays from Hard and Rocky Places by Janice Emily Bowers (review)

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layered over a difficult relationship with her father that Legler tries to salvage or at least explain. The central argument for the collection comes almost in the middle, with Lorde's "erotic charge" extended to Legler's connections with hunting, preparing, sharing, and eating the things that she has killed; her charge as a sexual being; her charge as a member of a community (of writers, teachers, lesbians, friends, family).

The beauty and texture of the collection is seen best in the open-ended pondering in the final chapter. Legler is camping with a group of women in the northern Minnesota boundary waters, and a friend is recounting an experience viewing the northern lights. Legler represents the tone of the entire collection and its pull between the natural world, self, and awareness when she says, "You always must go back to your own particular life with a vague ache in your heart; an ache that suggests to you there is another place you should be, although you don't know where it is" (182). The collection does not conclude so much as end with reiterated connections to the intangible world, but the honesty of the quest is compelling.

Fear Falls Away and Other Essays from Hard and Rocky Places.
By Janice Emily Bowers.
Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997. 175 pages, $35.00/$16.95.

Reviewed by **Sarah L. Bennett**
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Following Janice Emily Bowers through the pages of *Fear Falls Away* is like spending the day with a favorite hiking partner whose lively step, keen observations, and graceful insight can reveal the life and beauty of a landscape and nurture the soul. With the heart and earnestness of a poet and the eye of a painter, Bowers considers the mountainscapes around her home in Tucson from a perspective that is at once intimate and vast, but always human. Faced with the possibility of having to leave her beloved desert home after more than twenty years, Bowers revisits her favorite canyons and ridgelines as scientist, artist, and pilgrim, seeking an understanding of the many threads that tie her to those sacred places.

Formally trained and employed as a botanist, and regionally recognized as a writer and naturalist (*A Full Life in a Small Place and Other Essays from a Desert Garden*, 1995), Bowers has an enormous wealth of information to share on the life processes of that region's desert flora and fauna. Bowers offers treasures in gratitude and celebration of place: the precise conditions in which brittlebrush seeds can germinate; a woodpecker gathering and storing acorns in a snag used by generations of his kind where "[t]he tree seems to have a hundred brown eyeballs" (28); light playing in the iridescent feathers of a hummingbird's chin; butterflies "mudding" on wet sand near a seep. These details are gifts, not rulers with which Bowers measures her intellect or raps our knuckles in order to gain our attention. And while

she often requires we stoop to put eye to flower or darting bird, or pause to glance upward toward a ridge or a wheeling raptor, the effortless stride of her prose and her story are not broken but continue upward toward high places.

Bowers takes special care not to leave us off the trail somewhere overcome with awe in a mystical daze but instead grounds us in the profound attachments we make to the wild places we love in the context of everyday human realities. Perhaps this is what is most successful and most important about *Fear Falls Away*. Forced to consider leaving southern Arizona initiates a thoughtful exploration of Bowers' own internal, as well as surrounding external, landscapes where she considers the behavioral, emotional, and psychological adaptations we, as a species, make to place. Recognition of the ongoing evolutionary symbiosis humans share with their natural surroundings is a constant theme throughout these essays and a noteworthy undertaking for a nature writer. The rock art of the Hohokam who once lived in the region and anthropological theories and studies of traditional native peoples, such as the !Kung of the Kalahari and the Yanomami of Brazil, provide nutritious food for Bowers' thinking on the ways humans perceive the natural world, how they have adapted to it, and through the ages, brought drastic and often irreversible change to their environments.

Bowers laments modern society's degradation of the landscape, as she must, but simultaneously derides her own romantic notions of living as the ancients once did. She is accepting of her domestication, claiming, "I can never shed my house completely. . . . My house is more than walls: it is a point of view and a lifetime's worth of habits" (58–59). While she constantly struggles with and is sometimes saddened by the taint of civilization she cannot undo, Bowers' ultimate acceptance of her humanity in the face of her love for the wild is refreshing and works to make her connections to the natural world more profound. Bowers' recognition and embrace of her own personal and cultural human condition as it relates to the natural world is not only delightfully honest, but critical to the undertaking of that most important modern dilemma—how to live respectfully toward the natural places we love.

In the creative undertaking to understand her deep attachments to the mountains of southern Arizona, Bowers gains high ground in the rapidly growing genre of American nature writing. Her prose, at times powerfully eloquent, together with her wise and passionate grasp of desert life and landscapes, is enough to make this book a remarkable achievement. But it is her genuine, unhesitating examination of some of the difficult questions regarding our relationship to wild places that truly makes this book important. In her pursuit, Bowers consults a wide range of well-respected writers, philosophers, and scientists, such as the leviathan E. O. Wilson, Annie Dillard, and Charles Bowden. With such intelligence, courage, and craft, she should soon find her place among them. Certainly, Bowers offers us miraculous moments of intimacy in the wild, but she is also capable of bringing us to higher places

with bigger views and, most importantly, a better understanding of how to live, still loving wild places, while forgiving ourselves our humanity.

The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction.
By Louise H. Westling.
Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996. 211 pages, $29.95.

Reviewed by **Marja Mogk**
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In her 1985 study of southern women writers, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens*, Louise H. Westling writes that "at deep levels of signification human culture is an unbroken continuum from our earliest thinking ancestors to the present," which, she concludes, leads Western writers to reflexively conceive of the earth as feminine, just as the Sumerians did before us. "No matter how unconscious individual women may be of these associations," Westling argues, "their attitudes towards their sex are naturally related to their feelings about the landscape." *The Green Breast* evolves directly from this claim, enlarging the scope of inquiry to include men, namely Emerson, Thoreau, Hemingway, and Faulkner. Further referencing Max Oelschlager's *The Idea of Wilderness* (1991) and Robert Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1992), the book begins with an affirmation of the deep psychohistorical embeddedness of our notions of nature and their correlation with the feminine.

Westling maintains that a gendered divide between male and female representations of nature still holds: men tend to envision escapist, eroticized landscapes, while women tend to weave domestic values into self-identified landscapes. The problem is that gendering the landscape either positively or negatively seems to lead to a pretty poor score on the environmentalist scale. Westling sees the patriarchal paradigms of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* writ large in Faulkner, for example, while Cather's pastoralism reflects Virgil's gendered imperialism. Both men's and women's texts disrupt these destructive patterns in subtle ways, but subtle disruption just isn't enough anymore.

Clearly, Westling reminds us, we are on a route to deforest the whole world, just as the Sumerians deforested their realm. She joins other ecocritics in calling for new neuter, nonanthropomorphic metaphors and narratives before we run out of trees; we can no longer afford the gender-nature binaries so prevalent in American literature. Westling turns to Louise Erdrich's work as an encouraging example, but her thoughts are not without reservation: even Erdrich's characters are not radically successful at alternative imaginings, and environmentalism is always already in dialogue with imperialist nostalgia.