

from “Food of Gods and Starvelings”: Selected Poems of Grace Stone Coates”

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edited by Lee Rostad & Rick Newby

When she first married Henderson Coates and moved with him to the little town of Martinsdale, Montana, Grace Stone Coates wrote her father that she had come into an alien land. For the next half century, she lived the life of a shopkeeper’s wife in this land, but there was another life in writing. After twenty years of marriage, she wrote of herself:

Her occupation is housewifery: her delight, writing; her passion, music. All she has learned in 20 years of housekeeping drops from her in one half-hour’s intense writing, so that she has to learn her business of housewifery each morning anew; and all she knows of anything is drowned in one half-hour of music.

Fortunately, her husband is sane. He keeps her outdoors, fishing, duck hunting, and deer hunting; and when she is away from her Martinsdale home, she remembers, never the dingy meanness of a western village but the tremendous sweep of valley from the Belt mountains to the Crazies; or the Musselshell [river], swimming in moonlight, below Gordon Butte.

In the 1920s and early half of the 1930s, Coates had over a hundred poems and short stories published, edited seven books

for Idaho’s Caxton Press, wrote the local news for the county newspapers, wrote historical essays for state-wide papers, and published a novel—*Black Cherries* (1931)—and two books of poetry—*Mead and Mangel-Wurzel* (1931) and *Portulacas in the Wheat* (1932). During her most productive period, the annual *Best American Short Stories* cited twenty of her tales as Distinctive or Honor Roll stories, and John Updike chose her “Wild Plums” for his *Best American Short Stories of the Century* (2000). Coates also served as Assistant Editor for *The Frontier*, the remarkable regional magazine started and edited by H.G. Merriam of the University of Montana. And she wrote letters. She corresponded with William Saroyan, Frank Linderman, James Rankin, and many other authors and writers, with many friends (see Lee Rostad’s *Grace Stone Coates: Her Life in Letters* [Helena, MT: Riverbend Publishing, 2004], one of two honored finalists in biography and memoir in the 2005 Willa Literary Awards).

During these years, Coates had periods of deep depression and periods of unbounded energy, possibly indicative of manic depression—a condition shared by many people who have created the great paintings and literature over the years. In about 1935, Coates stopped writing—except for the local news and historical pieces. There were no more revealing glimpses into her soul and the events that shaped her work.

Grace Stone was born in Kansas on May 20, 1881, the youngest child of the Henry and Olive Stone family. She said of her parents, “My mother was of the blessed company of martyrs; my father, in her eyes, the devil’s advocate. She bore her children in the fear of the Lord, and the more immediate fear that they might be like their father.” Memories of growing up in this contentious

household resulted in her book *Black Cherries*, published in 1932 (and reprinted, with an introduction by Mary Clearman Blew, by University of Nebraska Press in 2003).

In 1900, Grace and her sister Helen were in Montana teaching in Hamilton. By 1904, Grace had moved to Butte, where she taught until 1910. In that year, she married Henderson Coates and moved with him to the little town of Martinsdale, where he and his brother built a general store.

When *Mead and Mangel-Wurzel*—honey-wine and hunger-root—was published in 1931, the publishers said, “Grace Stone Coates offers love, the food of gods and starvelings. To what thirst the wine was poured, to what famine the coarse beets offered, is any reader’s guess; but here *entre vous*, you will find all the calories you can digest. . . .”

Although most of her writing was in the 1920s and 1930s, Coates’ poetry can still offer today “love, the food of gods and starvelings.” Here, we offer a handful of the poems that will appear in “Food of Gods and Starvelings’: The Selected Poems of Grace Stones Coates,” to be published by Drumlummon Institute in 2007.

At Breakfast

“Where were you, last night?”

“I was in bed . . . sleeping
Beside you . . . of course!”

“And I was leaping
Broomsticks, and burying Jesus,
And patting Godiva’s horse.”

(from *Mead and Mangel-Wurzel* [Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1931], p. 17)

Conclusion

Do not be kind to me;
It is too late to be tender.
It is too late to rant
And accuse. Can you restore
The trampled grape to the vender,
Or water a dead plant?

I tell you quietly
Our life together is closing.
If I lied to you
Saying I was happy,
I deceived myself,
Supposing
Steadfast lies
Must make themselves come true.

(from *Mead and Mangel-Wurzel* [Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1931], p. 38)

The Hardness of Women

There is a hardness in woman like the hardness of falling water
That repulses what it compels; her life is barred
To man by her moving purpose. Who has caught her?
Though she curve to him like a wave her strength is hard.

