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Daughter of Orion

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DAUGHTER OF ORION:
HENRY BESTON'S PROGENY, KATE BARNES

ELLEN M. TAYLOR

Abstract: Henry Beston is well known for his seminal book, The Outermost House, *and other works about the environment and his quest for an earth-centered life. His daughter, Kate Barnes, is a celebrated poet in Maine, where she published three collections of poems and served as the state's first poet laureate. In this article, I discuss the complicated relationship between Beston and Barnes, articulated in letters and poetry. Barnes refers to her rich literary genealogy (her mother was the prolific writer Elizabeth Coatsworth) in many of her works, but those poems that mine the depths of her relationship with her father are among the most complex in subject and image. Three principal themes emerge in these poems: Beston's filial regret at having two daughters and no sons; Barnes's use of mythology to reframe her family narrative; and her celestial kinship with her father. We can see in her last published collection,* Kneeling Orion, *a father-daughter tension that is partially resolved.*

When Kate Barnes, Maine's first poet laureate, died in spring 2013, she left a legacy as a poet and beloved mentor to many. The daughter of the celebrated writers Henry Beston and Elizabeth Coatsworth, Barnes was buried at the family homestead of Chimney Farm, her modest grave marker beside Beston's massive rock and Coatsworth's small ceramic fox and flat stone. To many, this grave site was a somber reminder of how Barnes languished under her father's literary shadow.

Much of Barnes's poetic oeuvre echoes her parents' appreciation of ecology, rhythms of rural life, and rituals of northern seasons. The weight of her parental lineage also informs much of her work, collected in three books of poems published after her parents' deaths. These verses show a childhood marred by an emotionally distant father, a lonely adolescence at boarding school, a personal trajectory which arcs to an abusive marriage and finally to a voice informed by the burgeoning women's movement and ecological sensitivities of the 1970s and beyond. Throughout, her work is grounded in environmental concerns and a deep sense of place and self.

This article discusses literary connections and the familial challenges between Beston and Barnes. First, I will provide background on Henry and his paternal role, including his epistolary relationship with Kate as a child. Next, Kate's schoolgirl letters to her parents, and later adult letters to her friend and principal confidant[1] show the evolution in her thinking about her lineage. These relationships are later explored in her poetry. Three principal themes emerge: (1) Beston's filial regret at having two daughters and no sons; (2) Barnes's use of mythology to reframe her family narrative; and (3) her celestial kinship with her father. We can see in her final published work, *Kneeling Orion,* a father-daughter tension that is partly resolved.

Beston as Father

Henry Beston rose to fame as a celebrated writer of *The Outermost House* in 1928. He was forty years old, Harvard University–educated, and had served as an ambulance driver in France during World War I. The success of his book fueled his passion for a simpler life, away from the city and even the suburbs, to a rural community in Maine. He would find similar values in his life partner, Elizabeth Coatsworth.

The two writers cultivated an exquisite epistolary relationship for over ten years before they married in 1929. She was thirty-six, and he was forty-one, both relatively mature for a first marriage at that time. Coatsworth had traveled the world and achieved literary success in her own right. Like Beston, she was drawn to the rhythms of nature and rural communities in harmony with the land. These themes informed much of her work.

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[1] Eleanor Mattern was a close friend to whom Kate Barnes wrote several letters a week for over a dozen years, reflecting on her life and work. Upon Barnes's death in 2013, the letters were archived at the Maine Women Writers Collection (MWWC) in Portland. The author of this article had access to that material in the summer of 2016. In the fall of 2016, the archive was closed until the death of Barnes's children, to protect personal information. The MWWC granted permission to use the material gathered during the initial period of open access.

Beston was firmly set in his ways when he married. The arrival of children marked a significant change in the household and his daily routines. Henry had been working on a follow-up text to the *Outermost House;* his new book would explore the ponds and bay regions of the inner Cape Cod. However, "all literary work ceased at the end of June, with the birth of Beston's first child, Margaret Coatsworth Beston, on July 2, 1930."[2] The child's needs occupied the new parents during the summer, and in the fall, Henry returned to the cape, while Elizabeth and baby Meg moved to the Coatsworth family home in Hingham, Massachusetts.

Domestic life did not slow down Elizabeth, and she soon finished her award-winning children's book, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven.*[3] Yet Henry struggled to gain traction with his writing. He was restless when in the suburbs, and on a trip to visit an old friend in Maine that winter, he discovered his future farm on Damariscotta Lake. As Elizabeth remembers it, "Henry took me out to lunch in Quincy. I remember that we ordered fish sticks (for Henry, haddock was the only fish that existed). 'How would you like to have us buy a Maine farm?' he asked at the end of the meal, and I said, also in a split second, 'It sounds fine.' A few weeks later we bought the property."[4]

The farm included eighty-eight acres of hay fields, iconic stone walls, woodlands, and it abutted Deep Cove on the shores of Damariscotta Lake. The house had been built in 1835 and needed contemporary updates.[5] Yet the rusticity was part of the attraction. With the purchase of the property, Henry and Elizabeth joined the literary rusticators who left urban and suburban homes to find renewal in nature. Their urban flight helped launch the modern environmental movement that spread through much of New England.[6] The property, which they named Chimney Farm, would become the background of their writing, their marriage, and their children's formative years.

