"Living its Strange Life" A literary biography of Margery Latimer from the archives in 18 scenes

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by

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Introduction:
Three Visions of Portage

“I only enjoy a place where I write and that’s Portage.”
-Margery Latimer to Jessie Gruner.
February 9th, 1926, on vacation from Pasadena, California.

Portage, Wisconsin is a place defined by passing through it. It was once a major hub of passage, via river and canal, from the Great Lakes to the Mississippi River. Today, the town, home to just over 10,000 people, is little more than a distant suburb of the state capital, Madison, 35 miles to the south. On the drive up 91-North, billboards advertise Ho-Chunk casinos, water parks in the Wisconsin Dells, and the world’s largest Culver’s, a fast-food chain famous for its frozen custard. There are numerous roadside attractions: outside a gas station, a life-sized statue of a pink elephant wearing horn-rimmed glasses; on the roof of a cheese shop, a giant mouse, nibbling a hole-riddled block of cheese. These advertisements are pleas for drivers, on their way to somewhere else, to pull off the highway and stay for a while.

In downtown Portage, banners hanging from lampposts feature two Ho-Chunk Native Americans portaging a canoe above their heads, alongside the town motto: “Where the North Begins.” Portage’s name derives from its ideal geography for portaging, the French 17th century term for carrying a canoe overland between two navigable bodies of water. Positioned at the shortest distance between the Fox and Wisconsin Rivers, which bisect the state from East to West and North to South, the place is referred to as Kahkamohnakaneh by the Menominee tribe, meaning “at the short cut.” The Ho-Chunk call it Wauwauonah, meaning “to carry on shoulder.” The French called it Le portage, which evolved into its current name during American occupation of the Northwest territory in the late 18th century. This geography established the town as a central location in the fur trade and the transportation of supplies further west.

In 1828, the United States Army erected Fort Winnebago, on a hill overlooking the convergence of the rivers, to regulate the fur trade and prevent the native population from taxing travelers utilizing the portage point. In 1876, construction was completed on the canal linking the Fox and Wisconsin for steamboat passage. However, as early as 1858, the railroad had already linked Portage to the industrial centers of Milwaukee and La Crosse (which is on the Mississippi River), making the canal increasingly obsolete.

After its golden days in the early 19th century as a transportation hub, Portage emerged as a small city acting as the business and governmental center for the largely agricultural Columbia County. The downtown was vibrant, housing several hardware stores, grocery stores, hotels, bakeries, shoe shops, and the offices of the local paper, *The Wisconsin State Register*, founded by Portage native Andrew Jackson Turner (1832-1905), most famous for his 1893 *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*. Cook Street hosted numerous industries, including a brewery, a tombstone company, a cigar factory, and a large clothing manufacturer which served Northern Wisconsin. On the south side of the canal, a more robust industrial area included a hosiery company, an iron works, a grain elevator, and warehouses to store products destined for transport.

Today, the town is rather quiet. Downtown, with its American flag-lined streets and Victorian facade buildings, is uncrowded; most commerce has been relegated to surrounding strip malls. In the Church Hill Historic District, once-impressive mansions from the late 19th century stand in various states of disrepair. There is a sense of former grandeur, an older world lingering
at the margins and disappearing. It’s a charming but unremarkable place—a town most drive through, then leave behind and forget forever.

Yet in this seemingly placid place there unfolded a revelatory literary and social struggle of the early 20th century. The key players were Margery Latimer, a modernist writer, her mentor, Zona Gale, a progressive writer, and Latimer’s husband, Jean Toomer, a spiritual teacher of the Gurdjieff movement and modernist writer, best remembered for his masterpiece of African American Literary Modernism, *Cane* (1923). Gale and Latimer were both born and buried in Portage. Toomer’s presence triggered the town's most infamous scandal. All three profoundly shaped the town through their short stories, novels, and essays, which sought to contain and comprehend its essence.

Portage made strong impressions on Gale, Latimer, and Toomer; in response, the three authors offer sharply contrasting, sometimes opposing, visions of the town. They have profoundly different perspectives on the place’s Progressive Wisconsin variant of the typically Midwestern values of domesticity, self-reliance, and civic mindedness. Joan Didion writes in *The White Album*, “A place belongs forever to whoever claims it hardest, remembers it most obsessively, wrenches it from itself, shapes it, renders it, loves it so radically that he remakes it in his own image.” Each of these writers perceived a distinct vision of Portage and then attempted, through their literature, to remake the place in alignment with their own image of it. These writers absorbed, in an act of loving attention, some true details of Portage, and then cast that vision back into the world through their writing. As Didion writes, this act is not merely descriptive, but also generative: a wrenching of place from itself. Place inspires art and that art transforms a place through a new creative vision.

Portage offers an illuminating perspective through which to comprehend these three authors’ varied approaches to life and art. For Gale and Latimer, the town was not just their home, but the central subject of their writing. Therefore, their depictions of Portage directly reflect their individual political and social concerns as female American artists working during the onset of the 20th century. Nearly all of Latimer’s fiction—two published novels, one unpublished novel, and over twenty-two short stories—and hundreds of Gale’s plays, novels, and stories are set in some fictionalized rendering of Portage. For Toomer, his time in the town coincided with his greatest fame and authority as a spiritual teacher of Gurdjieff’s mystical philosophy. The town was also the place of his engagement and marriage to Latimer and the setting of his “experiment” (a summer commune based around Gurdjieff’s teachings) that ultimately provoked a massive scandal of sex and race.

One fact is constant for all three writers: in their eyes, Portage stands as a paragon of the small, oft disregarded middle-American town. What they disagree on is what that ideal means and how it should be imagined in their writing. The way these authors lived in and understood the town is so integral to their work that it embodies the very essence of their literature.

Portage and the country at large experienced rapid technological innovation and social change in Zona Gale’s lifetime. Gale was born in Portage on August 26, 1874, when the town was largely agricultural and industrial. However, to her parents, Wisconsin represented the wilds of the American frontier. Zona's father, Charles Gale, born 1842 in Galetown, Ohio, moved to Portage when he was nineteen, following his brother who came to build bridges for the railroad. Gale’s mother, Eliza Beers, born 1846 in Cuba, New York as the daughter of subsistence farmers from England, moved to Portage during the Civil War, because of Wisconsin’s permissive residency requirements for citizenship. In the winter of 1866, Eliza and Charles met square dancing at a Good Templar’s Ball in Portage. Charles worked as a railroad engineer and Eliza as a
schoolteacher. In 1885, when Gale, their only child, was eleven, a crowd gathered around a jewelry store on dusty Dewitt Street to witness the first demonstration of battery-powered electricity seen in town. In 1886, the American Gas Company installed the town’s first gas-powered lights. A year later, the city built its first waterworks.\(^4\) Zona Gale was forty-five-years-old when women were given the vote. She lived on the cusp of the late Victorian and early modern age.

As a result of this changing world, Gale was able to receive a formal education, a privilege that was denied her mother. (Gale was of the first generation of American women able to access formal higher education.\(^1\)) She was an unusually ambitious young woman, encouraged in her intellectual pursuits by her parents. She left home at eighteen to study literature and library science at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, earning a bachelor’s and two master’s degrees.\(^5\) After graduating, Gale worked for six years as a journalist in Milwaukee and New York City, writing for the *Milwaukee Evening Wisconsin* and the *New York Evening World*. But no matter how far Gale travelled from Portage, she always felt compelled to return to her parents and her hometown.

Her idealism about Portage (and small-town living in general) as well as her devotion to her parents formed the foundation of her life and literature. While working in New York City, she met, fell in love with, and became engaged to Ridgely Torrence, another midwestern writer who had moved out east for the sake of his career. But in 1904, when Torrence was visiting his parents in Ohio and asked Gale if he could make a side trip to Portage to meet her parents, she broke off the engagement, writing to him, “I guess I’m married already—to Portage.”\(^6\) She returned to Portage permanently that same year, writing to Torrence that her “old world was full of new possibilities.”\(^7\)

This assessment proved correct: Gale found dramatic successes as an author after moving back to Portage. Her first published novel, which she wrote at home in 1904, was *Romance Island* (1906), a sentimental fantasy about an imaginary island written in an ornate style. It quickly became a critical and commercial hit. The *San Francisco Bulletin* raved, “I don’t remember another book by an American woman, with the rare imagination, the grave and brave originality of this one; or a more cunning art. And Miss Gale is only a girl!”\(^8\) This one book was so financially successful for Gale that she was able to build her parents their dream home—her mother wanted “porches and pillars”—on the shoreline of the Wisconsin River overlooking the Caledonia hills. She had carved above the mantle two of her father’s favorite sayings: *Everything is a thought first and Nothing is so fine as the temple that builds. O may our house be built of love.*\(^9\) She lived in that home with her parents until 1928 when, at age fifty-four, after her mother had died and her father was dying, she unexpectedly married and started her own family. Her devotion to her parents and hometown helped her to promote a public image—of a proper community minded woman—that became her personal mythology, which she in turn included in subsequent books.

Even greater nationwide fame came after she focused her fiction on the seemingly mundane setting of Portage and wrote about characters like herself. After *Romance Island*, most of Gale’s work is set in small middle American towns clearly modeled on Portage and features female protagonists, often older women who are productive changemakers in their communities. It is hard to grasp just how famous Zona Gale was in her lifetime. Her fame began to rise in 1906, built through her winning the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the first woman to do so—for *Miss Lulu Bett*, a hit play in New York City in 1921, and continued to crescendo for another decade.\(^2\) Her fiction

\(^1\) The University of Wisconsin, Madison granted women full coeducational status the year of Gale’s birth.  
\(^2\) Edith Wharton won the prize the same year for *Age of Innocence* which made her the first woman to win the prize for a novel. For more information: https://www.pulitzer.org/prize-winners-by-year/1921.
had enormous national reach, and she used her books and interviews increasingly as a platform for her progressive and early feminist social and political ideas.

Portage was the vehicle through which Gale articulated her vision of small-town life and America at large in the early 20th century. Gale was a progressive activist and a national leader of the municipal-housekeeping movement, which sought, by framing the town as an extension of the home, to expand woman’s social domain into the community through civic projects. She publicized and promoted this idea in lectures, public meetings, and magazine articles. In Portage, Gale made her home a center of civic meetings and intellectual discussion. It was also the place where she met with and mentored many young artists, mostly women, the most serious of those relationships being with Margery Latimer. In choosing to remain single and live with her parents for most of her adulthood, Gale explicitly rejected the traditional feminine roles of mother or wife, believing them incompatible with the roles of public intellectual and artist. She remade the otherwise unremarkable town of Portage into the literary center of her state and popularized it as a place where women could live freely as intellectuals, artists, and active community members. While she explicitly advocated for her social vision in the public sphere, nowhere were her goals more clearly expressed than in her fiction.

As Gale’s creative work became more explicitly united with her feminist social aims, she became even more sought after as a public personality. She carried on the lessons her mother taught her in childhood that when assessing a book, she must learn the proper moral messages within. Gale summarizes her philosophy of politics and art in her essay “What the Day’s Work Means to Me” (1915):

The special privilege of creative work is that this work is essentially social from the beginning...from this truth the creative work can’t get away by any babble about “art for art’s sake.” He can’t help himself. If he does his work truly he has done a social act.

She articulates her vision for how women should behave in society in almost all her writing. Her female characters are simultaneously civicly engaged and devoted to traditional feminine roles as wives, daughters, and mothers. Her characters are models of the “new woman” as imagined by the municipal-housekeeping movement: engaged with the community but not threatening to patriarchal power. Gale’s stories are persuasive evidence in support of critic Rita Felski’s assertion that in early 20th century popular fiction, “the Angel in the House and the New Woman could easily co-exist.”

Gale’s social mission in her literature is evident in Miss Lulu Bett, an acerbic realist play, based on her earlier bestselling novel, about a woman who works as a servant for her sister’s family but longs for freedom and life of her own. In the last moments of the play, Lulu Bett bravely chooses a life of her own making, announcing on the doorstep, “Goodbye, goodbye, all of you. I’m going I don’t know where—to work at I don’t know what. But I’m going from choice.” She frees herself from the bounds of domestic servitude. Gale shows that women should have personal agency over their domestic lives and their labor. Yet even in this rebellion from her sister, Lulu does not threaten larger patriarchal forms of female subjugation.

Gale’s civic-minded vision of Portage connects with her literary output most clearly in her Friendship Village stories. Her most popular work, Friendship Village, is a serialized collection

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3 Gale was a leading advocate for the La Follette liberal Democrats, a suffragist, a pacificist, an activist for women’s rights and education. She was a charter member of the Women’s Peace Party, a member of the Wisconsin Woman Suffrage Association, and published opinions regularly in Wisconsin newspapers supporting progressive views.
of feel-good stories and delicate accounts of small-town life, told through the voice of Colliope Marsh, an unmarried middle-aged woman and town storyteller. These stories became immensely popular and turned Gale, already well-known, into a household name. The first *Friendship Village* tale was published in 1908, and over the next eleven years, Gale wrote 82 more stories and published four collections. Most of the stories center around civic projects undertaken by a fictional women’s organization: “The Friendship Village Married Ladies Cemetery Improvement Sodality.” On the surface, these stories celebrate homeliness, domesticity, and the innate kindness within human beings regardless of background or class; at the center of the work, however, is a progressive political conviction. Gale believed that elective politics could only go so far. Real social change, as argued in *Friendship Village*, was only possible if women worked to reform their communities from within.

Gale’s 1908 introduction to the first collection of the stories explicitly links Portage to the fictional Friendship Village and frames the work as a response to the forces of modern life:

> Friendship Village is not known to me, nor are any of its people, save in the comradeship which I offer here. For us here, the long Caledonia hills, the four rhythmic spans of the bridge, the nearer river, the island where the first birds build—these teach our windows the quiet and the opportunity of the “hometown,” among the “home people.” To those who have such a bond to cherish, I commend the little real hometowns, their kindly, brooding companionship, their doors to an efficiency as intimate as that of fairy fingers. If there were shrines to these things, we would seek them. The urgency is to recognize shrines.

> With us all the Friendship idea prevails: we accept what Progress sends, but we regard it in our own fashion. Our improvements, like our entertainments, our funerals, our holidays, and our very lives, are but Friendship Village exponents of the modern spirit. Perhaps, in a tenderer significance than she meant, Calliope characterized us when she said: “This town is more like a back door than a front—or, givin' it full credit, anyhow, it's no more'n a side door, with no vines.”

> For indeed, we are a kind of middle door to experience, minus the fuss of official arriving and, too, without the old odours of the kitchen savoury beds; but having, instead, a serene side-door existence, partaking of both electric bells and of neighbours with shawls pinned over their heads.\(^\text{14}\)

Gale believed that community and camaraderie of the American small-town could mollify the corrosiveness of modernity. Gale’s vision for the future of small-town America was not backwards looking; rather, she saw Portage and places like it as ideal grounds for her vision of a moral-minded progressive future that cherry-picks the best elements of modernity. She asserts this argument when she writes, “we accept what Progress sends, but we regard it in our own fashion.” In several *Friendship Village* stories, women act as countervailing forces to the amoral male-led world of capitalism and big industry. For example, in the 1911 story “The Fourth of July,” Calliope’s group prevents the town’s Independence Day celebration from being coopted by business interests and instead preserves it as a day of free community-centered patriotism.\(^\text{15}\) In Gale’s *Friendship Village*, women are engaged citizens but never seriously threaten male power. This is much of what Gale means when she writes that the small town is a “middle door to experience.” She imagines it as a place where traditional Christian and domestic values can coexist with some feminist ideas.\(^\text{16}\)

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\(^\text{4}\) The stories were published in *The American, The Atlantic, The Woman's Home Companion, and Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*, and others.
Gale’s moral views always informed her fiction—with the explicit goal of enacting positive social change in Portage and beyond. Most of her work centers around the experiences of communities rather than on individuals. In her essay “Portage, Wisconsin” (1929), Gale writes of the people in her hometown:

We too are losing the slow heresy of “I am” and reaching to the racial certainty that “we are.” And it is a moving thing to watch the esoteric teaching of group consciousness arrive among us by “town improvement associations” as well as by the religious teaching of brotherhood.17

There is an implicit hope in this passage that by portraying the benefits of group-minded social consciousness in her literature, real change can be enacted beyond Portage. A sense of belonging to a community rather than to just one’s home is itself a progressive notion, which provides women more opportunities to engage with the world. Municipal-housekeeping feminism, which Gale was a leading figure of, was built upon Victorian values of homemaking that assumed the moral superiority of women and the properness of their place outside male-led industry and politics. This feminism does not seek to overturn the system of patriarchy or cry out against it but work within its bounds to make women’s lives and communities’ better. It argued that everyone would be benefited if women had more say in the world, whether than be through town improvement associations or through the vote. Gale comprehended Portage through this “Victorian progressivism” and intended to deepen and preserve that view through her writing. She then tried to shape this myth of Portage into an actuality.

No one posed a bigger risk to Gale’s self-edifying myth of Portage than Margery Latimer. Before her sudden death in childbirth in 1932, when she was thirty-three years old, Latimer published four books: two novels, We Are Incredible (1928) and This Is My Body (1930), and two collections of short stories, Nellie Bloom and Other Stories (1929) and Guardian Angel and Other Stories (1932). Latimer began her career as Gale’s star protégée, the person Gale handpicked, paid to be educated, and promoted with the hope she would carry on her vision of place. Latimer and Gale met in 1917, when Latimer was eighteen years old, shortly after she published an original story in the local paper. Gale, impressed by the story, invited her for tea. Many meetings followed, and the two women spent hundreds of hours over the next fifteen years, discussing literature and ideas in the parlor of Zona’s columned home, or on walks along the banks of the Wisconsin River.