And a woman can leave a man, without quitting his dwelling,
 To loneliness deeper than night with no star-spawn;
 The dearth he has of her is beyond his telling.
 In the crook of his arm she is gone from him, she is gone.

(from *Mead and Mangel-Wurzel* [Caldwell, ID: The Caxton
 Printers, Ltd., 1931], p. 41)

Village Satiety

Satire sits on a satin cushion,
 Cups her chin, and looks at the street;
 Questions: lethargy—or devotion?—
 Prisons me here on this window seat.

To watch the villagers empty ashes,
 A wagon rattle to two white horses,
 Purse-gut grocers strut like Pashas,
 And willows stagger the water courses.

Satire broods at the empty window:
 I will be *thus*, and I shall do *so*,
 Hug my knees as wise as a Hindu,
 And watch stupidity come and go,

While I live a hidden life more sparkling
 Than lights that scream on a city street,
 With secret ways of thought, more darkling
 Than crypt where cavern and river meet.

Ergot is on me. I shall be festive
 While life conceived in me is dying.
 When I sit passive I shall soar restive
 Till I look down on great birds, flying.

I am deception to those who see
 Only coifed hair and tints that perish,
 A flat bosom and crooked knee.
 In me is what the gods cherish.

(from *Mead and Mangel-Wurzel* [Caldwell, ID: The Caxton
 Printers, Ltd., 1931], p. 70)

To H—

Only to the simple or the very wise
 Or those who, having hungered long, are fed
 Does Heaven open this side paradise
 And give its glory to their daily bread.
 Of these am I—never wise, my candor gone,
 But one long hungered, now in you content;
 And I have seen God moving in the dawn
 When our communion was His sacrament.
 My silence would more fitly meet your own,
 But the words press—that you will leave unread
 Though not unsmiled at. Never am I alone
 When you are whom I seek. Uncomforted
 You do not thrust me out. If nights are deep
 I care no longer; on your arm I sleep.

(from *Mead and Mangel-Wurzel* [Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1931], p. 149)

Portulacas in the Wheat

My mother was a woman rich in life
 Wisely controlled, renewed abundantly
 For others; vivid till subdued
 To her surroundings; limpid, loving Truth,
 Worshipping Right, a living loyalty!
 She gave me all I know of honor, faith,
 Hatred of lying, scorn of littleness;
 She gave me all I cherish, save two things:
 A sensuous joy in life that she half feared
 For me, and pagan gladness in the sun
 Even when I sinned—most, when I sinned, I think!

One hot, late morning, sun high overhead,
 (Having sinned and being well rebuked,
 Closeted, sentence served, and so, relaxed)
 I watched the binders drop their yellow loads;
 And, pushing farther in the wheat, achieved
 The shivering ecstasy of mimic fear,
 Pretending I must hunt all day, all night,
 A thousand, thousand miles to find my home!
 The wheat was higher than my head, that year;
 It caught my hair, I know, and tangled it;
 So, bending to avoid the tugging stalks,
 I came upon a wonder at my feet.
 I looked and held my breath, and looked again,

Then raced to find my mother!

Past the hedge

The panting path had never seemed so long,
 Till crowded to her skirts, and looking up,
 Ankle in hand—a much-corrected trick
 That deep excitement always reinvoked—
 When breath came back, the words came tumbling, too:
 A miracle! A marvel in the wheat,
 That she must see!

She answered, not unkindly,
 (For she was courteous even when she spanked)
 “I have no time to listen, child. Sit down!”
 —She held a heavy platter in her hand—
 “Now keep from under foot till I have served
 The dinner, for the teams are turning in!”

I sat and swallowed tears—not bitter ones;
 Mine lay behind the lashes, quick to ease
 Grown-up rebuff or happiness that hurt.
 The men came streaming in, and last, my father.
 He bent to wash; so, slipping down beside him,
 Confident here at least, with breath restored,
 Both feet on floor, and words more ordered; eyes—
 Who doubts?—as wide and eager as before,
 I told him of the marvel I had found.
 Without a word he leaned to take my hand,
 And went to read my riddle of the wheat.

Blossoms! A myriad of them, flaming silk,
 Of colors flaunted by the Sun! They glowed
 Clear yellow, red, and splashed and blended orange,
 Massed till we dare not step, then scattered out,
 Each one a passionate discovery!
 How long he shared them—minute, hour,
 Who shall gauge delight!—a brief eternity
 He gave my gladness perfect right of way
 While men and harvest waited. Turning home
 He talked of leaves so modified to meet
 Our arid climate, reservoirs to hold
 The moisture, little surface to the sun;
 I trotting by him, deeply satisfied.