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[2] Daniel G. Payne, *Orion on the Dunes: A Biography of Henry Beston* (Boston: David R. Godine Publisher, 2016), 185.

[3] Elizabeth Coatsworth, *The Cat Who Went to Heaven* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1958).

[4] Elizabeth Coatsworth, ed., *Especially Maine: The Natural World of Henry Beston from Cape Cod to the St. Lawrence (*Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Green Press, 1970), 6.

In September of 1931, Elizabeth was pregnant again, and on April 9, 1932, Kate was born. Henry writes in a letter, "'tis another lass, a strong lively pretty child."[7] Often called "Puss," she developed into a cheerful baby. In another letter, Henry writes, "the Puss-cats remains just as she always was, the best and most genial of babies. The protests (and they are vigorous) seem to be almost entirely confined to occasions when somebody is being fed and she hasn't yet had her share."[8] In 1932, with a toddler Meg in hand, and baby Kate in a "market basket padded and lined with rose-sprigged dimity"[9], the couple moved to their farm in Damariscotta, Maine, and set up house for the summer.

The household was fiscally solvent from Coatsworth's prolific literary output, and during the summers that followed Henry and Elizabeth hired help for the girls. Though Henry wasn't expected to braid hair or arrange doll house furniture, he lamented that he wasn't blessed with sons: he writes to his friend Luther Nuff (who had just had two boys), "I envy you a bit for we should both like a pair of boys to go with the pair of daughters." He had joked before his wedding that he and Elizabeth would "cross the bridges of matrimony 'like Tudors – Henry and Elizabeth'" who had two girls and two boys.[10] Yet Beston and Coatsworth had no sons.

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[5] Payne, *Orion on the Dunes*, 193.
[6] Dale E. Potts, "Community within Nature: Culture and Environment in the Chimney Farm Literature of Henry Beston and Elizabeth Coatsworth, 1944–48," *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 18, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 820–39, doi: 10.1093/isle/isr105.
[7] Payne, *Orion on the Dunes*, 197
[8] Ibid., 208.
[9] Elizabeth Coatsworth, *Personal Geography* (Brattleboro, VT: Stephen Green Press), 110.

Reading and writing were valued in the Beston-Coatsworth household. Barnes later honored 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.*" [11] Coatsworth becomes a muse for Barnes's later work, a cool pool into which she frequently dipped.[12] Her father's influence, however, was more like fire.

Kate's exposure to poetry was in stereo. Not only did her mother read to her and model daily writing at the kitchen table but Henry composed limericks and sent them to his daughters as postcards when he traveled to Cape Cod and across New England gathering material for a new book. Below is one such limerick, written to Kate in 1938:[13]

For Daddy's Puss

There was a young lady of Zamp
who when in a temper did stamp
she'd kick and she'd yell,
'til they rang the town bell,
just to quiet this person of Zamp.

Based in this creative artifact and others like it, Henry appears amused by his daughter's willful temperament. While he spent time planning renovations at Chimney Farm in the fall and winter of 1938, Elizabeth stayed with the children in Hingham, Massachusetts, and he wrote her daily.

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[10] Payne, *Orion on the Dunes,* 210.

[11] Kate Barnes, *Words from the Frontier: Poetry in Maine,* accessed September 1, 2015, http://www.poetryinmaine.org/barnes.php.

[12] I explore the relationship between Elizabeth Coatsworth and her daughter, Kate Barnes, in "Personal Geographies: Poetic Lineage of American Poets Elizabeth Coatsworth and Kate Barnes," *ELOPE: English Language Overseas* 13, no. 2 (2016): 111–27, doi: 10.4312/elope.13.2.111-127.

[13] Postcard from Henry Beston to Kate Barnes, 1938, folder "November 14, 1938–January 2, 1939," box 2, Beston Family Papers (George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin Library, Brunswick, ME).

Later, Kate attended the private Derby School in Hingham and stayed with her Aunt Maggie (Elizabeth's older sister) and Uncle Morton Smith while her parents traveled or spent time at the farm. When the children returned home for the summer, Henry remarked on Kate's growth: At twelve, in 1944, she was only a few inches shorter than her 5'11" mother. Henry writes, "Pussy is as husky as a future Knight-Commander of the Amazons. She's the lass who'll help me move the stove and dig up these State of Maine rocks! She's more Latin than Meg, and looks Latin, I think: Michelangelo would have had her for a model any day. Alas, that she was not a fine husky boy!"[14] Beston's lament for boys continues.

With the children away at school in the 1940s, Henry worked on essays for *The Progressive.* He was outraged by the eruption of another war, and much of his energy and attention was channeled into letters to editors, friends, and occasional essays. He ranted about the occupation of France "as foolish as it is evil"; the Allied bombing of civilian targets was, he said, deplorable. "I think we have seen, these last few days, the single most appallingly wicked act in all our savage human history," Beston wrote after the Allied bombers attacked Berlin. He lamented "the virtual obliteration" and the massacre of some thirty thousand civilians, the devastating trajectory of the war, and the general malaise of the modern world. The Boston suburban town of Hingham no longer interested him, even for short visits: "the suburb drives me nuts. There is no nature for a naturalist to see, there are no birds save 'the spotted Chevrolet and the Greater and

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[14] Payne, *Orion on the Dunes,* 260.