To fund her education and fully guide her, Gale founded the “Zona Gale Scholarship” at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. This institutional prize was, in fact, specifically arranged so that Gale could pay for her education without offending the Latimer family pride. When Latimer first opposed Gale’s wishes for her and dropped out of college in the spring of 1924, Gale continued supporting her. She took her to New York City and connected her with book and magazine publishers. Her mentorship was comprehensive, but for Latimer it was both undeniably helpful and at times crushingly overbearing. Meridel Le Sueur, another protégé of Gale’s and a friend of Latimer’s, describes Gale as “a nourishing woman, and with some of the destructiveness of ‘mothering.’”18 Gale strongly instructed her young protégés in her belief in literature’s social role. Latimer initially heeded Gale’s advice—indeed, her early work is lighter in tone and written in a lavish style more in line with Gale’s—but within a few years she rebelled and began to develop her own voice.
During Latimer’s sojourn in New York City, where she lived on and off from 1924 until 1928, her writing rid itself of Gale’s influence in nearly every facet except setting. Latimer resisted Gale’s sentimentality and Victorian sensibility. Instead—reading every international modernist work of the early 1920s that she could find, and especially interested in James Joyce, Thomas Wolfe, and Katherine Mansfield—she embraced literary experimentation. The years of Latimer’s life chart the trajectory of American high Modernist writers. She was born in 1899 and died in 1932 (the same years that bracket Hart Crane’s life). She was a person who sought, with a deep and often tragic urgency, a life and literature that was authentic and original, rejecting Gale's programmatic frame.

In the literary scene of Greenwich Village that Latimer joined, she sought a modern vision of writing to express her new vision of a Portage woman. Reflecting the rival influence of her boyfriend, poet Kenneth Fearing, Latimer developed a restrained and direct prose style, and her work took on darker, more psychological themes. She distanced herself from Gale’s vision of literature as requiring a moral imperative. Instead, her stories and novel centered around complex, often ungraspable, emotional experiences, particularly those of young women. She wrote to Meridel Le Sueur in January 1930 about her writerly vision for her novel *This is My Body* (1930):

I didn’t want to be subtle in this novel. I wanted to lay everything out in the sun, full of life, full of itself, for people to pick up and eat. I want my characters to be so real and normal and living that you have to throw your arms around them and feel their cheeks and suddenly offer your whole life to them forever. What I want is to give the sensation of great complete life and awareness of the body, mind, soul, motion, fingernails even. She wanted to recreate complete emotional experience through language, so viscerally that it would be felt deep in the body of the reader. The awareness she sought to instill was, as she writes, not to be felt just in the mind, soul, or body, but even in the fingernails, the most disposable parts of ourselves. Latimer’s goal was for her literature to be comprehensive: to work upon all parts of a human being.

This vision directly conflicted with Gale’s, which Latimer had come to see as a stifling and limited vision of what it meant to be woman and an artist. Latimer’s work presented a complex, imperfect view of womanhood, while Gale’s characters were often strong, idealized women. Gale argued that to be an artist, a woman must be liberated from the deadening roles of mother and wife so as to give their full energy and attention to their communities and the world; Latimer wrote openly about sexuality and a need for love in a world where women were often condemned for speaking of such things. In an afterward to the republished edition of Latimer’s short story collection, *Guardian Angel and Other Stories* (1984), Meridel Le Sueur referred to Gale as “the high priestess of pure womanhood…a vengeful goddess against the male world, imprisoned in a cage of white, middle-class, Midwestern Protestantism.” Through their correspondence, Latimer and Gale fought over these terms and questions. Gale believed that Latimer should put all her emotional energy into literature with nun-like devotion; Latimer viewed emotional drama and sex as human and therefore an urgent part of her literature. Gale repeatedly criticized—and sometimes directly interfered—with Latimer’s romantic relationships. For Latimer, these relationships fulfilled her and served as fodder for new literary plots and dramas.

The tension culminated in a fight, not over romantic relationships, but over the future of Portage, which stood for small-town life, community, a vision of America, and an idea about the relationship of literature and place. As early as 1924, Gale called on Latimer to follow her own
example, return to Portage, reject any entanglements with men, and devote all her attention to fiction. Latimer at times heeded Gale’s wishes, but increasingly resentment surfaced between them. Gale seemed uncomprehending of Latimer’s new approach to life in art.

Latimer first confronted and then rejected Gale’s mentorship and her vision of Portage in order to fully develop as an artist. For Latimer, like Gale, Portage was the center of her life and work, but Latimer’s relationship to the town was much more fraught. In a letter to her friend Blanche Matthias, sent in the summer of 1925, Latimer explains:

> What is it that Portage does? It is like a monster. Or is it here that I contact the monster in myself, the great, dissatisfied creature who cannot find his food, either in flesh or the other. Such disease here, death, food, sleep. And for an instant I saw Zona as she must see herself – an unhappy child, bewildered, caught, evasive, shrinking behind her mask.  

Latimer describes Portage as a malicious place, where self-evasion, banality, and secret suffering drive most human activity. She sees Gale not as a true artist but as a performer, who hides her deep-seated dissatisfaction by presenting an exaggeratedly sunny mask. Latimer and Gale’s opposing visions of Portage revealed themselves most openly in the women’s respective stories set in the town. While Gale’s energetic women characters seek to reform the town within the constraints of patriarchy, Latimer’s characters suffer under the weight of subjugation and long to break free.

Latimer’s new style reveals itself most clearly in her novel *We Are Incredible* (1928). Although dedicated to Gale, the book is wholly critical of her and her ideas. Hester Linden, the book’s antagonist, and clear stand-in for Gale, is a cold, sexless, domineering woman who manipulates and sucks the life force out of her small band of followers, eventually driving them to suicide. Latimer paints an even more damming version of Gale in the story “Guardian Angel” (1932) through the character of Fleta Bain, a manipulative mentor, who bullies a group of women in a small town and entraps them in their devotion to her. Latimer parodies Gale’s work by describing Fleta as an artist who paints flowers for magazine covers, “always faint and yet real enough to pass.” Vanessa, the Latimer-like protagonist of the story and initially a devotee of Fleta, is disgusted by Fleta’s politeness and evasion, her denial that truth lies within the body, and her love of surface-level beauty.

Latimer’s harsh criticism of Gale’s style and beliefs did not end their relationship, in part because Gale avoided reading any of Latimer’s new work. Rather, the relationship between Gale and Latimer collapsed in the summer of 1928, when Gale abruptly married William Breese, a childhood friend and wealthy widower, and the two adopted a child. Latimer heard of the arrangement not from Gale but from reading an announcement in the local paper. Latimer viewed the marriage not only as a betrayal of their friendship, but as evidence of Gale’s hypocrisy.

In critiquing Gale, Latimer makes clear that their differences were as much aesthetic as personal and centered on their widely divergent understanding of Portage. While Gale’s stories center on community, Latimer’s stories are built out of the tension and desperate yearning an individual feels most when isolated from any sense of belonging. The character at the center of basically all of Latimer’s stories is alienated and suffering young woman. Latimer personally felt this sense of alienation from herself and community most acutely in Portage. In a 1924 letter to Blanche Matthias, one of Latimer’s closest friends, she articulates the distance she feels from Portage society:
I have tried to do much to myself in the interests of literature and, in viewing Portage, I feel much as the girl in my book feels: “I am getting ahead of life by pretending that I like it.” ... I see two artificial worlds – that of society and that of the individual. I find tragic amusement at times in comparing them, battling with them, and making jokes. It all goes in the death of Self but I die too slowly.\textsuperscript{23}

Because Latimer felt this tension between society and the individual—a central theme of her literature and a question that plagued her life—most presently in Portage, it is no wonder she wrote about the place so often. Latimer always wrote about Portage in one way or another, sometimes only providing a pseudonym, such as Onnowac (in “Nellie Bloom) or Abbotville (in \textit{This Is My Body}). It was also the place where Latimer considered herself to be most productive and attuned to inspiration because it was so small and ostensibly bland. In a letter to Mildred Hergenhan in the fall of 1923, Latimer writes,

\begin{quote}
[Portage] has all the qualities I am hungry for; nothing exciting externally but a slow unconscious grip and intensity that makes me wordless. (A frightful and wonderful feeling for one so prodigal with words as I.) It is tiny – and so details, little happenings, are vivid and large. One cannot become hardened to sorrow or suffering here, as one might somewhere else.\textsuperscript{24}
\end{quote}

Portage was the landscape where Latimer worked out her own ideas in writing: of the psychological isolation, the impossibility of truly knowing another person, and the way civilization often stands in opposition to the needs of the soul. Portage was not just a backdrop but a central character of her work.

Although Latimer’s dark vision of Portage developed more fully later in her career, it is already apparent in an early story like “Nellie Bloom,” the first and titular story of Margery’s 1929 collection. Like much of Latimer’s work, this story is about a woman bound by a restricted social order who longs for transcendence, for connection, and love, unaware of where or how to seek these things. The story follows a young despairing woman returning to her town to understand herself and her home more completely. She seeks understanding by imagining the life of a now deceased unmarried older woman named Nellie Bloom, a story that has taken on both sentimental and mythical dimensions in town lore. The girl brings Nellie back to life through her imagination. Her suffering fuses with Nellie’s and she sees, feels, and lives Nellie's life in the town as if it were her own, vividly, and unsentimentally. The story suggests a definition of a small town as a place of individual stories that connect people. Latimer’s story reveals how place, and the suffering unique to it, binds people, especially women, over generations. The possibility for empathy is expressed as this young girl imbues her consciousness with Nellie’s.

Latimer’s “Nellie Bloom” is a direct, darker retelling of Gale’s popular \textit{Friendship Village} stories. “Nellie Bloom” opens, in a manner reminiscent of Gale’s stories, with a picturesque description of the town: “the old toll gate house covered with vines,” the “old man…with his napkin tied round his neck and a porkchop in his hands,” and the birds in the marsh grass.\textsuperscript{25} Unlike Gale’s village, the town is not a place of American optimism, where people support each other. Instead, it is a place defined by loneliness and superficiality. Only in reimagining Nellie’s life, which exists just as a myth, a fiction, does the narrator feel connected to anyone else in the town. What the narrator and this imagined Nellie share is an overwhelming sadness, a grief at the emotional constriction of their lives. For the narrator, the town’s ordinariness transforms into a
manifestation of Nellie’s grief: “Nellie Bloom was there among the blooming plants, the porch boards creaking under her light slippers, her sad face bent.” This story isn’t about the sweet sadness at the end of a long life, as Gale’s stories suggest, but a revelation of the falseness of that picture.

This story does more than poke fun at a small town's banality; Latimer turns a seemingly placid space into a scene of psychological horror. This view becomes clearest in the scene where Nellie sits down with her former best friend, Bird, the woman who ran off with her Nellie's fiancé and just bore a baby with him. The reader expects this moment to be marked by grief or reconciliation, but all Nellie can do is to think about mundane goings on of the town and the furnishing in the living room: “when Bird excused herself, she looked at the new carpet and the smart hangings at the windows. She recalled the subtle arrangement of tucks in Bird’s frock and then began wondering about the new cement walk that was being put in on Main Street past the library.” Banality is a means to alienate people from themselves, the story argues. Such starvation leaves Nellie a deadened machine, horrified by her alien body, silent and utterly motionless, with her arms around her grandma. The only genuine communion that happens in the story is the narrator's identification with the long-gone and wholly mythical Nellie Bloom.

If Gale’s goal in Friendship Village was to argue that empathy naturally arises in small communities, Latimer asserts the opposite. Latimer demonstrates through the character of Nellie Bloom that people are fundamentally alone; collective understanding is an impossibility because no one thinks or understands anyone else. The narrator’s act of empathetic imagination does not occur within the town or among any of the people in it. This idea of the impossibility of human connection and communication is a key argument of modernist literature, one which Gale rejects, both literarily and personally. Latimer’s work is like an inverted or introjected version of Miss Lulu Bett, where Lulu cannot escape her bondage because the community outside is equally repressive. Latimer wholly rejects Galle's optimism and faith in the community's ability to save individuals. She believes that absorbing individuals into false community structures is not a form of saving, but instead an act of starvation.

Latimer was on a path to become an original voice of American Modernism. Her work was published in the same magazines that published Joyce, Gertrude Stein, and William Faulkner. In the 1920s in New York, among other work, she wrote about contemporary politics for The New Masses and wrote book reviews in The Nation and The Forum. In 1926, Mark van Doren, editor at The Century, told James Rorty, editor at The New Masses, that “Margery Latimer seems to be able to tap most of the radical stuff of the middle northwest.” Latimer took Eliot’s sense of alienation and Woolf’s understanding of a woman's interior life and added to that a violent intensity and wild emotional drama that we associate with much more contemporary writers like Sylvia Plath.

Latimer understood that what she was thinking and writing was new. In 1924, at 23 years old, Latimer published a two-page radical literary manifesto entitled “The New Freedom” in The Reviewer. She heeded Ezra Pound’s challenge to “make it new” by calling for an entirely new language to describe intense, often adolescent, emotional life. Near the start of the essay, Latimer writes, “but have you met a man who sends out waving roars from defiant lips because you have murdered a word? You must meet him. Then you will want to keep on murdering words.” The voice of convention, a stuffy man, is rendered in clearly gendered terms. Implicit in the manifesto is a feminist call to arms, a directive for women in particular to write in a new language without shape. Latimer postulates that language can be a true reflection of inner experience, that it cannot only describe, but actively recreate emotional life. Out of this claim, she calls for freedom from
grammatical convention: “if you are grammatical you will shudder at times, but if you are fortunate enough not to be hampered in that way you will sigh long and deeply. Here is ecstasy. Now you are free to add to the race of words as rapidly as you please. Quiet words, crazy words, words with limp arms and broken hearts. Don’t let anyone stop you! Down with birth control!” As scholar Joy Castro writes, this essay anticipates Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), in the need for a woman to reject and escape patriarchal forms of literary authority to retain and deepen her creativity. Latimer’s manifesto is more radical than Woolf’s in its suggestion that an entirely new language be created in which to do that.

This essay also reveals the mystical underpinnings of Latimer’s work. She suggests that through the invention of new words and new ways of writing, one can be made more whole and understand oneself more deeply. She writes, “One word that I create myself is worth more to me than all the other that have been created.” The goal of work is not just experimentation for its own sake, but an unshackling, a transcendence for one’s soul. Writing, she tells us, also can simply be playful. She asks in the final line: “Can’t we give [words] more space for prancing?” Her ambition is to create women-centered literary experimentation for a new kind of writing that reject placidness and builds emotional intensity and sharpness shared between character and reader.

Despite creating some exciting new work while living in New York City, Latimer returned repeatedly to Portage to write. The town, which exasperated her, also anchored her life and her literature. She built a body of work, beginning with “Nellie Bloom” and deepening in the novel *This Is My Body* (1930), that not only explored the tension between small-town middle America and the more socially liberal and urban East Coast but were radically centered on the psychological experiences of young women. Latimer was working within a genre of Modernist literature which explored the conflict between the conformity of the midwestern town and the individuality and social liberation possible in the East Coast. This is seen most famously in Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925,) where Nick Carraway represents the conservative Midwest in contrast to the lavish excesses of Jazz Age New York. Latimer reimagined this classic modernist narrative by keeping the backdrop of the Midwestern/East coast conflict, but centering it on the experience of a woman, building on the works of Edith Wharton Willa Cather, and Zona Gale, in the process. Latimer was poised to make Portage as iconic a place to work out the modern world (for women in particular) as Winesburg Ohio was for Sherwood Anderson’s *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) or Sauk Centre, Minnesota was for Sinclair Lewis’s *Main Street* (1920).

While Gale had no respect for Latimer's literary experiments, several writers did, such as Carl Rakosi and Kenneth Fearing, but the most important of which was Jean Toomer. Toomer understood that out of Latimer’s personal alienation, writing was her attempt at comprehension and revelation. Most of Latimer’s work is autobiographical in more ways that just setting. There are countless moments, images, and lines from her fiction that can directly traced to passages from her letters. Her desire to write, to pour out her soul in confessionals, was all consuming. Toomer later explained this crucial facet of her characters and her writerly ambition: it was for her a form of mystic pursuit, a desire to “ecstatically” blend herself with the many. He adds in the introduction that Latimer “transformed acts of purgation into passages of literature with the hope that her readers would be made new as she has been. Her attitude as regards the function of writing was similar to that of the Greeks – literature as a means of catharsis, as a way of adjusting man to inescapable fate.” Latimer wanted her work to bring palpable change to herself and to the reader. For her, literature about Portage was a spiritual rather than social undertaking.
No one now associates Jean Toomer with Portage and yet he wrote two novels about the place, though both remain unpublished except in excerpts. By the time Toomer met Latimer in 1931, he was well-known as the author of *Cane* (1923), a rhapsodic work of short stories and poetry tracing Toomer’s roots through the deep south.⁵ After *Cane*, Toomer had a spiritual awakening which pulled him away from modernist circles and enmeshed him in the ideas of mystic philosopher and cult leader George Gurdjieff and his Institute for the Harmonious Development of Man. He wrote novels, stories, and essays—most rejected by mainstream publishers—centered on psychological and spiritual themes inspired by Gurdjieff’s ideas. By 1928, Toomer was a leading teacher of the Gurdjieff work based in Chicago, only slightly less popular than A. R. Orange in New York City. (At his peak in the late 20s and early 30s, Toomer had over 400 student-followers.) During one of his lectures in May 1931, he met Latimer, who invited him to Portage that summer to lead a commune where he could teach. He lived with Latimer and six others in the woods of Bonnie Oaks, Wisconsin, right outside Portage in an experiment devoted to the spiritual awakening of its participants.