My mother told me they were portulacas
 Gone wild, once planted by an earlier tenant.
 No! They were rich enchantment, silken flame,
 A whole new continent in Fairyland!
 That timeless, golden afternoon I held
 Grave converse with my Fellows of the Sun,
 Companionship beyond the need of words.
 Deep in the sun-drenched wheat, content, I heard
 The whirring binders drop their tawny loads
 Nearer and nearer, clanking nearer still;
 A pause, a question, then my father's voice,
 Abrupt, imperative, "Swing out, I say!
 The child shall have her flowers! Swing around!"
 So past my seignory the shining swathes
 Whose mile-long straightness was my father's pride

Veered suddenly, and made a vexing end.
 While drivers muttered, brothers jested, gay
 Unstricken blossoms bravely cupped the sun.

(from *Portulacas in the Wheat* [Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1932], pp. 13–16)

Hills

I have found peace
 Walking the quiet hills;
 Quick release
 From truculent ways of men.
 When life's feverish hurry
 Returns and fills
 My breast, I shall walk them again,
 And again and again.

Before I had striven
 My heart had abandoned strife;
 Now I have given
 Over effort and pain;
 Why should a dusty desk
 Command my life,
 When God is offering hills
 Washed clean with the rain?

(from *Portulacas in the Wheat* [Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1932], p. 38)

Tramps

Their faces are blurred with living,
 Like hills obscured by rain;
 They rise in the morning, early,
 From corners where they have lain
 Beside the traveled highway
 Or empty shacks in town,
 Before starched wives can shame them,
 Or hustling husbands frown.

They roll their meager bedding,
 Then stare at weeds they have pressed,
 And twitch their coats around them,
 And scowl, and have had their rest.
 They take the road: where timber
 Stands vigorous under flood,
 And slopes man has denuded
 Are gravel and gullied mud.

(from *Portulacas in the Wheat* [Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1932], p. 52)

The Cliff

Peace has left my heart,
 Driven by dull chatter
 On dingy street
 To a place apart;
 But I know where she is hiding.
 There's a cliff where pines are riding,

And exultant winds confiding
 Strange intentions of their own.

I shall make my way alone
 Past the green alfalfa tillage
 At the far end of the village,
 Skirt the coulee, dropping down
 Till the rounded knolls behind me
 Hide the chimneys of the town
 With their small insistency,
 And no curious eye can find me;
 Only then shall I be free
 For the prairie and the foothills
 And the cliff that summons me.

Free! To run, and free to loiter,
 Free to follow out of sight
 Startled rabbits' headlong dash
 And the screaming curlew's flight
 As they wheel and reconnoiter
 And protestingly retreat
 I shall climb the lichened boulders,
 Studying red and black and orange
 Mantling their aggressive shoulders;
 Lean against their warmth to trace
 Lovely gray-green lichen lace
 Edging every scarlet splash;
 Throw myself full-length to drink
 Icy, bubbling springs that wink

From the shaley hill.

Leading upward from the rill
 Is a deer trail hunters follow,
 That winds high above a hollow
 Where the bluebells are a lake.
 One quick, stinging breath I take
 Coming near.
 I shall stand there long, and gaze,
 And go softer on my ways
 From that passion of blue flame.
 Once so quietly I came
 That I glimpsed a wary deer
 Marshalling her baby fawn;
 They were there—and they were gone.
 I shall climb the steepening ledge
 With its fern and cedar scent
 Into timber; almost blind
 To the painted cups and lovage
 For the bluebells in my mind.

On the cliff's sheer eastern edge,
 With the valley wide below it,
 Stands a tree that loves the granite
 And the cloud-sweep and the wind.
 Its grim roots to me are kind.
 I shall so sit so quietly
 Chipmunks think I do not matter,
 Scampering like mad across my feet.

I shall neither feel nor think,
 Nor with teasing values reckon;
 If I sleep I shall not know it.
 I shall rest; and cease to be
 All that people know of me—
 Idly glad of gay beletus
 Netted curious underneath,
 Of the drifting vapor wreath,
 And the pine cones' deadened patter
 On the needles and detritus.
 If shy orioles reappear,
 Partridges resume their drumming,
 Glowing cedar birds flash free,
 I shall smile, for peace is near;
 But I shall not look or beckon
 Or entreat her swifter coming.

When the wind has hushed its story,
 And the rounded moon swims pale
 To confound the western glory—
 When her mysteries prevail,
 And squirrels quit their firs,
 And haunted birds fall dumb,
 Peace will know that I am hers;
 Peace will touch my breast, and whisper,
 "Come!"

(from *Portulacas in the Wheat* [Caldwell, ID: The Caxton Printers, Ltd., 1932], pp. 67–70)