Lesser Buick.'"[15] Henry spent less and less time in Hingham, and more at Chimney Farm or traveling in search of material to document the fading majesty of the natural world.

Kate's childhood was one of both educational privilege and parental absence: dexterous reading and writing were expected, and she mastered both skills early. Henry had attended a private school, Adams Academy in Quincy, Massachusetts, as did his father and brother. This may account for his insistence that his daughters too, attend private schools. At age thirteen, Kate was sent to Emma Willard, an exclusive boarding school for girls in Troy, New York.

In a letter dated October,1945, she writes to "Mummy and Daddy":

> I miss my freedom quite a little and have lost another 5 pounds this week because, for once, I am working as hard as I can…. only a few girls take 5 subjects, all the rest take 4…. If I go on losing weight this way in no time, I'll be slim. . .. Meg won't be able to say anything about the melon. My gray skirt is now too loose…I've been writing some poems and will, God willing get them in the [illegible]. I love the countryside as you prophesied. In the future I will try and walk more. All my love, Kate [16]

Beside her signature, she draws a pug. We see how she seeks approval, acknowledgement for her efforts to lose weight and to write poems. She studies hard, takes extra classes, vows to exercise. Later at school, Kate found solace in nature and even more, in horses. She managed her loneliness at boarding school by escaping into fields and woods on horseback. This physical and spiritual release also informs her adulthood and her poetry.

Her poem "Leaving"[17] addresses her perceived exile to boarding school: It begins:

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[15] Ibid., 271.

[16] Kate Barnes letter to Elizabeth Coatsworth and Henry Beston, Oct. 1945, folder "October 2 to November 1945," box 3, Beston Family Papers.

[17] Kate Barnes, "Leaving" in *Kneeling Orion* (Jaffrey, NH: Godine Press, 2004), 55.

> My father told my mother, and she told me
> that I didn't have to go to boarding school
> until I was thirteen. I didn't think
> much about it, I understood
> there was no choice. Our father often reminded us
> that in England children went off to school
> at seven or eight.

The poem goes on to describe the solitary train ride, with seats "that smelled of steam / and dust," and the book her mother pressed into her hands at the station: *The Oxford Book of English Verse.* This begins her formal education away from her family. She manages her loneliness with words and her eyes on the natural world. On the train she looks out the window at the "rocky hillside there, a shallow/ brown river there, running fast / among tall elms with sandbars rising" all the while thumbing her book of verse with gilded edges.

The father's ousting of his daughter may have caused a psychic rift she later seeks to repair with words. Her poetic concerns fall within our contemporary understanding of ecopoetics, including a wider understanding of "eco," from the Greek *oikos:* family, property, house.[18] Barnes's exile from her home and her mother is later manifested in her poetic critique of the family's patrilineal hierarchy.

Filial Regrets

Beston made no secret of his wish for sons. In 1945, he wrote to his friend, Luther Nuff, "A psychologist ought to do a study of what happens to a man without sons…down the slope he goes, fighting the incline, towards knitting and tasting, and frustration at the bottom." [19] This longing for sons and the primary importance of the father-son relationship is reflected in literature. Boose and

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[18] Angela Hume and Samia Rahimtoola, "Introduction: Queering Poetics," *ISLE Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment,* 24 no. 1 (May 2018). 134–49, doi: 10.1093/isle/isy014.

[19] Payne, *Orion on the Dunes,* 266.

Flowers note that of all the familiar literary permutations, that "father and son are the first pair most frequently in focus, and the mother and the son next."[20] Daughter and father relationships are the least examined. The traditional family unit tends to be hierarchal and patriarchal; it positions the father in a superior position, the daughter as subordinate.

Beston's regret at not having a son was apparent to his daughter. In an adult letter, Barnes writes:

> Reading over his books I notice he never – ever – uses the word "daughter." In *Northern Farm*, Meg and I are "the children." *Herbs and the Earth* is dedicated to "two young persons who never pull up or step on Father's herbs." I should think not! The book came out in 1935 when I was a well-tended baby. He couldn't use the word "daughters" because having them was a reproach to his manhood. I really think that he felt that REAL MEN had, at the best, sons – At the least, sons & daughters. That was intense for him.[21]

Barnes wrote several poems related to Beston's frustration toward his prolific wife and his bitterness for not having a son. "American Women" [22] a poem written in four sections of tercets, begins:

> "American Women!"
> said my father
> often and bitterly.
>
> All his unhappiness
> was in the phrase,
> the great anger
>
> That life was unfair -
> to him, to him -
> I can hear it yet.

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[20] Lynda E. Boose and Betty S. Flowers, eds., *Daughters and Fathers* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 2.

[21] Kate Barnes letter to Eleanor Mattern, Oct. 11, 1997, box 1, Kate Barnes Archives (Maine Women Writers' Collection, University of New England. Portland, ME).

[22] Barnes, "American Women" in *Kneeling Orion,* 20, 21.