In Portage, Toomer actualized his spiritual vision, both as a teacher and as a husband. The forest outside Portage also acted as an ideal test ground for Toomer’s goal of establishing a national center of Gurdjieff thought somewhere in the wilderness of America. It was also where he and Latimer fell in love. They married at the local Episcopal church. Latimer wore a black velvet dress, indicating to her community that this marriage was far from conventional, on both sexual and racial grounds.³³ Toomer hoped that the interracial marriage would act as a manifestation of his vision of a new “American Race” free from racial binary, articulating this idea in his unpublished essay “A New Race in America”: “My marriage to Margery Latimer is the marriage of two Americans.”³⁴

Toomer’s two unpublished novels set in Portage articulate his vision of the place. One is *Portage Potential*, (written both in the town and during their honeymoon in New Mexico and California) a 209-page description of what happened at the commune. In *Caracomb*, he offers a 280-page account of his relationship to Latimer and his efforts to shape her into a more "objective"—less emotional—person. In both, Toomer utilizes the town to describe the wildness and disorder that surrounds it and is within it. For him, Portage, distant from cities like Chicago and New York, was a neutral place where the Gurdjieff work could happen, an Ur-America. Toomer built his view on the vivid description of Portage that Latimer articulated in her literature. The town, as revealed in Latimer’s stories, acted an image of conservative and repressed culture where transformation from routine malaise to awakened consciousness is needed and possible.

Toomer’s ideas about Portage, while connected to Latimer’s, were directly connected (perhaps subordinated) to his study and teaching of Gurdjieff. He found in Portage a geography and history compatible with Gurdjieffean forward-looking ideas. Latimer encouraged Toomer to bring his teaching to Portage and he agreed that the surrounding countryside of Wisconsin Dells could act as primal American forest for teaching Gurdjieff’s philosophy. The institute for the Harmonious Development of Man, based on the ideas and methods of George Gurdjieff, as codified by his sometime, later estranged pupil P. D. Ouspensky, taught a system of mysticism centered around the intense simultaneous development of the three parts of the self—the mental,

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⁵ Toomer was a mixed-race Black man who “passed” as white after the publication of *Cane*. His father was a formerly enslaved man from North Carolina and his mother was a mixed-race woman born free in New Orleans. Her father, Toomer’s grandfather, was the famous P.B.S Pinchback, a mixed-race man who had briefly served as governor of Louisiana during Reconstruction—the only black man ever to serve as governor of any state until Douglas Wilder in 1989.
emotional, and physical—in order to access and liberate one’s essential being and escape from the “waking sleep” of banal life. This technique was called the “Fourth Way,” as it promoted comprehensive spiritual development, rather than following one of the three traditional paths of enlightenment allegedly personified by the fakir (emotional), the monk (mental), and the yogi (physical). “The Work,” as it was called by Gurdjieff, combined, in its less controversial aspects, intellectual discussion, music, sacred movements, meditation, writing, and artmaking, all directed to the development of higher consciousness. For Toomer, Portage was a blank slate on which to create in the image of his Master, Gurdjieff. Toomer and Latimer imagined Portage as the site where the transcendence of the individual as taught by this philosophy was possible.

This vision was destroyed by the racism which reared its head in Portage and the country at large. On their honeymoon in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, in the spring of 1933 a slew of largely inaccurate newspaper articles spread across the country which reported that Toomer was Black and depicted him as a dangerous cult leader advocating for radical interracial marriage. The Washington Telegram reported “NEGRO WHO WED WHITE WRITER SEES NEW RACE.” At the center of the hatred directed towards Toomer was his marriage to a white woman, Margery Latimer. The town, which just a few months earlier had seemed to cherish and honor the couple at their wedding, now turned on them. Latimer’s parents received so much hate mail and threats of violence that they had to flee Portage for a few weeks until things cooled down.

Racism destroyed Toomer and Latimer’s peace and their utopian vision of what Portage could be. The silent sense of alienation and lack of empathy lingering under the seemingly placid surface of the town, which Latimer already had recognized in her literature, reared its head as open hatred in the final months of her life. Toomer and Latimer’s progressive dreams were violently uprooted, and Gale’s placid idealization of Portage, briefly threatened, reasserted itself.

In Portage today, Gale’s legacy is everywhere—her books, her homes, her awards—and Latimer’s and Toomer’s existence is untraceable. The downtown arts center is named for Gale, as well as the young people’s theater, and the community choir; her image is painted on murals downtown, and a selection of Friendship Village stories are still read in high school English classes. As designated by her will, Gale’s properties were donated to the town. The home she built for her parents became the Women’s Civic League in perpetuity. Her second home, first made into the town library after her death on December 27, 1938, has since been converted into the town’s historical society and museum.

Gale is still celebrated as the chronicler of the town’s ideals. Gale’s will stipulated that her office had to remain untouched for fifty years, but the town has chosen to keep it preserved indefinitely. The office has red and blacked tiled floors, dark finely carved oak walls and built-in bookshelves. Its windows overlook an overgrown rose garden, identified by a weathered sign as the “Zona Gale Memorial Garden.” Gale’s desk is covered in letters, half burned candles in candlesticks, family photographs, and an uncapped pen, as if Gale had just stepped away for a

Outside of Portage this is not the case. Today, although Latimer is forgotten, Toomer is a much more widely read and known author than Zona Gale, despite the opposite being true in their lifetimes. Compared to her contemporaries, Cather and Wharton, Gale has been given very little attention in literary or feminist scholarship. Why? As Deborah Williams argues in Not in Sisterhood, The New Critics scholars did not view Gale as a true artist “because she wrote as an insider, as someone who lived among the people of small villages and rural outposts; and she participated willingly and publicly in collaborative, collective movements. Gale cannot be ‘liberated from social history’ because of her public affiliation with the female tradition and with other women writers, as well as her lifelong commitment to pacifism; she was obviously very much part of social history. Her work, therefore, could not be depoliticized…” (170).
moment. Leaning on the ornately carved wicker desk chair is a laminated photograph of Gale sitting in that very spot, leaning forward, left hand gripping the arm of the chair, face placid under her coiffed bob, her eyes staring straight ahead into the camera.

Gale’s ascendency and Latimer’s and Toomer’s disappearance complete Portage’s twentieth-century arc. I asked the volunteer working at the welcome desk at the Historical Society if she knew anything about, or if the museum had, any information about Latimer or Toomer. “One second,” she told me and then went to the back room. A few minutes later she came out with a three-ring binder with Margery Latimer Toomer and Jean Toomer written in papyrus font, put together by the museum in the early 2000s. It included photocopies of miscellaneous contemporary (and a few historical) newspaper articles about Latimer and Toomer, almost all focused on the scandals that followed their marriage. This folder, along with Gale’s few copies of Latimer’s books, and Latimer’s burial site in the town cemetery, are all that remain of Latimer in Portage today.

Gale’s sentimental vision of Portage has triumphed over Latimer and Toomer’s. Gale imagines Portage in Friendship Village as a land of equality and community, but her once-progressive vision now appears dated to a contemporary audience, as it reinforces a conception of the ideal community as white, homogeneous, and middle-class, where women are primarily in domestic roles. Latimer’s disappearance as a literary figure isn’t due solely to her early death; instead, Gale played an active role in facilitating that forgetting, aided by the community’s disapproval of miscegenation. To truly understand Latimer, the best resources are far from her hometown, but instead in her literature and the scholarly archives.

Margery Latimer is largely unknown to contemporary scholarship. If Latimer is remembered at all, it is often from these final two years of her life. Her name, when it shows up at all in published works, appears incidentally, in accounts of her husband, Jean Toomer. The most substantial published information about her life is found in a biography of Toomer, Cynthia Earl Kerman’s and Richard Eldridge’s The Lives of Jean Toomer, A Hunger for Wholeness (1987). In the chapter entitled “Portage,” Latimer is described in the weeks before the couple met as “fluttery and wildly dependent” and her life story up to that point is summarized in a single paragraph.37 The ten-month marriage, which ended with Latimer’s death in childbirth, is described dramatically, from their participation in the cult-like commune, to the nation-wide miscegenation scandal, to Latimer’s death, and the subsequent resentment and distrust towards Toomer from the community of Portage. The chapter centers on the intense, somewhat disturbing, idealization from both parties in the relationship: for Toomer, Latimer and he represented a union of a new American Race.38 For Latimer, Toomer was a spiritual guru who she felt could save her from her overly subjective interiority.

Although important, her time with Toomer casts light on only a small part of Latimer’s ever-evolving work as a writer. Her radical vision as an artist is almost lost to history. She was, in the five years before her death, an accomplished author, by all accounts on the brink of a brilliant career. Her four published books are long out of print and all but impossible to locate today. (Although the Beinecke Library at Yale University holds most of Latimer’s archives, as of 2023 they have only one of her four books: We Are Incredible.) A selection of some of Latimer’s stories from Nellie Bloom and Guardian Angel were republished in 1984 by The Feminist Press, at the behest of Meridel Le Sueur, author and friend of Latimer’s, near the end of her life. In an afterward, Le Sueur provides a feminist reading of Latimer’s work, extolling her bravery in invading “the alter of the good women” and crying out with a female language which “in itself was subversive.”
The lack of shame with which Latimer wrote of the emotional lives of women, and broke open cruel patriarchal structures was, as Le Sueur tell us, radical.

The Jean Toomer Collection at the Beinecke Library contains most of the primary sources for this thesis and is the richest source of unpublished information about Margery Latimer, thanks primarily to the loving efforts of Jean Toomer. After Latimer’s sudden death in 1932, Toomer spent the next three years gathering her correspondence. He sent letters to all of Latimer’s correspondents and fellow writers, asking them to send him the letters Latimer had sent them. He compiled and typed a manuscript, never published, entitled *The Letters of Margery Latimer*, which is 830 pages in length. Other than Latimer’s mentor, Zona Gale, and ex-boyfriend Kenneth Fearing, both of whom refused Toomer’s request, it is a remarkably complete collection—a record of love and a sign of respect for Latimer’s work. In Toomer’s introduction, he offers readers a vivid sense of Latimer’s intertwined life and work, and his belief that she had been on the verge of becoming an important writer. He celebrates Latimer’s individualism, her strong faith in the role of literature, and her bravery in publishing work she knew would be misunderstood in a hometown where people found her strange and made her suffer. She was, he tells us, a person who always sought Real experience and human connection, feeling perpetually apart from both the town where she grew up and to which she chose to return, and from the wider world.

The struggle over which writer’s vision of Portage would most shape the future, a seemingly minor personal drama of the 20th century, enacts over the span of a few crucial years broader fights over changes in American values, democracy, and customs that are still playing out today. On the small stage of Portage, Victorian and modernist values clashed, generating vibrant sparks of literature which we can turn to now for insight and inspiration. The erasure of Latimer’s literary vision represents a lost opportunity for a more progressive ideal of the future, one more open, more inclusive, more real, and more artistically courageous. The movement from a Victorian literary feminism to what we think of as today’s feminism was delayed for decades in part due to Latimer’s early death and the subsequent forgetting of her work.

Out of the three visions of Portage, Latimer’s is singular. She sought in her writing a comprehensive vision of the place, which upheld the truthful experience of women longing for genuine community. Resisting sentimentally, her work embraces visceral emotional experience, written with so little self-censorship that it feels contemporary. The center of her work is honesty, an ability to see and render the silent suffering in her hometown and the often-overlooked inner lives of women. Her vision of Portage and the future is the strongest, most worth knowing, because she, as Didion writes, “remembers it most obsessively.” Her creative vision of the town was much less programmatic than Gale’s or Toomer’s, and therefore the most aesthetically progressive.
“Living its Strange Life.”
A literary biography of Margery Latimer
from the archives in 18 scenes.

“I have begun to plant thee, and will labour to make thee full of growing” – Macbeth, 1.439

– Quoted by Latimer in a letter sent to Perry Goldman on January 31, 1930, regarding the
experience writing her novel This Is My Body (1930).

List of Scenes and Dramatis Personae:

NOTE: Some characters will be played by the Narrator. He should inhabit the character
he plays with heart, never with judgment or a satirical bent. The narrator is a fabulous
actor, one of those vagabond artists in the lineage of traveling troupes from Athens to the
American circus. For all his grumbling and bitterness, he is essentially an empathic man.

   Narrator, (fictional). Man, 81 years old. A retired actor born in Iowa. He has a
   Midwestern accent and lumbers when he walks. Wears a shabby long grey coat
   and small spectacles.
   Leo, (2001-present). Man, 22-years-old. Contemporary college student. Curly
   brown hair, roundish glasses. Wears sneakers, jeans, and a T-shirt.
   Margery Latimer, (1899-1932). Woman, late 20s to early 30s. An author. A
   person of seriousness and emotional intensity, revealed through her wide blue
   eyes. She is tall with wavy light brown/reddish hair which she wears short. Her
   skin is pale. She dresses simply and often in black. She possesses all the self-
   doubt, suffering, terror, and (occasional) pure joy of a true artist.
   Jean Toomer, (1894-1967). Man, mid-30s. Author and mystic teacher. A light-
   skinned Black man with a thin and handsome face. His hair is black, oiled, and
   combed back. He has bushy eyebrows and a mustache. He wears a well-tailored
   but mismatched suit: light-colored slacks and a dark blazer. When he smokes, he
   holds the cigarette between his thumb and pointer finger.
   John Hayes Holmes, (1879-1964). Man, 59-years-old. Minister of the
   Community Church of New York and a founder of the NAACP and ACLU.
   Meridel Le Sueur, (1900-1996). Woman, 85-years-old. She comes to this
   production from the year 1984. Her hair is pure white, and her face dappled with
   sunspots. She wears large square glasses, a flowing striped blouse, and multiple
   long bead necklaces.

2. Jean and Margery Meet. The two encounter each other for the first time at a Gurdjieff
   meeting at the Groves’ apartment. May 1931; Chicago, Illinois.
   Jean Toomer, Margery Latimer, Leo, Narrator, various students.
   Jeremy Lane. Man in mid 30s. Follower of Toomer’s Gurdjieff group, spouse of
   Betty.
   Betty Lane. Woman in mid 30s. Follower of Toomer’s Gurdjieff group, spouse
   of Jeremy.
Leo Egger

**Lane’s Daughter.** A child of 3 years. She wears a taffeta dress patterned with rosebuds, and a long ribbon tied in her hair.

**Yvonne “Tockie” Dupee.** Woman in late 20s. Follower of Toomer’s Gurdjieff group and a onetime romantic partner of Toomer. She is slightly dissociated.


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3. **A Story from Nellie Bloom:** “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold.” An imagined rehearsal of a screenplay adaptation one of Latimer’s short stories published in the Reviewer in 1924 and subsequently collected in Nellie Bloom and Other Stories (1929). 2023; a film studio.

**Narrator, Margery Latimer, New York Times.**

**Kenneth Fearing, (1902-1961).** Man, late 20s. Proletarian poet, pulp novelist, and bohemian of the Greenwich Village. He drinks often and too much. His clothes look slept in; his trousers are ragged, and his hair disheveled. He wears round glasses and a hat.

**Alice Neel, (1900-1984).** Woman, 35-years-old. Renowned American portraitist. She wears a plaid short-sleeve button-up shirt and black jeans, with flecks of paint here and there. Her hair is black and shoulder length.


**Nikolai Bessaraboff, (1894-1963).** Man, 30s to 40s, Russian. Translator of Gurdjieff’s philosophy books into English and expert of Russian musical instruments. Business attire.

**Mr. Arnold, (fictional).** Man, early 60s. A character from the story “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold.” Wears working class attire from 1920s.

**Mrs. Arnold, (fictional).** Woman, late 50s. A character from the story “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold.” Wears housedress and winter cap.

**Film Director, (fictional).** Demanding man in a pinstriped suit and a mustache evocative of John Waters.

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4. **Zona Gale and her Homes.** An introduction to the relationship between Margery Latimer and Zona Gale and an account of visiting the Museum of the Portage and the Women’s Civic League in Portage during the summer of 2022. 2023; a stage.

**Leo, Margery Latimer.**

**Zona Gale, (1874-1938).** Woman, late-50s to early-60s. Author and progressive social advocate. She wears a long flowing house dress, a fur coat, and a gold necklace. Her clothes are expensive but tasteful. Her hair is blondish-brown and worn short. She is polite and precise in manner and speech.

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5. **Latimer in College.** The story of Latimer’s early college years at Wooster College, Columbia University, and then as a receipt of the “Zona Gale Scholarship” at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Fall, 1922; Madison, Wisconsin.

**Narrator, Margery Latimer.**

   Leo.


   Margery Latimer, Narrator, Leo, Kenneth Fearing, Zona Gale.

   Landlady. Woman, in late 60s. Casual attire.

8. **A Long Trip.** Latimer and her mother go to California. June 1925 – May 1926; various locations including a transcontinental train.

   Narrator, Leo, Margery Latimer, Kenneth Fearing, Zona Gale, Gotham Review.


   Reverend Daniel Corrigan, (1900-1994). Man, in his late 20s. The progressive minister of St. John’s Episcopal Church in Portage. He has large ears and well-groomed black hair. Wears a black shirt with a white clerical collar.

   Irishman. Short man with red hair, thick Irish accent. Train attendant. He wears a company uniform.

9. **The “Victim and Saint.”** Latimer reads We Are Incredible (1928) to Gale. Autumn 1925; Portage, Wisconsin.

   Margery Latimer, Zona Gale, Meridel Le Sueur, Narrator.

10. **A Puppet Show.** Leo questions how best to remember Latimer’s legacy and performs a selection from her novel, This is My Body. 2023; puppet theater.

    Leo.


    Margery Latimer, Kenneth Fearing, Narrator, Leo.

    Eli Siegel, (1902-1978). Man, late 20s. Russian, but with no accent. Poet and founder of the philosophy of Aesthetic Realism. His clothes, like Fearing’s, are rather disheveled.

    Leslie Rivers. Early 20s. Fearing’s and Latimer’s roommate. Novelist who struggles to write.


    Zona Gale, Margery Latimer, Meridel Le Sueur, Narrator, Leo, Leslie Cameron in Evanston Review.


    Margery Latimer, Jean Toomer, Helen Dupee, participants of commune, Leo, Narrator.
14. **The Honeymoon.** The wedding and “the miscegenation scandal.” October 1931 – July 1932; various settings across America, including Santa Fe, New Mexico and Carmel-by-the-Sea, California.
   Narrator, Margery Latimer, Jean Toomer, Leo.

15. **Latimer’s Death.** Latimer’s death in childbirth. August 1932; Chicago, Illinois.
   Meridel Le Sueur, Narrator, Leo.
   **Horace Gregory, (1898-1982).** Poet, editor, and translator. Friend of Latimer’s from college.

16. **Burial.** Latimer’s funeral—shortly before Gale lectures about Latimer at the Pen Women’s meeting. August and October 1932; Portage, Wisconsin.

   Jean Toomer, Margery Latimer, Narrator, Leo.

18. **Epilogue: Zona Dreams of Margery and Margery Dreams of Zona.** Empty stage.
   Margery Latimer, Zona Gale, Narrator.
1. Prologue: Hello.

Portage Railroad Station, 1884.41

LIGHTS RISE SLOWLY. HOUSSELIGHTS STAY ON.

NARRATOR stands alone on stage. He wears an old and ill-fitting grey overcoat. In his old age, NARRATOR is growing thin. The stage is empty. NARRATOR picks his teeth with a toothpick for a long time, finishes, breaks the stick between his fingers, and throws it on the stage. We are in Portage, Wisconsin. NARRATOR waits until the audience is quiet and then begins speaking.

NARRATOR
Alright, alright. Okay. It seems like everyone is here. Hello everyone. This is our first preview, so don’t be surprised if there’s some tinkering that happens live tonight. (Pause). As you might have inferred by these glasses sitting precariously on my nose bridge here, I am—or more accurately, I’ve been appointed—the narrator of this thesis…play. Here (he holds up a binder overflowing with loose papers) is all the research that Leo gave me to work with. He asked me, because of my background, to help him organize this unwieldy mess of letters and manuscripts into some kind of narrative. I’m going to try my best here. But there’s a lot to work with.

(Small pause, he adjusts his glasses.)
Let me tell you a bit about myself. I’m an actor by trade; I’ve mostly worked in and around Chicago and Minneapolis and toured the canon of Shakespeare and Wilder across the Midwest. I’ve been retired for some time, but when certain projects call, I simply cannot resist…much to the chagrin of my children. If you’re in the audience tonight, Sophia and Ricky, I love you. And I’m sorry to be preoccupied with this.

(He blows a kiss into the audience. He sits on a stool. Wipes away sweat on his forehead with a handkerchief.)
I was born, according to my mother, at 10:23 in the morning at the Methodist Hospital in Des Moines, Iowa. The day was August 7th, 1942—a few hours before the start of the Guadalcanal
Campaign against the Japanese. Of course, I don’t remember the details of my birth, nor do I know much about the island hopping of our American boys, but I am rather sure both happened. Because I’m here before you. And we’re not speaking Japanese. (*Dry laugh, Beat.*) I suppose something like this will be a…common theme of our next hour or so together: how to know a person from the past through their archives, especially when, even while they lived, their own identity was mysterious to themselves. It is also a story which questions how history is comprehended, distorted, reimagined, and recontextualized through art and artmaking. What we are about to—

(*He breaks from his script and looks off stage.*)

Okay, I’m sorry, but these (*pointing to his glasses*) are really irritating me. I don’t know if it’s a budget problem, but I think the property master, the props man, excuse me, left in the old prescription. Did you get these at a salvation army shop? I really can’t see a damn thing. If it’s okay with you [name of stage manager] I’m gonna, simply, just take these off. Alright? Okay.

(*He tosses the glasses onto the ground. He rubs his temples.*)

Alright. Before we really get into this, I want to say this to all you out there who I know are watching, but I cannot see: I understand that you may have many questions now, about this form, about what this thesis is about, and, more than anything, about why you should pay any attention to what follows here. I hope I will provide satisfying answers in due time, but of course, I cannot promise anything. After this event concludes, any questions you may still have please send to this address:

(*Holds up a sign that says: “leo.egger@yale.edu”*)

and we will get back to you….in two to five business days. Alright, [name of the stage manager] let’s begin.

*He picks up a bell from behind the stool and rings it. A moment of transition. The lights focus onto the stage. House lights turn off. The play has begun.*

This is the story of Margery Bodine Latimer, later Margery Latimer Toomer, a writer born at the turn of the 20th century in the small town of Portage, Wisconsin. Imagine, if you please, our stage as the town.

*This is purely imaginative. The stage remains bare. Sound effects or other technical means of suggestion are discouraged.*

Twelve thousand years ago, at the end of the last ice age, glaciers receded and made this land. Yes, this land here, these riverbeds. Look, the sand on these banks is fine and golden, made of crushed sediment, deposited by melting walls of ice. *Twelve thousand years ago.* That’s not so long, now, is it? About 360 generations. It remains, at least to me, fathomable.

Here is the great Wisconsin River which flows westward through our state into the Mississippi. Here is the Fox, smaller but *respectable*, flowing northerly into Lake Michigan. These rivers are the veins of Wisconsin, down which lumber, canoes, steamboats, and rafts bobbed their way out West. Look. Portage is situated on the narrowest piece of land between these rivers, making it a good spot to build a town. In fact, this is where the name comes from: Portage was the best place to *portage* a canoe from one river to the next. To those here who weren’t Boy Scouts, portaging refers to carrying a boat overland from one body of water to another.
(Aside.) The only activity I remember doing with my father was an annual fishing trip we took to the Northern Highlands of Wisconsin. I hated more than anything when he made me portage with him. I was much smaller than my father then, so the lip of the canoe would grate against my shoulders and leave them raw. (Small beat, then aside breaks.) But enough about that.

Here is the now-defunct canal which once connected the two rivers. (He consults his notes in the binder.) It’s 2.3 miles long, 75 feet wide, and 7 feet deep. Digging began in 1838 with just shovels and wheelbarrows. Eventually the Army Corps of Engineers brought some heavy machinery, but still, the canal wasn’t completed for steamboat travel until 1876. By 1858, however, the railroad had already linked Portage to the industrial centers of Milwaukee and La Crosse, which made the canal rather obsolete even when it was brand new. Bulldozers dammed the canal in 1951 after years of limited use. Nowadays, the town celebrates “Canal Day” on the first weekend of July. The Presbyterian Church sells brats, hotdogs, and cupcakes; there’re walking tours of the historic district and the civil war encampment; and for the kids, there’s balloon sculpting and arrowhead necklace making. It’s a good time. You should come someday. Just 30 minutes north of Madison.

Here is Main Street. It’s what it sounds like. You’ve got American flags waving lazily in the breeze, some bars, a pizza shop, and a mural with an illustration of western settlers and steamboats. There are a few boarded up-shops here, and here, and there too. A couple miles north is the railroad station, which is not used much anymore of course. Further from town there’s a plastic manufacturing plant, a couple lakes for the kids to swim in, Silver Lake cemetery, and a hell of a lot of dairy farms all around us.

Okay, now imagine right this way is Edgewater Street which runs perpendicular to the Wisconsin River, there. This is the big white house Zona Gale built for and lived in with her parents. Gale was Latimer’s mentor, whom you’ll meet soon enough. Gale lived in this house until June 1928, when at the age of 54 she married widower William Breese, a manufacturing titan who ran a hosiery plant in the town. Make a left down McFarlane Road, walk ten blocks, and we end up at the house Gale lived with Breese until her death in 1938. It’s a grand brick house, with a sunroom, a rose garden, spiral staircases inside, and a lovely office on the right there, for Gale to write in. Gale donated both homes to the town after her death. The white home is now the Women’s Civic League, and the brick one, once the library, is now the Historical Society. A roadside historical marker stands outside her second home designating the importance of the site. “Home to Zona Gale:” the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in drama, a proponent of early feminist ideas, and a fantastically popular chronicler of the stories of women, girls, and small-town American life in the early 20th century.

Walk just half a block from where we are and make a left down West Marion Street and we arrive at the home Margery Latimer was raised in and lived for most of her life. It’s a simple white two-story home with a gabled roof. The grass is sunburnt yellow. On the curb there’s no historical marker, just trashcans waiting for pick up.

Despite Latimer’s many achievements—her four beautiful, strange, emotionally resonant books published in her lifetime, her literary experimentation, her singular vision of being a woman in
American, and the fact that almost all her work is set in Portage or a stand-in for it—Margery Latimer is forgotten in this town. She is forgotten in history. She is forgotten in literature. She is worth knowing.

Why is Latimer forgotten? (He rubs sweat off his brow, opens binder.) Well for one, fear of miscegenation regarding her marriage to Jean Toomer, a Black author best known for his modernist classic, Cane (1923). When news of the interracial marriage blew up in newspapers nationwide, racist vitriol exploded in Portage and the country. This scandal is one that the town, proud of its progressive heritage, wants badly to forget.

Secondly, Latimer’s vision of the town is unknown because of historical disinterest in scholarship in women writers, particularly those labeled as regional writers. A lack of engagement with Latimer’s vision of small-town American life happened even during her lifetime; her mentor, Zona Gale, disapproved of her writing, which was both experimental and critical of the emotional falseness of communities like Portage. Gale’s positive vision of Portage did not have room for Latimer’s modern and darker vision of the narcissism and lack of empathy of most human beings. She helped to accelerate Latimer’s literary disappearance and because of her public and financial success, she continues 85 years after her death to have a great deal of say over what is remembered in Portage today.

It’s about time to see the story of this town from Latimer’s eyes. It’s time to see her life as she understood it while she lived, not as others did.

What follows here will not be comprehensive. It’s a small window into Margery Latimer’s life, the people she knew, and the town she called home. It’s a story built on archival research (holds up binder) and site visits, told through letters and literature. It is about a person who comprehended life through writing and wrote from life. It is about a person who—

LEO enters.

LEO

Sorry, am I late?

NARRATOR

Yes.

LEO

Ah, okay, sorry, sorry. My bad, really. (To NARRATOR, who he hands a few more loose pages.) Take this please and try to incorporate it in this run if you can. (To audience.) Hello everyone, I’m Leo Egger, a second semester senior at Yale University. This is my thesis for the Humanities department. It’s advised by Karin Roffman, to whom immense gratitude is owed.

(Beat.)

I’m going to try not to interfere too much with this story, but I thought I’d introduce myself and my relationship to this work before we really get started. As my narrator probably already told you, this story is—where are your glasses?
I got rid of them.

What? That’s not an option. The glasses are essential.

I couldn’t see out of them. They were giving me a headache.

(Breath.) Okay. Where are they?

Okay…you broke them. Well, we need new glasses. Would you please go backstage and talk to [name of prop’s master] and get a new pair? You can punch the lenses out if they bother you. I’m sorry we’re not a high budget operation here, alright? Our financial resources went to research, not props, okay.

Alright, alright.

I apologize. I understand this may seem unimportant, but things like this matter.

(Grumbling.) You just want me to look like you.

Alright. Here are the rules of this play. Generally, anytime a character who is not me or Leo speaks, what they say is a direct quotation. Occasionally I play a character. That also is a direct quotation. The only exception to this rule will be when a scene or dialogue is played out that is pulled from Latimer’s recollection of events or paraphrase of speech in her letters. Still, these scenes will be entirely built from the archives. I will alert you when such moments arise. And if you aren’t certain, the endnotes are very detailed.

NARRATOR exits. He calls out to the prop’s master offstage.

The swirling chronology and style of this biographical essay seeks to serve the life with the material we have. What follows is Latimer’s vision of her life as she wrote about it in her letters and in her literature. Almost all the evidence for this thesis I collected from Latimer’s personal archives. This is not a play exactly, but a biography in theatrical form told in eighteen scenes. I
chose this form because I wanted to combine clear narrative structure with direct engagement with archival materials. A straight narrative or an analysis of letters alone, I thought, wouldn’t serve what made Latimer most interesting, which is how her life and work responded to each other.

But before we get into that, let’s talk basics about Latimer as an artist, which is why we are here in the first place. This thesis is about Margery Latimer: a forgotten American Modernist writer whose work was published in the late 1920s and early 30s. By modernist, I mean an interesting amalgam of modernism writers and thinkers. Like Sherwood Anderson, Latimer’s work is set in the midwest and exposes the underbelly of seemingly mundane customs and life within small towns. Like Edith Wharton, Latimer’s writing explores how custom can be soul-crushing for women. Like James Joyce, she is excited about what experimental language can do. Like Virginia Woolf, she believed in writing as a way to explore the interior lives of women. And although not wildly innovative in terms of style, her work is modernist for its psychological astuteness, the intensity of emotional drama depicted through the interiority of women, and its interests in the limits and possibilities of language. Underneath her descriptions of placid settings and interiors, she shows that there lies an unsettling violence which threatens to break the surface at any moment. When I went on a research trip to Portage for the first time, with her descriptions of the town and its people in my mind, I felt this vision manifest.

(Pause. He sits on the edge of the stage.)

Like almost everyone who knows anything about Margery Latimer, I first learned about her by reading about her husband, Jean Toomer, the author of *Cane*, a collection of short stories and poems about the American South, first published in 1923 and considered a masterpiece of Black literature and Modernism at large. I read *Cane* my sophomore year at Yale in Professor Ernest Mitchell’s fabulous course, “Novels of the Harlem Renaissance.” I studied Jean Toomer’s archives in the James Weldon Johnson Collection at the Beinecke Library for a final paper I wrote comparing Toomer’s prose style with Alfred Stieglitz’s *Equivalent* series, which are his thousands of abstract photographs of clouds.

*NARRATOR returns, wearing a new pair of glasses.*

(to NARRATOR) Oh, gosh, look! So much better. Thank you. Really, thanks so much.

*NARRATOR waves LEO off.*

(Back to audience). Anyway, during that research at Beinecke, I came across Latimer’s name and out of curiosity, I started reading her letters in the archives. Immediately my imagination was caught by the intensity and vulnerability of her language, her ability to articulate a desire to free herself from her own history and personality—to discover truth that was outside herself. To remove the burdensome veil of ordinary life.

I remember one the first letters I read, which has stuck with me still, about a trip she took to Chicago in 1924. She was at the Art Institute of Chicago and saw “a strange looking foreign man—Italian, in overalls and rough shoes” who couldn’t afford to pay the entrance fee. She went up to him and asked if she could pay for him and show him the pictures. She writes, “then he looked so strange and bewildered and tight inside, unfinished, that I felt like him and I had to
smile into him hard…He did, too, a lovely one and then he turned and stumbled away as though he had no toes at all, and I could see the trail of blood they left on the white marble floor…” Latimer captures, in surreal terms, a grief that comes upon her when she sees a stranger she communes with somehow but cannot know. That image of blood on a sterile white floor has imprinted in my mind. It captures the feeling of her literature.

(Pause.)

After reading many of the letters, I read Latimer’s novels and stories, which are about women (and some men) emotionally constricted by custom, upbringings, nations, and communities. Her characters long for rebellion, to discover deep freedom, but the path to realizing that confounds them. Latimer’s characters mirror her letters; later her letters mirror the experiences of her characters. She works out the structures of emotional life in her writing, both in her letters and her formal literature. Sometimes what results is unnerving; sometimes it’s revelatory. Often, it is raw and emotional. Always, it is honest.

NARRATOR
Stay focused my friend. We’re here for a story.

LEO
Oh. So, as I said, I met Latimer first through her letters in the archives and then through her stories and novels. This project is built almost entirely on archival research: at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, at the State Historical Society in Madison, and at the University of Wisconsin, Madison’s Memorial Library Rare Books collection. I also took a couple site visits to Portage.

(Pause.)

NARRATOR
I’ve been meaning to ask you: why is Latimer’s collection here at Yale and not Wisconsin?

LEO
Well, because of her husband, Toomer! After his death, his archives were first donated to Fisk University and then transported to the Beinecke Library in 1985 at the request of his second wife, Marjorie Content Toomer.

NARRATOR
But why is Latimer’s archives with Toomer’s?