The message in it
was for my mother:
“Castrating bitches.”

The short lines, often punctuated with a period, create a terse mood, as though the poem reflects the chill in the household climate. The mother’s offence is writing books with ease; her success emasculates the father, who lashes out at “American women!” with “unhappiness” and “anger.” The speaker, “can hear it yet,” showing the indelible memory this tension etched.

I, too,
a ten-year-old future
American woman,

heard it all
in that agreeable
house of books

The contrast between the hostile father and the “agreeable” house, populated by books, is profound—more so because it is the mother writing the books, while the father vents about the state of world affairs. The section goes on to describe how the entire landscape, “gardens, the lawn / yielding to hayfields, /the fields / to the lake” all breathed in “his rage and grief.” Even the lake and the clouds overhead feel this thick emotion. In the third section, the now mature speaker wonders:

Wasn’t it my fault?
Right after

I was born,
my father had come
to my mother’s bedside

In a storm of tears -
once again, no son.

The girl recognizes her connection to her mother, and her own destiny as a future "American woman." The daughter's birth spawns tears for the father, rather than joy. The fourth and final section emphasizes the daughter's burden of disappointment:

> I spent
> a lot of my time
> in attics. When people
>
> called me, I wouldn't breathe
> or answer. I wished
> could be invisible,
>
> an invisible child,
> or perhaps only
>
> an unconceived,
> wandering, unrealized
> spirit, a speck,
>
> a spark, a shadow,
> a twist of wind
> in the standing hay.

We see the speaker wanting to be invisible, even "unconceived." This residual childhood pain spawns a poem where the remembered child wants to transform into "a spark, a shadow" to become "a twist of wind." This organic metamorphosis rebirths the child into a natural element.

Feminist scholars have suggested a daughter's ambition may be affected by a father's preference for sons and disappointment in daughters. Noting how a father may represent the larger patriarchal culture, Patricia Reis write that we must turn "our attention toward understanding and deconstructing the collective father. . .Understanding the interconnections between the personal father and the cultural father is imperative if we are to free our bodies, minds, souls, and claim our power to live a creative life"[23]

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[23] Patricia Reis, *Daughters of Saturn: From Father's Daughter to Creative Woman* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 19.

The father/daughter relationship also sets the tone for subsequent relationships with men, according to Reis. The daughter is shaped by her connection with her father; he will impact her sense of self, sexuality, and competency. A "father can make or break her feelings of self-esteem or self-confidence, her understanding of herself as a woman, her belief in herself and her own authority as she enters the world."[24] In Barnes' case, she had strong role models in her mother, grandmother, and aunt. She attended girls' camps, girls' schools, and a female college. Indeed, during all her developing life she was exposed to strong women in her own family, and as friends, mentors, and models. Nevertheless, it appears these women were not enough to balance the weight of paternal influences. Barnes's portrayal of her father as a malevolent character in her poems, and her pondering, in her letters, about his power point to the impact of both the personal and the cultural father.

In *Hideous Progeny,* Katherine Hill-Miller describes her study on literary daughters and how their fathers trained them to follow their "intellectual footsteps." Her text focuses, in part, on Mary Shelley, born in 1797 to Mary Wollstonecraft and William Godwin. Like Shelley, Kate Barnes was born into an extraordinary literary family. And also like her, Barnes spent much of her life "contending with ghosts of both her mother and her father."[25]

Mary Shelley adored her father, writes Hill-Miller, yet she also felt hostility, and this combination of passions appears in her novels. Godwin encouraged his daughter's literary learnings, and her education, as did Beston with Barnes. Both treated their daughters as intellectual heirs, yet both fathers withdrew their support as their daughters reached womanhood and became wives and mothers. We can see Kate Barnes's parallel admiration and fear of her father and fear of becoming like him.

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[24] Ibid., 22.

[25] Katherine C. Hill-Miller, *My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley, William Godwin, and the Father-Daughter Relationship (*Newark: University of Delaware Press. 1995), 19

In an adult letter, Barnes writes that she has often been compared to her father. A friend once told her, "I think your temperament is much more like your father's. It's like having two dressage horses, one who is absolutely steady, who will always do his best….and another who can be extra brilliant – SOMETIMES!"[26] In another letter the following year, Kate writes that her mother once "shivered my timbers by saying 'You must guard against the part of you that is your father.'"[27] Barnes identified with her mother, Beston's counterweight. All Barnes's adult life was lived in Coatsworth's immortal glow: "My mother seems to be with me everywhere. I think about anything – writing, the conduit of life, foxes, all animals, the sadness of the world. And she is there already . . . I got a fortune cookie the other day, and it just said RICH. I thought, yes, not in money, but in having had my mother."[28]

In the same letter, Barnes reflects on recent reading she's done of Maxine Kumin, Sharon Olds, and Susan Griffin. She's taken with Griffin's comment that "the central problem with women's writing: that is self-hatred, hatred of the body, hatred of one's own [female] voice, hatred of one's perceptions." Perhaps this lack of confidence and belief in her own perceptions delayed Barnes from reclaiming her poetic voice until after her father's death.