LEO
Well, after Latimer died in childbirth in August 1932, less than a year after she and Jean Toomer married, Toomer compiled Latimer’s letter in the hopes of publishing a book of them. Latimer’s mother, Laurie Bodine Latimer, and Margery’s friend, Meridel Le Sueur, also helped with this work. The three of them wrote letters to many of her friends and contemporaries, asking them to send to Toomer the letters Latimer had written them. Here is a response to Jean Toomer about one of these requests from John Hayes Holmes, Minister of the Community Church of New York City and a founder of the NAACP and ACLU.
JOHN HAYES HOLMES, played by the NARRATOR, sits with his legs crossed in a wooden chair in his office. He wears spectacles clipped to his nose bridge. His hair is parted in the center. The day is November 23, 1933; New York, New York.

NARRATOR as HOLMES

Dear Jean. I was glad to get your letter and thus be reminded of dear Margery. Not that I needed any reminder, for she lives in my mind as a radiant spirit. I like to think of her wonderful eyes, and they used to look so gently and early into mind as we discussed many questions, especially in those days when she was somewhat new to New York.

I never felt that I knew her as I wanted to—she seemed to elude me in a way that left me at times a little forlorn. She seemed to have a certain innocence, a certain unspoiled beauty of inner life, and a shy and yet very courageous searching impulse toward life and its meaning, which I seemed to feel that New Yorkers had lost, if indeed we ever had such qualities, from too much rough and ready contact with the crude realities here in this city. I sometimes think of her as one of the few persons I have ever known who were “not of this world.” But she was penetrating this world, even if she was not of it, as she wanted to truly to understand it and interpret it. And she had a pure idealism! I think of her as a kind of vision that flitted across my life for a little time and then was gone. Her loveliness was all her own, and I am still mourning her.44

NARRATOR as HOLMES rises slowly. NARRATOR removes whatever costume he has donned and returns to himself. NARRATOR sits in the back and smokes.

LEO

Toomer received hundreds of letters, which he sorted and hand-typed into a final manuscript of 830 pages. (I see this manuscript as an of love.) It is a remarkably complete collection, but there are some holes. The most important letters missing are those Latimer sent to Zona Gale, who never sent the letters to Toomer despite promising to and Kenneth Fearing, Latimer’s ex-boyfriend, who declined to send them because he felt they were too personal. Gale’s letters are in the State Archives in Wisconsin. Fearing’s are located all over: some at the University of Wisconsin, some at the New York Public Library, and some at the University of Tennessee. The Beinecke Library holds both Toomer’s manuscript and Latimer’s original letters, but as of 2023 only owns only one of Latimer books, We Are Incredible (1929). Although very difficult to find, I tracked the others down through public libraries and used bookstore websites.

(Pause.)

To fill in the holes in Beinecke’s archive, I made a trip to Madison. There, I went to the State Archives to view Zona Gale’s collection and read the complete correspondence between her and Latimer. The archive at the University of Wisconsin also has some other important letters, mostly between Latimer and two of her closest friends: Blanche Matthias, a schoolteacher, and Meridel Le Sueur. I couldn’t discover why Matthias’s letters never made it into Toomer’s collections or why some of Le Sueur’s most personal letters didn’t either, even though she was in close touch with him.

LEO indicates to NARRATOR that he can take over.

NARRATOR
Le Sueur, like Toomer, is a key figure in Latimer’s story. Le Sueur was Latimer’s dear friend and fellow protégée of Zona Gale, who did much at the end of her life to preserve Latimer’s legacy.

LEO

Le Sueur is fascinating; she deserves a literary revival of her own.

NARRATOR

Born in Murray, Iowa in 1900, she grew up around radical farmers and labor groups. Her mother and stepfather were ardent socialists. It’s hard to believe today, but the midwest was then the beating heart of American Progressivism.\(^\text{45}\)

(Pause.)

After dropping out of college at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts, Le Sueur worked briefly in Hollywood as a stuntwoman and an actress. At Mabel Dodge’s literary salon in New York, she befriended John Reed, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and Theodore Dreiser. She was a leading figure in the proletarian literature movement of the late 1920s, traveling across the country during the depression to write about the destitution of American workers. In the 50s, she was blacklisted as a communist, but kept writing, often in very experimental forms about labor rights, Native Americans, and the midwest. Her legacy was revived in the late 70s with the Feminist movement which celebrated the proto-feminism, open lesbianism, and socialist ideas in her work. At the end of her life, writers from all over the country came to learn from Le Sueur at her home in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

(Pause)

Latimer loved Le Sueur very much and confided in her throughout her life. Indeed, the last Letter Latimer ever wrote was to Le Sueur.

\textit{LATIMER enters, nine-months pregnant. She sits at a desk and types.}

O, she’s here. This is her. Margery Latimer. Margery Latimer Toomer. (beat) On August 15th, 1932, from Chicago, one day before her death, she wrote to Le Sueur:

\textit{LATIMER}\n
I feel ripe and round and ready. I haven’t before. My stomach feels done. Quite finished. Quite complete. The nurse has me all ready and everything ready. She thinks it might come within twenty-four hours. I haven’t felt ready before but now I do, as if I myself were about to fall ripened from a branch into the grass. There is something too sad about my not having seen you through any of this. We’ve been in contact, that is true, but I wanted so much to be near You.\(^\text{46}\)

NARRATOR

In the last days of her life, she was working on a novel which she never finished called \textit{The Ship}, about her experience training in the Gurdjieff spiritual method in an experiment led by Jean Toomer in the forests outside Portage. Would you read the section at the end of part three? \textit{(LATIMER nods and starts rustling through her papers.)}
In this scene, Paula, the very Latimer-like protagonist, is standing out on a balcony at night in her old college town of Madison, Wisconsin. Earlier in the week, she was hurt by the experiments’ participants criticizing her writing as overly emotional and subjective and has decided to leave. Here she is standing, after a lonely day in Madison, and in the night, she has a vision which inspires her to return to the experiment. She sees the world as more than just herself, but as a single flowing mass of life, as a single unity.

Spotlight on LATIMER.

LATIMER

Now it was night and from the top of the hill the water was soft and dark, hardly moving. The land was dark and still, too, with a soft muffled stir occasionally as the wind sounded over the raised water and earth, but nothing was swept or changed by the movement. Everything was still. The land and the water and the wind were all dark together, and then with a smooth lifting motion they seemed to mix and rise, and something that burned like a star rose out of the dark drowse of their being. Something from the land and the water and all people lay in this star. All people were reduced, their living washed out of them. Those who had struggled were the same as
those who had been swept heedlessly on, no arm raised, no cry from within to push them on above their lives. Those who were strong were reduced and from the weak all life was swept away, all traces of soft muttering the cruel hand, the small shaded eye. All were reduced together until they breathed with the dark land and sky and water, held together by the breath of wind that gathered constantly their particles.

Now there were no cries from the people. They were without body, without voice. They lay in their particles, mixed with all. They rose slowly with all into the burning star. And all was still. Now those who on earth had struggled through the corruption of many skins, down to unrisen star, down to the heart of their very lives so that they might rise new speak, be resurrected, now these were wrapped with the others, with those who walked in muffled night, without movement, snatching their food with savage hands, killing, moving like shadows over the earth. Now they were all the same, one as great as another, mixed, living at last and forever in the great burning star that rose from the darkness of all, out of the center of the earth, the air, out of the world's people reduced to their last particles.

O where are the weak and where are the strong? Where are those trails through darkness into darkness, those stones that could never be rolled away? O where are the people, the living forms? O where are the bodies, the voices, the hands? No, be silent! Now we are risen. Now we are one.47

Spotlight off.

NARRATOR
Okay, but we are getting ahead of ourselves. We will come back to this last book, this ending later. (to LATIMER) Goodbye. Thank you. Prepare for 1931. The dinner scene, remember.

NARRATOR hands her a script. LATIMER takes the pregnancy stomach off and exits.

LEO
We were discussing Meridel Le Sueur.

NARRATOR
I’m on top of things, don’t worry. In 1984, at the age of 85, Meridel Le Sueur advocated for some of Latimer’s short stories, long out of print, to be republished. The Feminist Press, the same house that reprinted Le Sueur, published a collection of Latimer’s stories from her two books Nellie Bloom and Other Stories (1929) and Guardian Angel and Other Stories (1932), under the title of the latter.

LEO
I am quite grateful for this book. It introduced me to Latimer’s literature and provided the basic narrative arc of her life.7

7LEO: In addition to the stories, at the back of the book Le Sueur provides a memoir, Nancy Loughridge gives a short biography, and Louis Kampf, Professor of comparative literature at MIT, provides a literary analysis arguing for Latimer’s place in the canon of American modernism.
NARRATOR gestures offstage. MERIDEL LE SUEUR enters.

NARRATOR
In the memoir at the back of the book, Le Sueur characterizes Latimer as an early Feminist voice.

LE SUEUR
(Reading from the 1984 reprint edition.) Margery’s stories, seized from women’s prisons of the past, like messages left on a wilderness trail, warn us, guide us, and certainly give us a sharing in the pain of women between centuries of struggle. The great span of years between 1880 and 1930 are anguish, mute years of women’s struggle out of the tortured cocoon of dead structures. They went far to the edge of their blind exploitation and died there on the rim, leaving strange messages for us to decipher.49

LE SUEUR exits. Beat.

LEO
The goal of this thesis is to rekindle Latimer’s life and her literature in our collective memory. Her life matters, not only because it touches on much important literary, political, and social history, but because of her views on the relationship among autobiography, modernist experimentation, and place. For Margery, literature was a place where she worked things out that she wasn’t always able to resolve in her life, questions of womanhood, duty, and the possibility of really belonging in the world and to her town of Portage. Portage is the stage where these tensions play out most explicitly, particularly between Latimer and Zona Gale. What does it
mean to belong to a place? How is it shaped by artists' visions of it? How did Latimer use her life to inspire art and then how did that art feed back into her life?

NARRATOR
Yes, yes Leo, good questions, but let me help you here.

LEO
With what?

NARRATOR
(whispering) I feel like you’re just jumping the gun a bit right here. To attend to any of these broader subjects we need to begin with the people. Like we talked about.

LEO
(whispering) I was talking about people.

NARRATOR
(whispering) Let’s just get back to this play, ok?

Fine.

NARRATOR
Jean Toomer.

JEAN TOOMER enters.

LEO
Toomer says this in his introduction to the unpublished collection of letters.

JEAN
Margery Latimer, with her reddish-gold hair, luminous grey-blue eyes, transparent skin, and vulnerable consciousness, was like a creation of some other race on some other planet who suddenly found herself transported into the tortured mazes of the human life of this earth.50

LEO
Latimer and Toomer met in May 1931, in Chicago.

NARRATOR
Jean Toomer fell in love with Margery Latimer in Chicago. He admitted he loved her in Portage.

LIGHTS.
2. Jean and Margery Meet

NARRATOR stands downstage. LEO sits upstage on a stool taking notes.

May 1931; Chicago, Illinois. In the apartment of Shirley and Max Grove. A dozen people, including MAX, SHIRLEY, YVONNE, LATIMER, and TOOMER, sit in a circle as TOOMER lectures. Many scrupulously take notes. The audience does not hear what TOOMER is saying.

NARRATOR

May 1931. Chicago. Latimer meets Toomer for the first time at one of his group sessions at (pointing to them) Max and Shirley Grove’s apartment. There are a dozen spiritually seeking characters at the apartment, all devout pupils, followers, really, of Toomer. At this time, Toomer was a leading figure in the Gurdjieff cult in America, second only to Alfred Orage in New York City. Toomer has over 400 pupils in Chicago.

The circle breaks and the people scatter around the apartment, pouring drinks. YVONNE DUPEE, another follower, stumbles around the room (Margery thinks she looks like a “drunken goddess”) while her sister makes faces at her like a
suffering mother. JEREMY LANE, another of Toomer’s most devoted students, hand-in-hand with his wife, BETTY, circle the room, greeting people, smiling widely, and cracking jokes. He looks to Latimer like a reincarnation of the god Pan. Jeremy’s DAUGHTER, little more than a toddler, wanders through the living room with an odd dignity. The apartment is alive with laughter and conversation. The group sits down to eat.

NARRATOR
Before discovering Gurdjieff’s teaching, Jean Toomer had been a star of the New York literary scene in the early 1920s. But then he had a spiritual calling. According to his unpublished autobiography, From Exile into Being, Toomer had a mystical experience standing on the 66th Street L station on an April evening in 1926, which redirected the trajectory of his life.

TOOMER steps out from the dinner. We hear a subway car rattle and see the yellow lights of a train car reflect onto tiles of the station. Lights tighten on TOOMER. The students are still eating behind him and can be seen dimly.

TOOMER
My body and my life were in the power of a Power…I became as a child, captivated by a wonder-work. At a stroke my mind was emptied of thoughts. As a child I gazed raptly. Myself was melted down to a single simplicity. Constrictions and fears, desires, plans, all vanished. I had no thought of myself, no wish for anything other than this amazing present happening. Now was important. Now was all.

NARRATOR
Although Toomer continued writing for the rest of his life, after discovering the Gurdjieff practice, his work centered around the psychological and the spiritual, often composed in highly esoteric terms. His new style was unappreciated by many publishers, including Clifton Fadiman in 1932, then working at Simon and Schuster, who said of his new style:

NARRATOR as FADIMAN
I believe very deeply that since CANE (which had genius in it) you have traversed the wrong road.

NARRATOR
After Cane and Essentials, a collection of aphorisms released in 1931, Toomer never was able to get another book published.

Toomer’s spiritual journey also heightened his discomfort with the rigid boundaries of race in the United States. Toomer had Black ancestry on both sides, but he could “pass” as white. He was often mistaken as East Indian. And by 1924, Toomer stopped identifying as a “Negro” and resisted having Cane anthologized by those—such as James Weldon Johnson—who categorized his work as Black literature. Instead he advocated for a new vision of American life free from a binary conception of race. Regarding his marriage to Latimer in 1931, he said:

TOOMER
There is a new race in America. I am a member of this new race. It is neither white nor black nor in-between. It is the American race, differing as much from white and black as white and black differ from each other. It is possible that there are negro and Indian bloods in my descent along with English, Spanish, Welsh, Scotch, French, Dutch, and German. This is common in America, and it is from all these strains that the American race is being born. But the old divisions into white, black, brown, red, are outworn in this country. They have had their day. Now is the time of the birth of a new order, a new vision, a new ideal of man. I proclaim this new order. My marriage to Margery Latimer is the marriage of two Americans.\textsuperscript{58}

\textit{TOOMER returns to the dinner. LATIMER feels comfortable in the room, which surprises her. When she had gone to Gurdjieff groups previously; or had found herself in any groups at all for that matter, whether classrooms, workshops, or newsrooms, she typically felt a nauseating claustrophobia and spiritual posturing. (Indeed, she felt acutely the falseness of most human relationships.) But here the group “seemed wholly alive and creative,” everyone unfiltered and authentic.} \textsuperscript{59}

\textit{NARRATOR (Flipping through the binder.) The scene you are seeing, emerges from a few of Latimer’s accounts of the night, which she wrote to her friends, particularly one sent to Blanche Matthias in May of ’31. (Beat.) That night, to Latimer everyone seemed authentic, willing to reveal their true selves, except for Toomer. He seemed over-deliberate in every word and deed.}

\textit{LATIMER Aside. I have been so dominated by Zona that I seem to recognize any kind of domination, conscious or unconscious. I feel it, the way you feel damp seeping through a rough skirt.} \textsuperscript{60}

\textit{LEO She recognized a wild power within Jean that he seemed unconscious of, suppressed by the dominant influence of his master Gurdjieff, with whom he had studied at the institute headquarters in Fontainebleau, France. From her painful experience with her own mentor, the ostensibly great, giving, and renowned writer Zona Gale, Margery knew what it was like to be dominated, to have one’s selfhood stamped out by a charismatic teacher.}

\textit{Dinner is over. JEREMY LANE plays the piano. LATIMER sits down on a couch nearby. Her face is warm. She looks down. She holds a glass of water. She looks up. TOOMER is in front of her.}

\textit{TOOMER Is there room here?}

\textit{She nods yes and he sits beside her. LATIMER senses that everyone in the room is observing them, waiting for the moment where they will acknowledge each other. TOOMER looks at her, but she avoids him, staring straight ahead at Jeremy playing the piano.}

\textit{LATIMER}
Aside. As I sat there, I could feel myself changing inside, growing quieter, the elemental parts of myself seeming to merge, turning to cool moving water, like glacial rivers.\textsuperscript{61}

TOOMER  
\textit{(Speaking loudly, over the sound of the piano.)}
Now, I’m going to hold Margery’s hand if I may, Mr. Lane.\textsuperscript{62}

\textit{Jeremy laugh and nods. He flips the page of his music book and begins to play a new song as TOOMER takes LATIMER’S hand in his.}

NARRATOR  
\textit{(Flipping through his folder)} Margery Latimer describes it like this: the moment their skin touched, Jean’s hand seemed to move inside of hers, flesh, and blood flowing into a radiant whole. Margery felt like her hand no longer belonged to her.\textsuperscript{63}

Startled, LATIMER pulls her hand away from TOOMER’s and places it on her lap. She looks ahead.