Barnes addresses her dead father directly, in her poem "Prospero's Cell."[29]

while I sit talking to my dead father
telling him I understand, I can see now

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[26] Kate Barnes letter to Eleanor Mattern, Dec. 26, 1996, box 1, Barnes Archives'.
[27] Kate Barnes letter to Eleanor Mattern. Dec. 7, 1997, ibid.'
[28]. Kate Barnes letter to Eleanor Mattern. Sept. 4, 1997, ibid.
[29] Barnes, "Prospero's Cell" in *Kneeling Orion,* 35.

how it was for him, why he never once
wrote the word "daughter"

in any of his books. "I realize
you were afraid," I say, "If you'd admitted
you just had girls, that your only children
were two *daughters*, the very word
would have lifted itself off the page
to steal the pith from your arm.

Here we can see a sort of mild resolution as the speaker tells her dead father, "I understand." Yet, the understanding underscores the residual hurt. If the essence of the word "daughter" would emasculate him, "steal" his most vital energy, then the reality of having two girls was indeed his misfortune. The speaker addresses her father, while he "lies under a boulder as high as my breast bone / at the edge of the wood, / a skeleton" referring to the family burial ground at Chimney Farm, where Beston is buried beneath a large glacial erratic.

Mythology

At Chimney Farm, Henry maintained robust epistolary relationships, writing several letters a day, a practice Kate would adopt. In letters to friends, he articulates dismay at the war: "When sixty thousand people can be killed in one hideous instant by an annihilationist machine, the show is over." [30] Yet to thirteen-year-old Kate, away at boarding school, he focuses on his simple existence.[31]

> Hello Kate, old girl… Yesterday as I was getting the farm warmed up and melting the ice from the frost-curtained windows, I began to think of the winters Mother, and you, and I spent here, and I decided that Mother and you were heroines, and that I was a sort of hero myself! How did we do it! Well, the accomplishment certainly reflects on the family! … The house is as quiet as a stone in the mountains

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[30] Payne, *Orion on the Dunes*, 265.
[31] Henry Beston letter to Kate Barnes, Dec. 18, 1945, box 3, Beston Family Papers.

> of the moon, and very warm and cozy. I can hear the fire in the range talk to itself….
> Well, Puss, old girl, all good things + lots of love! Ever, Father

That winter, Henry was alone at Chimney Farm until Elizabeth and the girls joined him for the holidays. The solitude suited him more than the clutter of the Hingham suburbs, and his epistolary circle kept him company in his quiet house, listening to the "fire in the range talk to itself." Since family is generally absent from Beston's writing, his cumulative letters become the family text. In the above letter we see Henry thinks of himself and his family as characters in an adventure story—with his role as hero complimented by Elizabeth and Kate as heroines.

Even the name of the house, "Chimney Farm," and frequent references to "the farm" is part of a well-crafted narrative. A "farm" may suggest milking cows, acres of corn, or rows of vegetables, but this was not the case with the Beston property. While Henry was proud of his herb garden where he tended plants and generated ideas for a book (*Herbs and the Earth*), a neighboring farmer leased the pastures for hay, tended their fields, and kept his horses in the barn. Henry's herb garden was less a culinary pursuit and more a contemplative exercise. He spent hours with catalogues, considering his choices. Once planted, he would sit in the garden: "At long intervals he might crumble a piece of earth between his fingers or pull up a weed. But mostly he was just staring and staring," Coatsworth writes.[32]

The Beston household stayed fiscally afloat due to Coatsworth's steady royalties and modest family investments. Otherwise, like the Alcott family in the nineteenth century, they may have been destitute due to their farming habits.[33] The Beston family did not stake their livelihood on the land; the connection was aesthetic and artistic rather than material.[34] Principally, the Beston household "only grew words,"[35] as Barnes has said, while Coatsworth's prolific and lucrative writing sustained them.

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[32] Elizabeth Coatsworth, ed. *Especially Maine*, 7.

[33] John Matteson, *Eden's Outcasts: The Story of Louisa May Alcott and her Father* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

Beston, Coatsworth, and Barnes all write of haying, for example, but their fields were leased to neighboring farmers. They did not rely on their crops or the weather, unlike other families in town, who "cobbled together a living," to use an old Maine expression, through harvesting, putting up fruits and vegetables to get through the winter, and selling goods to tourists. Melanie Simo discusses this phenomenon in Maine, where rural traditions remained despite agricultural decline.[36]

Barnes's poetry questions this mythology of a heroic family, as she dismantles the impression of a happy household reading under the eaves. In "Coming Back," the opening poem in Barnes's collection, *Crossing the Field,* the speaker "can hear my dead father / still grieving and raging downstairs like the Minotaur / in the depths of the palace cellar; like water, / my mother's voice goes on soothingly, / *Sleep now*."[37]

The mythological Minotaur, with the head of a bull and body of a man, who devours humans for substance, represents the father. He needs the women who surround him—wife and daughter—to sustain him, and perhaps as repository for his anger and disappointment. The house becomes a labyrinth where he lives, surrounded by walls of books.

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[34] Joshua Sullivan discusses this potential schism between material labor and artistic rendition in "The Starry Plough: Twentieth-Century Environmental and Communal Continuity in Henry Beston's 'Northern Farm,'" *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment*, 2, no. 4 (Autumn 2014), 844–57, doi: 10.1093/isle/isu095.

[35] Barnes, *Words from the Frontier*.

[36] Melanie Simo, *Literature of Place: Dwelling on the Land Before Earth Day 1970* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005).

[37] Kate Barnes, *Crossing the Field* (Nobleboro, ME: Blackberry Books. 1992), 2.

Barnes also evokes biblical figures. “At Home”[38] describes her father writing:

> 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 –
> like a smith hammering thick and glowing iron,
> like Jacob wresting with the astonishing angel.

The story of Jacob struggling with an angel is widely interpreted as an allegorical battle between man and God.[39] In this poem, the writer is struggling to produce a satisfactory phrase. In the biblical account, Jacob is released from the battle when he asks for a blessing and is granted one. Yet Barnes’s poem ends during the struggle; there is no release or resolution.

Coatsworth also writes of how painstaking the writing process could be for Beston. While she often wrote “at top speed”[40] churning out poems, stories, and young adult novels, Beston’s words often were “crunched up into a ball and thrown over his shoulder onto the floor … Occasionally an entire morning’s work would be spent on a single sentence.”[41]

Barnes also struggles with her own mythology, her own story, and its implications. In “The Kitchen Window”[42] Barnes’s speaker remembers looking outside and seeing an “eleven-year-old girl whose light brown hair / loops in strong curls” as she sat bareback on a pony, “with staring blue eyes, a pony like a prophet.” The girl and pony disappear, and the second stanza belongs to the speaker washing dishes at the window as she tries to remember what she wished for, when she was that girl:

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[38] Barnes, *Where the Deer Were*, 26.
[39] Stefano Zuffi*, Old Testament Figures in Art* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications. 2003), 125.
[40] Coatsworth, *Personal Geographies*, 119.
[41] Ibid.
[42] Barnes, “The Kitchen Window” in *Kneeling Orion*, 15.

I was singing lullabies
about a bleating lamb, I was telling endless
fairy tales – as if anyone ever
lived happily ever after, as if the fearful twist
of sadness and betrayal didn't twine
through everything, even the brightest threads
of light….

The girl riding bareback, the woman washing dishes, are in the past. The final stanza shifts to third person: "And so the ghost / goes back to washing her dishes, the ghost /of a young woman who has no trouble creating / a world of glittering, pure, unbroken / happiness." There is a kind of mythology created here, with a reinvention of the past and removal of the self through use of the third-person speaker, who is happiest seated on her pony or singing lullabies to her lamb. The speaker reinvents her past and substitutes an unhappy childhood with a blissful one, on "a pony like a prophet" riding through "running streams and green, new leaves."

In "The Rhetoric of Fiction,"[43] a series of twelve linked poems describes a courtship, marriage, marital abuse, and separation. The narrative series mirrors Barnes's personal experience, though the poems are written in the third person and the woman is never named. The painful marital story is now "fiction."

Barnes's reading of feminist poets and theorists in the 1980s and 1990s may have prompted her to work through her complex relationships with her father and her husband, to cast them as characters in her poems.[44] Kowaleski -Wallace outlines a cultural argument where women tend to attribute aggression only to men, and in doing so, deny female power and anger. This Janus face of power and passivity is well expressed in the tenth poem of the series. "In the Corner"[45] shows two characters:

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[43] Kate Barnes, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Durham, NH: Oyster River Press, 2001). This series of poems first appeared in the *New England Review* in 1994, and was then published as a chapbook, with Barnes's illustrations throughout.
[44] Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Their Fathers' Daughters: Hannah More, Maria Edgeworth, and Patriarchal Complicity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 296.

> 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.

Yet this man has no pity to rouse. We know nothing of any physical abuse in the Beston household, yet the tension and rage we've seen depicted in Barnes's poetry concerning her childhood describes a pattern we may consider emotional abuse. In the marriage in this poem, the source for this erupting physical violence is the wife's refusal to submit:

>   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.

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[45] Barnes, *Rhetoric of Fiction*, 17, 18.

As the violence peaks with physical blows, the woman's spark ignites. 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 from monosyllabic or two-syllable words of earlier poems in the series to polysyllabic diction: "stubbornness" and "unthinking assumption." The use of white space here, the breath between the words, adds drama to the scene. The poem ends with the abuser passed out, and the beaten woman 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 speaker's energy is organic, part of nature, "gusts in a storm"; the debris she leaves behind is also part of the natural world. This physical climax to the series is noteworthy for the release of passion and the speaker's epiphany that yes, "she exists."

In the final poem of this series, "Chapter Twelve: The Dining Car,"[46] the speaker imagines the husband and wife meeting expectedly after decades of separation. She chooses the neutral yet romantic space of a dining car on a train "crossing the Rockies" where the "two gray-haired people, might sit at a clean white tablecloth / a last time across from one another." Their imaginary conversation is cordial, "Let's not start blaming / anyone" but soon the old pattern interrupts the façade as "he poured a big splash / of brandy into his coffee" and she realizes that "He is really / more bitter than ever. He'd like to make a last gesture, / all right, he'd like to belt her one –." This is not going to be a fairytale with a happy ending. Yet, the speaker looks outward where "the stars continue their unbroken dancing" and even beyond "the furthest reaches / of any imagination, they trace their intricate patterns / into a balance that is always shifting, / and always perfect." While the couple will not reconnect, the star-filled sky provides solace. Again, Barnes has transformed her experience into poetry and found resolution in words.