TOOMER  
\textit{(Whispering.) You’re protecting yourself…You’ve heard things about me.}”\textsuperscript{64}

NARRATOR  
What Latimer may have heard, perhaps from Alfred Stieglitz or Georgia O’Keefe, with whom Toomer spent the summer of 1924, in their house on Lake George, New York, was that Jean had a formidable reputation with women.\textsuperscript{65}

LEO  
Indeed, I find it quite plausible as is suggested in Toomer’s biography, that his allure as a spiritual teacher was wrapped up in his captivating masculinity and charisma. As you can see, there were considerably more women than men in the Chicago group.

NARRATOR  
Although he had many lovers, even a few in the apartment that night, he openly cautioned every woman he was involved with that he wished to remain single and had no interest in marriage.\textsuperscript{66} His feelings about the subject, however, had changed in the last year.\textsuperscript{67} He felt his energy being wasted and decided that without marriage he would remain:

TOOMER  
\textit{(Aside.) unstable, uncosmic, unconcentrated.}

NARRATOR  
In December 1929, at a lecture on Indian culture, Toomer fell in love with one of his students, Emily Otis, whom he described as a charming blond woman from a moneyed Chicago family.

LEO  
His pet-name for her was the “sweetest of the gooses,” and to Emily he was affectionately referred to as “moose.”\textsuperscript{68}
Within a month of their meeting, Toomer was sure he wanted to marry her, but knew that her family would object on racial and financial grounds. He worried at first that if the marriage were to take place, and news came out of his racial identity, it would threaten the Gurdjieff work. He also hoped that if the marriage did take place, the inevitable public controversy would finally give him a platform to launch his “plan for the spiritualization of America,” which included the dissolution of strict racial binaries. He wrote the following note about the prospect of interracial marriage with Emily:

**TOOMER**

(Aside) My act and Emily’s would cease to be ours alone and would become the nation’s, yea the world’s.\(^69\)

**NARRATOR**

On June 19, 1931, Emily sent Jean a letter explaining that she had decided to marry someone else.\(^70\) He wrote in his journal that he had to marry anyway, “such a one as Emily.”\(^71\)

**LEO**

A marriage would not only be unifying for him on a personal level but could have larger political implications that could support his goal of becoming a spiritual leader of the nation.

**NARRATOR**

Latimer also felt ready to marry; she had recently taken steps to free herself from Gale’s influence and—

**LEO**

Was searching for a powerful personality to take Gale's place. Latimer was a person, it seems to me, who jumped from person to person, seeking a savior. First it was her mentor, Zona Gale, in Portage, then her long-time boyfriend, Kenneth Fearing, in New York City, and eventually her husband, Jean Toomer, in Chicago, Bonnie Oaks, and on the road, as you shall see soon enough. These three people also many of the main characters in Latimer’s novel, the plots of which can, as I mentioned, be clearly traced back to Latimer’s personal life.

**NARRATOR**

*(To LEO, shooping him off.)* Stop it. Please. You’re getting in my way.

**LEO sits in the back quietly.**

**NARRATOR**

Where was I... It’s worth saying that Latimer had encountered the Gurdjieff work before meeting Toomer. When she was in New York in the mid 1920s, she attended some lessons led by Alfred Orage, the leading American teacher at the time. The work interested her intellectually, but she wouldn’t submit herself to it, for fear that it would interfere with or dampen her emotional life
which formed the basis of her writing practice. But, in the spring of 1931, through Toomer and his teaching, she finally found herself open to Gurdjieff’s ideas.

LATIMER places her hand back on TOOMER’s. Their fingers intertwine. They sit together silently amid the music, the soft conversation, the puffs of cigarettes smoke. LATIMER watches out of the corner of her eye the way each note touches Jean and becomes a part of him. A great quietness settles over her, rushing from the top of her head, and descending into her body like water. LATIMER describes this experience as an erasure of personal desire, as if the memory of who she once has dissolved.

The whole event has been spiritually overwhelming. LATIMER unlaces her hands with TOOMER’s and gets up from the couch. She thanks the Groves for inviting her over that night, and then, after putting her glass away in the sink, she walks to the door and pulls her coat, light green with gold trim, off the rack. JEREMY, BETTY with the sleepy DAUGHTER in her arms, and TOOMER come up to her, and give their goodbyes.

LATIMER

Goodbye.

JEREMY

Goodbye for now.

BETTY

Goodbye sweetheart.

JEAN

Goodbye.

LATIMER

Goodbye.

LATIMER doesn’t budge. She doesn’t know why. She stands in the open doorway motionless, smiling.

NARRATOR

Latimer stands frozen in the doorway.

LATIMER

(Aside.) Jeremy, Betty, and myself were like three stalks of corn, young, tender, naïve, warmed by the sun of Jean.  

---

8 LEO: Gurdjieff expounded the idea that the only authentic art is “objective art.” By this he means art that results from conscious premeditated effort by an artist, free from subjectivity or arbitrary additions. He also thought that art should be functional, meaning it should assist in the helping people gain higher levels of consciousness and achieve greater understanding. Toomer made serious attempts to live up to this vision of an artist.
BETTY

Honey?

LATIMER

Goodbye again. It was lovely—to meet you all.

*BETTY, JEREMY, and JEAN* say their goodbyes again. LATIMER remains still. *JEREMY, BETTY, and JEAN* being to laugh. LATIMER tries to join in but can’t. She feels tears rising from her chest into her throat. She feels that her body is not her own.73

JEREMY

(Laughing) In another minute, you’ll be Walt Whitman.74

Everyone except LATIMER laughs. As he chants the poem, JEREMY spins his wife around. He picks his daughter up, holds her close to his chest and dances in circles.

JEREMY

(chanting and singing)

GOOD-BYE my Fancy!

Farewell dear mate, dear love!

I'm going away, I know not where,

Or to what fortune, or whether I may ever see you again,

So Good-bye my Fancy.

Now for my last—let me look back a moment;

The slower fainter ticking of the clock is in me,

Exit, nightfall, and soon the heart-thud stopping.

Long have we lived, joy'd, caress'd together…75

LATIMER

(directed only to TOOMER). Goodbye.

LATIMER turns and leaves, as JEREMY continues his performance. She walks slowly down the stone steps into the Chicago night. Max Grove drives her back to her cousin’s house.

TRANSITION.

The next morning. LATIMER in bed. She awakes to sunlight.

LATIMER

Last night, I was washed of sin. I was washed clean. Now, I can choose.76

LIGHTS.
3. A Story from *Nellie Bloom*: “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold”

*LIGHTS.*

*The stage looks like a film set with an interior of a shabby midwestern home. A title card on the set tells us that the scene being filmed is “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold.” The actors playing the couple sit on set with scripts in hand, practicing their lines in the background.*

*NARRATOR enters.*

**NARRATOR**

It’s time to talk a bit about Latimer as a writer. At Leo’s request, we are going to work on Latimer’s “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold” published by *The Reviewer* in volume IV, number 2, in April 1924. *(He carefully takes the magazine out of the folder and holds it up.)* The story was later reprinted in Latimer’s second book and first collection of short stories, titled *Nellie Bloom and Other Stories*, in 1929, after Latimer returned to Portage from New York City. Of that book, *The New York Times* wrote:

**NEW YORK TIMES**

Whether it is of something she has experienced or observed, or merely imagined Miss Latimer writes out of a deep and fruitful personality. Her stories are absorbed into her, then, disciplined by art, released into writing. With such a person, there is no using the terms “objective” or “subjective”; she is neither one nor the other. Her stories are subjective because they are deeply felt and personally expressed in terms that are her own. They are objective because they are disciplined to their purposes, cleanly and artistically set forth.]

**LEO enters.**

**LEO**

I chose “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold” because I think it provides a good case study of Latimer’s voice as a writer. When I read it, I was thrilled. It both comedic and horrible. Surreal and mundane. Like much of her work, the story is emotionally charged, stylistically innovative, and set in the Midwest. It is about people who long to be seen but cannot see.

**NARRATOR**

But before we get into it, it is time to introduce another character: Kenneth Fearing, Latimer’s boyfriend for much of the 20s. They met at the University of Wisconsin, Madison in 1920 and then lived together in Greenwich Village.

**FEARING enters.**

**NARRATOR**

Fearing, born in Oak Park, Illinois, was an accomplished proletarian poet and pulp-novelist. Although raised in a well-off family, in New York he was a legendary bohemian: unkempt, poor,
and often drunk. As you can see, Fearing was attractive in a boyish way: thin with dark messy hair, horn-rimmed glasses and a sharp skepticism, which went hand-in-hand with his playfully immature disposition. In the Greenwich village scene of the 20s and 30s, his nickname was the “drunken poet.” He appears in several of Latimer’s works under the name Ronald. In Latimer’s 1930 novel *This is my Body*, he is a sardonic idealist and womanizer, but also the person who opens the protagonist’s, Megan’s, eyes to reality, sexuality, the city, and modern ways of thinking about art.

**LEO**

You can get a good sense of Fearing’s character from Alice Neel’s 1935 portrait of him at the Museum of Modern Art. In the painting, Fearing sits beneath a single gleaming lightbulb, with a book propped-open, and a cigarette dangling from his lips. His skin is pallid, his glasses round, and his hair a swath of black. The Sixth Avenue “L” train, a recurring image in his work, rattles behind him. On all sides he is surrounded by his characters of destitution: a bride and groom, a soldier, police beating a man, a sleeping baby, and slouched darkened figures with skull-like masks. Out of Fearing’s chest emerges a skeleton holding his heart, which bleeds red.

![Kenneth Fearing by Alice Neel, 1935. Oil on Canvas, 30 1/8 x 26” MOMA Collection, Object 28.1988](image)

**Narrator as ALICE NEEL**

Fearing’s heart bled for the grief of the world.

*ALICE NEEL disappears.*
LEO
A predecessor to the beatniks of the 50s, he wrote collaged poetry full of verve and the energy of the streets. Joseph Mitchell wrote of him in a profile for the World-Telegram:

NARRATOR as JOSEPH MITCHELL
Fearing’s poems are about tear-gas, and packing-box cities, and evictions, and in them are the biographies of thousands of Depression-shattered citizens.80

JOSEPH MITCHELL disappears.

LEO
(To FEARING.) Would you read to us “St. Agnes’ Eve”? I have the book right here. (To audience.) This is the first poem of Fearing’s first book of poetry, Angel Arms, published in 1929. It’s dedicated to Margery Latimer. (To FEARING.) Go Ahead.

FEARING
St. Agnes’ Eve

The dramatis personae include a fly-specked Monday evening,  
A cigar store with stagnant windows,  
Two crooked streets,  
Six policemen and Louie Glatz.  
Bass drums mumble and mutter an ominous portent  
As Louie Glatz holds up the cigar store and backs out with $14.92.
Officer Dolan noticed something suspicious, it is supposed,  
And ordered him to halt,  
But dangerous, handsome, cross-eye'd Louie the rat
Spoke with his gat,  
Rat-a-tat-tat—  
Rat-a-tat-tat  
And Dolan was buried as quickly as possible.
But Louie didn't give a good god damn,  
He ran like a crazy shadow on a shadowy street  
With five policemen off that beat  
Hot on his trail, going Blam! Blam!-blam!
While rat-a-tat-tat  
Rat-a-tat-tat  
Said Louie's gat,
So loud that Peter Wendotti rolled away from his wife,  
Got out of bed to scratch his stomach and shiver on the cold floor  
Listening to the stammering syllables of instant death  
Met on secret floors in the big vacant galleries of night.
Then Louie sagged and fell and ran.  
With seven bullets through his caved-in skull and those feeble brains  
Spilling out like soup.

He crawled behind a water-hydrant and stood them off another half minute. "I'm not shot," he yelled, "I'm not shot," he screamed, "it isn't me they've shot in the head," he laughed, "Oh I don't give a damn!"

And rat-a-tat-tat
Rat-a-tat-tat
Muttered the gat
Of Louie the rat,
While the officers of the law went Blam! Blam!-blam!

Soft music. Violins moan like weeds swaying far under water. 
The vibrant throats of steam-ships hoot a sad defiance at distance and nothing. 
Space curls its arm across the flat roofs and dreary streets. 
Bricks bulge and sag.

Louie's soul arose through his mouth in the form of a derby hat 
That danced with cigarette butts and burned matches and specks of dust 
Where Louie sprawled. 
Close-up of Dolan's widow. Of Louie's mother. 
Picture of the fly-specked Monday evening and fade out slow.

NARRATOR
Okay thank you. Well read.

LATIMER enters. LATIMER and FEARING sit in an apartment in Greenwich Village. This can just be two chairs set downstage.

Fearing, according to Latimer, said of “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold” that:

FEARING
It sounds like sticks and stones thrown together.

LATIMER turns away from him.

FEARING
(Soberly.) No, a lot of silver knives and forks. You can’t connect things.

LATIMER
But there is a most subtle connection.

FEARING shakes his head.

I must remind you of this: it is very good. I know it is.

FEARING exits.

NARRATOR
Nicholas Bessaraboff, a translator of Gurdjieff texts, whom Latimer met him at a writer’s colony in Wyoming, New York, loved “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold.” He said to her:

NARRATOR as BESSARABOFF
I believe in you. You have a masterpiece there but work – work – and don’t let people spoil it – you have a masterpiece.  

BESEARABOFF disappears.

LEO
In this short story, as in many of Latimer’s, she depicts her hometown without sentimentalizing it, pointing to a current of fear and despair which underlies the banality, blandness, and Protestant stoicism of the place. Most characters in Latimer’s stories are unhappy and confused by the expectation that they ought to be happy with their churches, customs, and civility. The characters experience intense emotions in the ordinary progress of their days—sexuality, passion, creativity, anger, the will to power—that burst through the benign surface briefly and at unexpected moments.

Latimer’s stories are all about a desperate search for something true. Repeatedly, Latimer’s characters seek truth in their lives, a thing which they cannot articulate nor locate. Underlying this pursuit is a sense of alienation from their home, their friendships, and the true nature of their own suffering.

To me, Latimer’s synthesis has many parallels with the work of Grant Wood, an American painter from the same generation as Latimer, best remembered for American Gothic. In Wood’s paintings, like Latimer’s stories, the characters and backdrops at first seem ordinary, but the longer you look, the landscape becomes more unnerving, the faces more inhuman. It is a banal world like one we know, but rendered in an ostensibly realistic style, and yet warped in such slight ways that that appears also absurd, tragic, surreal. His work, like Latimer’s, points to the undercurrent of emptiness in supposedly meaningful activities: Daughters of the Revolution meetings, church, elk club gathering, and thresher dinners.
Latimer’s work also reminds me, maybe a little anachronistically, of the Fredrick Wiseman’s film *Monrovia, Indiana, (2018)* a two-and-a-half-hour documentary about the titular farming community of 1,643 people. In one scene, which is a single shot that goes on for 30 minutes, the town board discusses a proposal to add a bench in front of the city bank. Over the course of the scene, the terrible dullness of the conversation transforms into an odd poetry. There is an absurdity, even a tragedy in the bumbling operations of everyday human bureaucracy. There is also a sweetness in the belief that such rituals—in this case of small-town governing—are meaningful. It is what is supposed to give life purpose. Latimer felt the poetry without the optimism.

**NARRATOR**

Okay, that’s fine…thank you. Sorry to pause the flow, but the question I have Leo, is whether these small-town community pillars had meaning that is now lost or never had it to begin with?

**LEO**

I think Latimer’s work suggests that these centers of community never operated in a manner that was life-giving. There is a concealed violence under the guise of the ordinary which the characters of Latimer’s stories wish to free themselves from even before they fully understand it. Since her death, Latimer has been labeled an early “feminist writer” because of this recurring theme of female characters seeking liberation from a patriarchal Midwestern civility. Like in Edith Wharton’s *Age of Innocence (1920)*, Latimer’s characters feel an enormous desire to overturn tradition in order to sustain their own lives—and meet resistance everywhere.

These dual sensibilities of local color and modernism are seen clearly in the very short story “Mr. and Mrs. Arnold.” This story about a small-town couple chatting in their house can be understood as a satirical reimagining of Gale’s local color stories. At the beginning, the dialogue appears to be ordinary banter between the older couple at the center of the story, but as the story progresses, the couple’s language morphs into a kind of lunatic babble. Near the end of the story, the language evokes the Theater of the Absurd. At times, it is decidedly Beckettian—at once comedic and oddly tragic.

**NARRATOR**

Come on Leo! Let us not waste our time in idle discourse!

**LEO**

Okay, then get going. Put these on. *(LEO hands him sunglasses.)*

**NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR**

Okay Rick and Samantha. Here’s the background for the section of the scene we are working on today. Someone, please get me a coffee! I’m staggering up here.

*LEO brings him coffee. FILM DIRECTOR sits.*
Leo Egger

So, this story is all about language. Let’s get that straight right away. Latimer introduces the reader to you, the husband, and you, the wife, through their individual use of language. The narrator says…can someone get me the book?!

*LEO runs out and brings him* Nellie Bloom and Other Stories (1929).

Okay. Also is this decaf?

LEO

No…?

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR

Well, I wanted decaf. *(Throws coffee on the floor.*) I have my siesta in 45 min, I can’t be wired.

*(To the actors.*) I’m sorry about his disruption. Okay, where was I? So, it says, here *(referring to a passage in the book)* that Mrs. Arnold doesn’t say much, so no one really knew what she believed. And that Mr. Arnold played extravagantly with language, but still no one knew what he believed.