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[46] Ibid., 20, 21.

Celestial Kinship

Both Henry Beston and Kate Barnes share delight in the stars and their celestial verse in the night sky. In *Northern Farm,* Beston writes of stepping out from the warmth of the kitchen fire, to retrieve something in the barn. Outside, he finds himself beholding a sky "with an immense glittering of stars in their luminous rivers and pale mists, in their solitary and unneighbored splendors."[47] The stars take on planetary features as rivers and condensation, and their extravagance is amplified by being "unneighbored." Above all, shines Orion: "There exalted and assembled in one immense principality of the skies, the shining press of the greater winter constellations glittered above the little cold and dark of earth. Orion, most beautiful of all the stellar figures, shone above the meridian, the timeless hunter of the timeless sky."[48]

Beston's fascination with the theater of the night sky began as a child and continued throughout his life.[49] His *Starlight Wonder Book,* a collection of fairy tales published in 1921, points to the sky. The *Outermost House* concludes with chapter ten, "Orion Rises on the Dunes," where he writes of walking on the beach at the end of an August night:

> In the luminous east, two great stars aslant were rising clear of the exhalations of darkness gathered at the rim of night and ocean—Betelgeuse and Bellatrix, the shoulders of Orion. Autumn had come, and the Giant stood again at the horizon of

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[47] Coatsworth, *Especially Maine,* 85.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Payne, *Orion,* 11.

> day and the ebbing year, his belt still hidden in the bank of cloud, his feet in the depths of space and the far surges of the sea.[50]

And so Beston ends his most celebrated text and a year that he will never replicate: "For the gifts of life are the earth's and they are given to all, and they are the songs of birds at daybreak, Orion and the Bear, and dawn seen over the ocean from the beach."[51] The pure intensity of that mostly solitary year on the dunes, when words and stargazing were Beston's only obligations, would remain a beacon in his memory. Later he returns to astronomy, "my first love,"[52] and finds delight in the night sky.

Kate, too, looks to the stars in her work. The title of her final collection, *Kneeling Orion*, gestures to her father. The title poem is narrative, constructed in five stanzas, with all but the first opening with Barnes's hallmark of triple indenting the first line, like a big breath before speaking.[53]

The poem is written in the third person; we meet "a lonely woman" in the first line, "two hours before dawn." She has woken from dreams of an embrace, "still feeling / the warm shudder at her core." The line break after "feeling" emphasizes a physical aspect of the lonely woman, before we learn to what the physical sensation refers. She looks out at her old car, "glistening with frost. It's blind / with hard rime" but the motor runs and softens the ice. This slant rhyme of "blind" and "rime" feels serendipitous, as though a happy accident has happened for the poet.

The second stanza takes us past white wrapped bales of hay, "shimmering in the darkness / as if white cows were lying there asleep / looming in the faint light / of the stars." Even the industrial plastic packaging of hay becomes "mystic" and "wonderful." As she drives on in the third stanza, she sees three does leap "in long bounds like the ups-and-downs / of rocking horses." They shine in the headlights and "drop away." Each line is crafted with such purposeful movement that reading them feels like watching a diorama.

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[50] Henry Beston, *The Outermost House* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1988), 215.
[51] Ibid., 218.
[52] Coatsworth, *Especially Maine*, 147.
[53] Barnes, *Kneeling Orion*, 127, 128.

The last two stanzas open with questions: "What's below?" The reader looks below with the speaker, to see a "slow stream flowing down the cleft / of the gully" and later "tangled branches / of poplar and swamp maple." The final stanza asks, "What's Above?" and returns to the title image:

> Only the brilliant night, Orion
> kneeling over the black field,
> his vast body extended, his bright shoulders
> lifting his outstretched arms, his handing sword
> glittering before him

Bent over the dark field, the constellation Orion becomes alive. His shoulders extend the poem's right margin to lift his arms, and in the next line, his sword juts out even farther. All those soft *s* words: *vast, shoulders, his outstretched arms, sword*, make a swooshing gesture in the poem, as though the sword has swished through the air. The sound is then replaced by dazzling imagery, as the sword is pictured with

> … stars spilling all around
> in grains of blue fire; and himself,
> winter's giant, rising once again
> into the autumn sky, brushing the bare treetops
> with his shining thighs, filling the cold air
> with seeds of light.

The spilling stars like the hunter's grain; his "shining thighs" spreading "seeds of light" further personify the night sky and make the magnificent constellation come alive like the winter giant he represents.