ACTRESS playing MRS. ARNOLD

So, he uses speech and I don’t, but both of us can’t be understood.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR

Yes, thank you for repeating what I just said. Bravo. Look in this scene, language is a limited tool of communication. Truth, capital “M” Meaning, it eludes these poor people whether that have language or not. They cannot even be understood by their own spouse in their own home!

It’s worth saying that this theme runs through much Modernist literature.

ACTOR playing MR. ARNOLD

Okay, but so for Mr. Arnold, language is the avenue through which he seeks his own independence and yet he has limited control over it?

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR

Yes…kind of…limited control in the sense that it doesn’t seem to point to any real meaning, but that doesn’t stop him from talking fancifully and often. For example, in a single sentence Mr. Arnold will contradict himself, turn to some platitude, and then bring up some domestic chore for his wife to do. He also carelessly employs language as a weapon, putting down random people in his town as “cutthroats” and “cowards.”

ACTOR playing MR. ARNOLD

He plays with language like a child poet. Look how much he alliterates as he speaks.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR

Sure. Sure. And here, he accuses his neighbors of being unable to face life. When Mrs. Arnold asks him if he can face life, he—say the line!
ACTRESS playing MRS. ARNOLD

(Taken off guard.) Can you face life?

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR
He does not—or chooses not—to hear her. Play that!

ACTOR playing MR. ARNOLD pretends to not hear.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR
Language is the medium through which Mr. Arnold resists the world, which by his own
description, is a very sinister thing. In his frantic speeches he grasps for purpose in his days, for
something to make boring life meaningful. After going to the store to order cider, an errand he
makes up for himself, he calls Mrs. Arnold asking if she needs anything else. He has only been
gone for a few minutes, so, of course, Mrs. Arnold doesn’t need anything. Mr. Arnold is upset
that after going to all the trouble of calling, Mrs. Arnold couldn’t think of anything to get. He
bangs the receiver down. He called just for the sake of calling, of doing some action that feels
purposeful, and is angry when the meaninglessness of the activity is revealed to him. Perhaps the
story is saying that many of our actions are this way: outwardly they are ordered, but essentially,
they are absurd.

LEO
As a reader, the effect is both hilarious and horrible.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR
Where’s my coffee? (LEO hands him decaf coffee) Hmm.
(Sips, suspiciously, narrowing his eyes, then looks to ACTRESS playing MRS. ARNOLD)
Your turn. Tell me about Mrs. Arnold.

ACTRESS playing MRS. ARNOLD
Okay, yeah, hmm. Well, she is, like her husband, bored by life. She’s a housewife so her days
are pretty…rote. But she seems to be able to handle this more appropriately than Mr. Arnold.
She is unfazed by Mr. Arnold’s disordered speech and cruelty. She placates his anger with
stoicism. She is described here as “mild” and “stiff,” her language soft and unfailingly polite.
Yet, she understands the real world in a way that Mr. Arnold doesn’t, which is suggested through
her knowledge that it will rain, which Mr. Arnold ignores by tossing away the umbrella she gets
out for him.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR
Okay, I can agree with this. She is like a robot, a machine, animatronic in her completion of
chores. As she cleans the dishes, she “watched the water make the glasses clean”; she smiles
when she imagines the soup, cut celery, and muffins she will make for lunch; her laughter is
neither bitter nor amused, but instead makes “a plain flat sound.” Her life force is deadened.

ACTRESS playing MRS. ARNOLD
Or she has a sophisticated use of deadpan, which she employs as her only path to personal agency.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR
I’ll give you that. Fine. So, to conclude, for Mr. Arnold, language is the medium which resists the strictures of his Victorian marriage. He wants more from life. He wants to be understood in a way he cannot articulate. Mrs. Arnold, on the other hand, uses language in a ritualized manner which enacts violence on her relationship. There is a sinister humor in the way the Arnold’s speak past each other. Neither person sees nor hears each other in any meaningful way. They behave like actors in different plays.

ACTOR playing MR. ARNOLD
Mr. Arnold tries to destabilize the lifelessness of his situation by responding in ways that break up routine, while Mrs. Arnold stays locked into her rhythm.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR
Let’s get on our feet. Okay so here we are in the script. It’s dinnertime. Action.

*Lights focus on the set.*

MRS. ARNOLD
Come into the dining room, dear.

MR. ARNOLD
Don’t I always dear?

*Mr. Arnold tastes the soup.*

MRS. ARNOLD
Will you say it’s good?

MR. ARNOLD
All soup is good.

*Mrs. Arnold laughs with a plain flat sound. It is neither bitter nor amused.*

Well do I have to say that everything you cook is splendid, wonderful, excellent, incomparable? Can’t you let me forget that I am eating? Where are you going this afternoon?

MRS. ARNOLD
The club, probably.

MR. ARNOLD
You be careful at the crossings. Now, listen to me. Dear, (*he stands up and bends over the table*) You’re going to be run over one of these days.
MRS. ARNOLD

I suppose so.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR
Cut. Try it again, but blander. He’s said this to you a thousand times. Action.

MRS. ARNOLD

I suppose so.

MR. ARNOLD

You can’t ever watch where you’re going. You expect people to get out of your way and the bandits nowadays won’t get out of anyone’s way. You ought to know it, dear!

MRS. ARNOLD

Will you have some tea?

MR. ARNOLD

Certainly, I won’t! Have I even been a man to indulge my stomach?

MRS. ARNOLD

I had a yellow crepe when I bought this tea.

MRS. ARNOLD puts her chin in his hand and looks out the window.

MR. ARNOLD

If I’d known thirty years ago what I know now, I’d have set the world on fire.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR
This is good, but you need to listen to each other less. This scene veers into lunacy, the language of the couple becoming more and more dissociated from the conversation they seem to be having.

When Mrs. Arnold mentions a little bowl she likes, Mr. Arnold responds,

MR. ARNOLD

No wonder I’m a madman living in the same house with you. Not a day can pass that you don’t make your remark about that bowl.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR
Mrs. Arnold replies, as if she did not hear a word he said,

MRS. ARNOLD

You are looking for cake again.

NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR
The surface of normalcy is charged—their domestic dialogue veers into nonsense! Sensing some horrible alienation, Mr. Arnold dashes from the house and Mrs. Arnold is alone. She stays home. It rains. LEO! Rain noise.

*Leo turns a rain tube. LATIMER enters.*

Mr. Arnold returns hours later supported by two men, drunk, raving, and bruised. Mr. Arnold speaks, as if he is speaking his final sentence, with a surprised and half-frightened mouth:

**MR. ARNOLD**

I tell you I could set the whole world right if they’d only listen.

**NARRATOR**

The story concludes as follows:

**LATIMER**

His wife moved softly and slowly away.

**MRS. ARNOLD**

There’s something quite good for supper.

**LATIMER**

She said without intonation.

*Lights on the set go out. LATIMER exits.*

**NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR**

Okay, decent work everyone. Let’s circle up. We’re going to talk through it one more time and then run it back. The important thing to remember is that Mr. Arnold feels that the world is broken, but cannot say why, or according to him, cannot be heard. Mrs. Arnold answers the only way she knows how: by returning to the rituals of everyday domestic life which she knows and enacts daily. It seems at any moment the scene will break open, revealing a terrible hilarious void.

**ACTRESS playing MRS. ARNOLD**

Latimer seems to be saying that the idea that we can tame the world with civility is an illusion of our own making. Beneath the yellow dresses, the warm muffins, the phone calls about what cider to order, is a fundamental impossibility of understanding between this husband and wife.

**ACTOR playing MR. ARNOLD**

It is a frightening story because the characters seem aware of the defamiliarization and yet can do nothing about it. Mr. Arnold screams into a void and Mrs. Arnold continues with her day, playing the role she has learned and mastered all her life.

**NARRATOR as FILM DIRECTOR**
Yes, and this theme is reiterated again and again in Latimer’s work. If you’re interested in reading more, you should find a copy of We Are Incredible (1928) and read her brutal description of the Fry family, with an overbearing mother and ineffectual wet noodle of a father. Latimer uses the tools of Gale’s craft particularly her domestic midwestern setting but turns Gale’s themes on their head with Modernist literary techniques. What Latimer sees beneath the banality of this Midwestern landscape isn’t peacefulness or order, but uncanny hollowness!

(Pause.) Okay, shall we run it again?

LIGHTS.

4. Zona Gale and her Homes


LIGHTS.

LEO stands alone on stage. Present day. Yale University; New Haven, CT.

LEO

I’m glad to be alone with you all. I’m going to tell you a bit about visiting Portage in the summer of 2022. My father went with me. We drove from Chicago to Madison where we spent a few days for me to do research and then we drove up to Portage.

Judy Eulberg met me and my father outside the Historical Society in Portage, which as you’ve heard, was Zona Gale’s second home which she lived in with William Breese and her adopted daughter Leslyn after her marriage.

Judy, a spunky grey-haired lady from Milwaukee, moved to Portage in her twenties to work as an English teacher at the local high school. She taught Zona Gale’s books in her classes and after she retired, she decided to learn everything she could about the author. Strangely, there is little published material about Gale’s life, so Judy has gone on weeklong trips to Madison over the last ten years to study the Zona Gale collection at the Historical Society. Although she has written
nothing formally on the subject, I suspect she is one of the world experts on Gale and the town of Portage.

She walked us down the sidewalk at a clip, as we made our way to the home Margery was raised in. It was just around the corner from the museum. The white house, with the cross gabled roof, is now home to some other family. There were toys in the yard. I decided against knocking.

We made our way to the home Zona built for her parents in 1908, which she converted into the local chapter of the Woman Civics League in 1931.

The house is a neoclassical temple, white and rectangular with an overhanging roof supported by ionic columns. The crowns of beach trees, walnuts, and mulberries unfurl before the river, blue and wide. In the distant fog are the purple Caledonia hills. Pooling islands of fine gold sand dot the face of the river. In the summer, Judy told us, Gale would bring out a desk and umbrella and write on an embankment.

After much difficulty finding the proper key (she had to briefly run home, only two houses away, and get another one), Judy opened the door and showed us around the house. The interior is of understated grandeur, wooden molding, elegant floral curtains, and full of well-crafted but not showy furniture. By the fireplace was a painting of Gale as a child, wearing a blue dress with a lace collar. Her face is pudgy but self-assured as her hands sit upon a red tasseled armrest. I imagined the many winters that Latimer and Gale sat over tea and conversation in that very room—out the window, snow piled high and ice sheets floating down the Wisconsin.

On the central bookshelf in the living room were all of Gale’s books as well as books written by her friends. In her lifetime, one of the most pointed rejections Latimer felt by Gale was that her books never made this shelf. All four of Latimer’s book are there now, side-by-side with Gale’s. I was taken by the binding of Guardian Angel, yellow like the sand of the Wisconsin, with red lines and floral patterns on the spine; the blue cover of Nellie Bloom and We Are Incredible, with the ingrained gold type, the tops of the “N” and “W” spiraling madly at the ends; the bile-green spine and all capital font announcing itself as: THIS IS MY BODY.

One of the bedrooms upstairs, the old guest room, is occupied today by someone who oversees the civic league. Framed on the door is a list of important people who stayed in this room: Jane Adams, American activist, and Nobel Prize winner; Cystal Eastman, cofounder with her brother Max Eastman of The Liberator; Fola La Follete, actress and suffragette; Margaret Woodrow Wilson, daughter of President Wilson; Charlotte Perkins Gilman, author and social advocate; Inez Milholland, labor lawyer and leading suffragist; and, yes, Margery Latimer.

Next to the bedroom is Zona’s old office. Light poured through the sheer curtains, casting wavering patterns of flowers across the embroidered floral carpet, desk, and velvet armchair. On a table in the left corner of the room was a display with some of Gale’s belongings: a summer hat with a ribbon, a vase filled with ostrich feathers, and a pair of opera gloves laid across a gold-stemmed umbrella. On the walls hung a plaster cast relief of Mary and Jesus beside a framed photograph of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The desk had been arranged with photographs of Gale’s
parents, as well as pens in an inkwell and some letters. Gale always pointed her desk towards the wall, Judy told us, because otherwise she would be distracted by the view.

From her home, Gale held town meetings, intellectual discussions, civic league gatherings, and sessions with her various mentees, most of who, were young women. Gale mentored many young artists, but no relationship was as serious as hers was to Margery Latimer.

LATIMER and GALE enter.

LATIMER
Zona saw one of my stories in the village paper and from that time she gave hours and hours to me, listening to my work and only telling me what she liked, never what she didn’t like. I had no friends except her. I lived in the illusion she made for me.88

LEO
Gale was captivated by Latimer’s natural talents. She frequently acknowledged Latimer’s genius to her friends. After reading one of Latimer’s English papers from college, Gale wrote Russel Gore:

GALE
This is a wonderful child here. She is one of the most exquisite centers of intuitive experience imaginable. Last night we took our basket to a hill against the sunset and she read me something which she had done in English at Madison, on the mysticism of Emerson which is eons beyond what she knows she has written, and yet she does know it too.89

LEO
It’s hard to say exactly what Gale wanted from Latimer. Perhaps it was just good will? The desire to carry on the next generation of American female authors? Perhaps she really loved her?

I think Gale felt that Latimer could carry on her legacy in literature and in Portage. Latimer was an ideal pick: she was naturally talented and a person, who when she fell for someone, she fell hard. At the beginning of their relationship, Latimer hung on Gale.

An example of her devotion in a letter to Gale.

LATIMER
Then I read pages of Faint Perfume—

LEO
Gale’s 1923 novel.

LATIMER
And felt again that awe. It is very wonderful to be so humble before you and to know that I can serve you whether you are here or not, living or dead. But may I?90

LEO
Thank you all.

LATIMER and GALE exit.

Where was I?

Well, after seeing Gale’s house, Judy invited us to her home. That day was her and her husband’s fiftieth wedding anniversary and they were amid preparation for a party that night. Dad, Judy, her husband, and I sat on the back porch drinking tea and lemonade. We talked about their marriage, family, Shakespeare, and the town. Every time my glass ran empty, Judy leapt up and filled it again. There was a breeze and the sound of the summer afternoon: crickets and rushing water.

In Portage, I had come for Latimer and everywhere I found Gale.

LIGHTS.

5. Latimer in College

Fall, 1922, Madison, WI. By the fountain next to the University Library. Students bustle by. NARRATOR and LATIMER sitting on opposite sides of fountain.

NARRATOR
Here we are in Madison, Wisconsin. Latimer is there. I won’t bother her. A few months ago, she returned to Wisconsin after living in New York City for the year.

Before Madison, Latimer attended Wooster College in Ohio in the fall of 1920 for a few months before dropping out. In the summer of 1921, she went to New York City with Gale, and took a summer session in playwriting at Columbia University. She was a star of the class; in fact, her play won a prize and was selected to be produced by the drama class. Rather than return to Wooster in the Fall, Latimer stayed in the city for year. She wrote short blurbs for the fashion department at the Woman’s Home Companion, a women’s magazine, at their office at 27th Street and 4th Avenue.91 In the March issue, she wrote on “Tissue Gingham Edges Without Hem and the Doubt Duty dress.”

In the city, and despite her job, Margery found the intellectual seriousness she had longed for in Portage. As I mentioned earlier, at Gale’s behest, she attended some Gurdjieff lessons led by Alfred Orage, the leading America of the Harmonious Development of Man and the founder of The New Age, a modernist magazine focused on mysticism. On Monday evenings, she met with a group of girls and young women, most of whom were Jewish, at the Henry Street Settlement on the Lower East Side to discuss literature and philosophy. In a letter sent to her father, Clark Latimer, on November 26th, 1921, Margery says that the group was reading Zona’s Pulitzer-prize winning play Miss Lulu Bett and that Zona had come in to talk with the group, who “appreciated it more than Portage ever would.”92 In the following weeks they planned to study Nietzsche and
Emerson. In another letter from March 11th, 1922, Margery writes that the settlement group talked about:

LATIMER
…all sorts of interesting things — the fourth dimension\(^9\), reason and intuition, competition, happiness, struggle, morality, and Bolshevism. They are so quick to respond to ideas and so eager to express themselves. I am devoted to them. They are exactly the kind of girls that my friends in college always told me I wouldn’t ever be able to get along with.\(^{93}\)

NARRATOR
Latimer loved deep thinking, but she suffered in academic settings.

LATIMER
Most of my misery has come from schools. How I used to suffer in that devilish place. But the one thing I cannot understand is people when they pretend about morals and all of that. I simply can’t take it in. There are certain things that everyone feels if he will only wake up and what is there so secretive about them? I certainly don’t know.”\(^{94}\)

NARRATOR
Latimer explores this theme of moral hypocrisy and anti-intellectualism at the university in the first half of her novel *This Is My Body* (1930). In a letter to Ruth McClelland, \(^{95}\) Latimer describes the university as chockfull “of red-haired girls whose clothes are quite perfect and who bind their heads with tiny ribbons.”\(^{96}\) She also says it’s a “a place where people look surprised instead of delighted when one says something important.”\(^{97}\) At Wooster and later at Madison, she found many of her fellow students and professors creatively stifling, misogynistic, and opposed to her way of seeing.

LATIMER
Why am I continually being accused of impracticality, gentleness, femininity, being a sweet child and adorable? Why do I feel as though I could direct the nation\(^{98}\)…

NARRATOR
The people bored her, and she felt that she wasn’t taken seriously. But Gale continued to encourage her education. In 1922, Latimer returned to school at University of Wisconsin, Madison on the “Zona Gale Scholarship,” tailor made for her. The week before she started classes in Madison, Latimer wrote the following to Blanche Matthias.