In the penultimate poem of this collection, "In a Dream,"[54] the speaker remembers her "terrifying father, long dead," a dream prompted by a conversation Barnes had with an editor over a new edition of one of Beston's works. This opening stanza gives a narrative entrance, the welcome space into the poem, which then recesses into memory. The first line of the second stanza is triple indented, a frequent Barnes device, as though opening a door wider:

> The old wallpaper
> in my parents' farm kitchen, the one with faded scenes
> from Currier & Ives on it, lies buried
> under many newer patterns. Would it even
> be possible anymore to pry them up
> and reveal the place where my father wrote
> on the wall with his pencil (in Greek),
> *Be on the side of life?*

The wallpaper is both real and metaphor, imagined and true. How many layers of experience cover our relationship with the past? Can we ever reclaim the essence of an event, however vivid the details might be (the pencil, the Greek)? The language here is quotidian, nothing flowery or calling attention to poetic technique. Instead, the speaker invites us to answer her question and be a participant in the kitchen.

The third stanza opens the door even wider with its indentation, and deeper in context, as we travel to the night the father died:

> When he died,
> in his bed in that same house, all the lights
> flicked off for a moment. His spirit
> always *was* perturbed. I often think
> how good it is that he doesn't have to bear
> what's happening to our world (although
> he would have predicted it). He would grieve

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[54] Ibid., 150, 151.

> so fiercely, he would rage, he would tear
> himself and everyone around him
> to tatters.

The rage of the father is juxtaposed against the reflective mood of the poem. Three repetitions of "he would" create a mantra. His violence would spread to "everyone around him"; all would be reduced "to tatters." Such is the magnitude of the patriarchy here; the king's fury would be felt by all. The speaker offers a consolatory line, being grateful that the father's absence spares him from worldly affairs that would have further tormented him.

The fourth and final stanza offers a sonnet-like turn: Because "his words / go on being stamped onto pages," he may be pleased about that. And "maybe he's looking / down the field right now, just after sunrise / from the farm graveyard at the edge of the woods." The raging man may be pleased at his legacy. Though he's looking from the graveyard, the sun has just risen, showing life and death sharing a couplet as a natural union. The poem ends with another question:

> Does he see his red house, the laden
> apple trees, the long shadows, the deer
> stealing in among the dry corn stalks,
> while, below them, mist wreathes upward
> in drifts from the black stillness of the lake?

Clearly, a man so committed to nature's rhythms and the denizens of his land would notice these details, if he could. Can he? Where does the dream end? What are the borders between the dream and reality, between the living and the dead? Can we ever know them? The poet/daughter's perception of her father's anguished spirit features again in this dream/poem; familial ties and their resilience cast a pall over both the dream and the poem.

We can also read “In a Dream” as a metaphorical remembering of the father. “Language works by association in order to evoke the father’s full power, a power which resides beyond the paternal body itself.”[55] Barnes’s relationship with her father assumes a literary form after his death. He is reconstructed in absentia in these poems. This restoration, this re-membering, offers a poetic resolution to their tumultuous relationship.

Conclusion

Born into a family where reading and writing were sacred activities, Kate Barnes echoed her parents’ love of language and its possibilities. Both parents made their living arranging words, although their chosen genres differed: Coatsworth was primarily a poet and novelist, while Beston wrote essays on natural history, nature, and culture. As a poet, Barnes followed her mother’s path, through Barnes’s subject matter often includes the natural world admired by both parents. Poetry gives Barnes the literary freedom to also explore an emotional landscape, to tap the vein that was her tumultuous relationship with her father. Ultimately, in her poems she re-creates her childhood, with all its emotional terrain, influenced by both her parents and her wider literary and cultural lineage.

Both parents were eccentric and iconoclastic. They had the privilege to write as their chosen labor, to send their daughters to private schools, to travel and entertain and maintain two households. They were also products of their time, coming of age during two world wars and the rise of industrial America. Beston was emotionally scarred by World War I; his experiences as an ambulance driver showed him war’s carnage, and his subsequent retreat into nature can be seen, partially, as a response to that exposure. His hermitage on a Cape Cod beach and the success of

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[55] Kowaleski-Wallace, *Their Fathers’ Daughters*, 307.

The Outermost House mark a period significantly different from his later life as husband and father, when he was unable to recapture the rhythms of those sentences written with the sonic soundscape of wind and tides.

Barnes grew up in the aftermath of World War II, with the women's movement, the rise of a new bohemian culture, and a flourishing of women's voices in literature. She found her voice after her parents' deaths, and in her writing, she re-creates them. Her father's anger and disappointment at not having a son informed Barnes's childhood and her poetry. Like Beston, Barnes evokes classical mythology, and creates her own, reshaping her familial experience in poems. Her father's passion for astronomy kindled her own, as she, too, looked to the stars for divine beauty. She, too, evokes Orion in her final book of poetry; he earns the book's title and features in many of the later poems.

Henry Beston and Kate Barnes were united by rhythms of rural life which enthralled them both. It will take continued vigilance for generations of essayists and poets to chronicle environmental beauty and ward against environmental violence. Indeed, the night sky that was an inspiration to both Beston and Barnes is increasingly swallowed by light.

In the spring of 2018, Kate Barnes's burial stone was erected beside her parents' graves. A slate gray tablet, it includes a few lines of her verse: "Crossing the field / in sunlight and singing." Below is an etching of a joyous horse, kicking up his hind legs in delight. Thus, the daughter rests with her parents, now three writers on Chimney Farm, all who delighted in growing words.[56]

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