LATIMER
For so long nothing has seemed worth doing and if it weren’t for Zona I should feel like Nothing. I don’t know why things that seemed so enchanting and lovely in New York should seem so different here…I still feel my love for things and I know the magic of people – and it all seems worthwhile for them – but not for me. I think I am disappointed in myself because I have done nothing that I thought I would do. And I am so tired of myself. I never thought I would feel that…I used to see tree star and sun as Myself – (always with a capital). They belonged to Me.

\(^9\) The Fourth Dimension refers to a key term used by Ouspensky in *Tertium Organum* (1912) as an extended metaphor for the esoteric nature of reality.
Now I can feel nothing of myself – the one I used to know – and I seem to belong to them – anything that I can sway or sing and change color. Sometimes I think that tree and sky know that I am theirs but usually it is as though they don’t need to know. We are of the same substance.”

NARRATOR
This period was the one where things with Latimer and Gale were at their best. Latimer would come home to Portage many weekends to spend time with Gale and share her schoolwork with her. But by the end of the school year, Latimer dropped out of Madison, moved to New York permanently, and the relationship between the two women slowly started unraveling.

LIGHTS.

6. Monologue: Gravestones in Portage

LIGHTS.

Silver Lake Cemetery; Portage, WI. Evening. Summer 2023. LEO on stage.

LEO
The land is brown with sunburnt grass. In this light, everything looks flat and uniform. I am lonesome and hot. I find Zona Grave’s grave on a small hill.

There are three 6-feet long concrete slabs with wreaths craved into them. The middle stone reads “WILLIAM LLYWELYN BRESEE - 1864 — 1954.” To the left, “JESSIE BLACKMAN, Wife of WM. LL BRESEE – 1864 — 1922.” To the right, “ZONA GALE, Wife of WM. LL BRESEE, 1874 — 1938”. Below it is her epitaph: “LIFE IS SOMETHING MORE THAN THAT WHICH WE BELIEVE IT TO BE”

Down the path, right on the edge of the road, is a flat piece of rock, innocuous and brown, blackened by rain. Crust of lichen blooms on its surface. It reads: Margery Latimer Toomer 1899-1932.

LIGHTS.

7. Madison to Portage to New York

Winter, 1923, Madison Wisconsin, Latimer’s bedroom. LATIMER is on her bed reading. NARRATOR and LEO are downstage. NARRATOR sits on a stool and LEO kneels on ground beside him.

LIGHTS.

Someone knocks on the door.
NARRATOR
This is Latimer’s bedroom which she rented in a boarding house off campus, something few women did.

(Aside, flipping through binder.) The dialogue in this scene is constructed from a letter Margery Latimer wrote to her friend, Jessie Gruner.

LATIMER goes out into the hallway and meets the LANDLADY.

LANDLADY
Honey, we need to talk.

LATIMER
(Aside.) In what follows I was amazed, hurt, then amused.

LANDYLANDY
This boy –

LATIMER
Kenneth.

LANDLADY
Kenneth Fearing.

NARRATOR
LATIMER
(Aside.) I just looked at her. Then I wanted to laugh and say, maybe I am, don’t be too sure about it….

LANDLADY
—I wish your mother was here. I wonder if she would approve of your seeing him so much – and in your room, too. You are alone so much of the time, and everyone is beginning to talk. Now, of course I trust you. But I wouldn’t want my daughter to do such things. You – come in late at night, and he is here too much. I want you to tell your mother all about it…. I know you’re not a loose girl.

LATIMER
(Aside.) I am going to have to tell the Dean of Women about this.

LANDLADY
I am going to have to tell the Dean of Women about this.

LANDLADY exits.

LATIMER
(Aside.) I rented an off-campus apartment of my own, much to the chagrin of the Dean of Women, who called the act immoral. The powers that be call any act immoral if any girl asks for an ordinary amount of freedom.100
The dean tried to convince Margery to give up her scholarship. She did not but was deeply shaken by the meeting.

LATIMER

(Aside.) I know that once I rather enjoyed being pointed out as a radical and smoking in public and going about with wild-looking men. But after seeing the person my parents see in me, I feel shocked at all of that, and when I hear that shop people in Madison stop Miss Zaturenska, so she says, and say that last year's Zona Gale Scholar was a bad woman, had men in her room, smoked, and went about with married men and carried on in an immoral fashion, then I am as dazed as my parents would be and as unbelieving.¹⁰¹

So, you see what I have to face — myself. My ego that wants to flee when it isn’t praised. I must get over that feeling of being important.¹⁰²

LEO

This whole incident is fictionized in the novel This Is My Body, published 1930.

NARRATOR

The novel dramatizes these events. In the novel, the Dean sleeps with a student, impregnates her, forces the girl to have an abortion, and then suspends both the protagonist and her boyfriend, who are under suspicion of having slept together, which they had not.

LEO

(Aside.) This is exactly what fascinates me about Latimer. Her life clearly feeds her work but all her writing, even in her letters, is itself a recontextualization of experience, which then feeds back into her life. Her literature tries to capture the immediacy of present emotional experience, which she first renders in her letters. Some people saw her artistic project in a very negative light, as an extended adolescence or as evidence of neurosis, but the emotional exploration of her work is the very thing that makes it radical.

NARRATOR

Anyway, despite the suffering, Latimer’s second go-round at university life, although short, was much more successful than the first. Latimer made great literary friends, met Fearing, and regularly wrote editorials and book reviews for the campus literary magazine titled The Lit.¹⁰³ Fearing published regularly on campus and in Shadowland, a short-lived performing arts magazine. In a letter to Mildred, Latimer writes of Fearing.

NARRATOR

She recalls breathlessly that one of their mutual writer friends, Leon Herald, refers to Kenneth as a god.¹⁰⁵ In the summer of 1923, Kenneth became editor-in-chief of The Lit.
Many of Margery’s friends from University of Wisconsin, Madison became successful, working writers after graduating. There was Carl Rakosi, (a short-lived boyfriend of Latimer’s between Fearing and Toomer) whose poetry inspired E. E. Cummings and William Carlos Williams. There was Mildred Evan Gilman, who wrote Fig Leaves (1925), a satire on the university and adolescent girlhood. There was Leon Herald, an Armenian poet, who wrote the poetry collection This Waking Hours (1925) and was also brought under the wing of Zona Gale. And of course, there was Kenneth Fearing, who published six collections of poetry between 1929 and 1956. Of his poetry, Latimer writes in a letter to Rakosi:

LATIMER
They bring blood and the meaning is so stark I want to hang to it.

NARRATOR
While Latimer hung around a literary crowd, she distanced herself from Bohemianism. This is true also in her reading, which included some modernist authors like Joyce and Mansfield but also many classics like Chekhov, Melville, Goethe, and Euripides. In a letter to Mildred from the fall of 1922, Margery recalls a party in an apartment in Madison which she describes as a Greenwich Village imitation of Paris’ Latin Quarter.

FEARING and LATIMER at a party in Madison. The hostess is in bed, the room is thick with tobacco smoke. The floor and table are cluttered with the Liberator, Rhythmus, Circle, and other “radical publications” and the bookshelves filled with “suppressed books.” One of the editors for The Lit—“a so-called friend” of Latimer’s—sways around the room.

LATIMER
With a dress to the floor and a nonchalant expression around her eyes and ears. I found the whole event so self-conscious that it was nauseating.

FEARING
That party was like looking in at a basket of snakes by mistake.

NARRATOR
In the summer of 1923, Latimer returned to Portage and never returned to college. She says the final straw for her was the college class where she heard a professor talking cheerfully about Dante’s Inferno.

LATIMER
I am in Portage, free to dress my thoughts in any costume and parade them on hopes. I see Miss Gale very often and Kenneth comes over. I’m quite mad about it here. It has all the qualities I am hungry for; nothing exciting externally but a slow unconscious grip and intensity that makes me wordless. (A frightful and wonderful feeling for one so prodigal with words as I.) It is tiny – and so details, little happenings, are vivid and large. One cannot become hardened to sorrow or suffering here, as one might somewhere else.

NARRATOR
In early 1924, she moved to New York, where she wrote book reviews for the *Herald Tribune* and the *Nation* while trying to sell her first novel first titled *Lilac Castle*, and then *Green Flamingos*.\footnote{More information on this essay is found in the introduction above.} Fearing followed her there soon after. In addition to writing, she worked some at the headquarters of Robert LaFollette, the Wisconsin Governor (1901-1906) and Senator (1906-1925) close to Zona Gale who was the Progressive Party candidate for president in the election of 1924.\footnote{More information on this essay is found in the introduction above.} *Green Flamingos* was held for some months and eventually rejected by editors at Knopf and Boni & Liveright. They both said they would be interested in future work. Although heartbroken by the rejection, Latimer felt a new clarity of vision.

**LATIMER**

One has to fail, fail, fail. This is the first progress I have made—to know that.\footnote{More information on this essay is found in the introduction above.}

**NARRATOR**

1924 was also the year that Latimer’s prose style became more restrained, differing more evidently from Gale’s Victorian sensibility. In the city Latimer aligned herself more explicitly with modernist writing. In January of the 1924, Latimer wrote *The New Freedom*, a two-page literary manifesto published in *The Reviewer*, calling for literary invention and grammatical freedom.\footnote{More information on this essay is found in the introduction above.} In New York, Latimer also expressed for the first time distaste with Gale’s work. She writes to her mother, Laurie Latimer, on October 6th, 1924, after the disappointment of the rejection of her manuscript.

**LATIMER**

Anyone that holds out for years, no matter how mediocre in the beginning, will find a place. Look at Zona. Her art was certainly commonplace. She certainly won through elimination\footnote{More information on this essay is found in the introduction above.}

**NARRATOR**

In April of 1925, Gale pesters Latimer to come home and focus on her writing.

**GALE**

I encourage you not to fall into that Orage group, becoming utterly absorbed, forgetting the work you are there to accomplish. I’m rather in favor of you coming home and marrying Dudley Brooks sometimes…

I heard a story of a girl who went to New York to a department store and asked for lace. They didn’t have any lace, then woman at the counter told her to go to another address that had it and there, she was murdered. I haven’t told you many such stories. But when you write to me of the man on the train telling you that he would have paid your fare – and yet you know, Margery, I think that he would, and that it would have been all right.

Forget that. But nobody on earth can get on in New York unless he gets down on the job of going after something and forgetting everything else. I know somebody living on tea biscuits too, who got a piece of work to do by the following morning, and was invited to go out for a beefsteak, and had had no dinner, and wouldn’t risk it, and refused, and finished the work – for nothing but five dollars too. Unless you can look inside and honestly find that general variety of spirit in you, it’s no good. You will be getting ill presently and thus having a perfectly good
excuse to give it up and come home – like thousands before you and me, and all of us. I can usually tell – or I think I can – by ten minutes talk with a girl who is trying to stay in New York whether she is going to or not, and if she told me that she had spent nearly a month having a good time, with letters in her pocket to various editors whom she has not yet approached, I would mentally comment: home for her in six weeks more. Forgive me? For of course I know you are not that in your heart at all. But it’s your feet I am considering.

NARRATOR
She tells Latimer to quit her job reviewing novels and focus all her energy on her fiction.

GALE
Here is something I could make plainer if we were walking on the bridge…Your one level of perception — you know this – is worked out highly in one not too-wide area (excuse me) where you are at your best. If you leave it, and dip down to clerk, and model plane, mystically, then you are out of tune…you can no more do that without paying a price in loss of energy and value…I don’t want you to lose strength at that any more than I want for you any other occupation which thwarts the best in you…If you are going to fall short of your own life, come back and do it here!”

NARRATOR
Margery writes to her mother that-

LATIMER
-Zona is at all times a bad influence.

NARRATOR
And yet, she still confides in Gale. She’s conflicted about whether she should return to Portage or stay in New York, where she has yet to find success. She writes to Gale:

LATIMER
In New York, I think I feel impractical and to feel that here is worse than death.

GALE
Why do you let it in? Keep it out! Get outside your emotions – they are for the people – not for you.

LATIMER
But the city has gone over me like a steam roller. I have to get back to my childhood and to Wooster to get the same feeling over again – you see it lies waiting for me and I never conquer – I run away.”

LIGHTS.
8. A Long Trip

LIGHTS.

NARRATOR, LEO, and others on empty stage.

NARRATOR
In June 1925, after a lovely but unproductive spring with Kenneth at a rented house on a wide winding road by the ocean in Staten Island, Latimer returned to Portage to focus completely on her next novel, *We Are Incredible.*\(^{117}\) She completed her first draft in December 1925, but rather than return immediately to Fearing in New York City, Latimer went on a long trip to Pasadena, California with her mother.

LEO
*We Are Incredible* is a novel about a woman named Hester Linden, clearly a fictionalized Zona Gale, and her abusive influence over a group of young artists, particularly a vulnerable girl named Dora, in a small town like Portage. The book’s overall condemnation of Puritanical attitudes is implied by using the name of Hester from the *Scarlet Letter.*

NARRATOR
When the book was published in April of 1928, it was met with mixed, but generally positive reviews.

GOTHAM REVIEW
*We Are Incredible* by Margery Latimer is a remarkable psychological novel dealing with repression of the life force by puritanical impulses to be good. It is another proof that young American writers are not going to let age-old dominance by puritanism sear the youthful soul without putting its crimes on record.\(^ {118}\)

NARRATOR
The local paper, the *Portage Register-Democrat* had the pastor provide his thoughts on the novel. He wrote that it was a psychologically charged novel of some skill, but concluded:

NARRATOR as REV. CORRIGAN
Though there are passages of unmixed quality, most people will lay down the book and say, “my, what unpleasant characters.”\(^ {119}\)

NARRATOR
Fearing, according to Latimer, said of the novel:

FEARING enters.

FEARING
It’s damn good except for having 75% too much conversation, for fluking all the love scenes, for writing about semi-impotent characters, for having two high points in scene three, for not explaining what killed them in the end, for making Mitchell kneel to Hester in the last part.\(^ {120}\)
NARRATOR
In the process of writing, Latimer felt she had exorcised some of her building resentment towards Gale. She wrote:

LATIMER
My qualities are falling from me. I am beginning to see. It is not quite like magic— it is better. It is losing all the false covering of years and getting down to the quiet, the disinterested, the deeply colored part…It has made me self-conscious of the barrier that I have raised between us, the suffering I have gone through in this fixation upon you, the intolerable haze of it. Not that I wasn’t conscious of it when my book was done but this makes it a universal thing that everyone goes through, and I seem less remote, less lost in it.\textsuperscript{121}

GALE
Your sense of struggle is not between you and me, it is between you and your self. That self and I are as much one as we ever were.\textsuperscript{122}

LEO
In 1929, reflecting on the novel, Latimer felt that she dwelled too much in negativity.

LATIMER
I want to write something that is different from what people have read before. I want it to be the sort of thing that can be understood by the most intelligent reader and the least intelligent—something that will bring something new and inspiring into the lives of all who read it. But can I do that? I don’t know. That is what I want to do. In ‘We Are Incredible’ I wrote of life as a doom. But that’s not the way I really feel. I want to write of life more as it really is—as being a privilege and a joy.\textsuperscript{123}

LEO
Life “as a privilege and a joy” … Latimer’s darkness is not essential to her writing, but her desire for her work to touch something universal, to be understood by “the most intelligent reader and the least intelligent.”

NARRATOR
We are in the spring of 1926. Latimer is in California with her mother. Fearing complained bitterly about his prolonged separation from Latimer, which he saw as a ploy by Gale and Latimer’s family to force them to break up. Latimer ignored Fearing’s pleas to return. The frustration boiled over in March 1926, when Fearing wrote:

KENNETH
If you don’t return to the city soon, I will cut the whole relationship out of me like a ring of ulcers.\textsuperscript{124}

NARRATOR
Latimer decided to return. In part for Kenneth Fearing. And in part, it seems, because she didn’t feel yet that she could be productive away from him; she was about to realize, though, that it wasn’t about a person but a place.

*The palm trees become desert and the desert became grassland as LATIMER rides the train back from California with her mother. Her mother is sad to leave, but LATIMER is relieved. She couldn’t write in California and had a premonition before she went to California that she would die there.* Looking out on the corn fields of Illinois, she is happy to be alive.

LATIMER
I only enjoy a place where I write and that’s Portage. California is the sort of country that you should be content to imagine…We slept outdoors surrounded by roses and palms and a sprawling vine covered with soft yellow flowers that look at night, like butterflies hanging there.¹²⁶

*(Pause. She looks out the window.)*
I am twenty-seven years old, and I look old. This constant consciousness of the inadequacy of things ages one very much. Whenever I move, I am plunged into adolescence again.”¹²⁷

NARRATOR
The following dialogue is based on a letter from Latimer to Jane Comfort.¹²⁸

*INTERNAL TRANSITION. The final night of the journey, in the rocking sleep cabin. The sound of rotating pistons and billowing steam.*

LATIMER
*(Shouting in her sleep.)* Help me! Help! I don’t know which is which. I don’t know whether to go up or down!”

Laurie Latimer wakes up in the lower bunk.

LATIMER
*(Soothing.)* Well then, come up.

Laurie
*(Crying out, still half asleep.)* No, no that is wrong!

Then come down.

LATIMER
Help! Help me! That is wrong.¹²⁹

*LATIMER wakes up sweating. IRISHMAN, a short red-haired attendant, who happens to be filling up the ice buckets in the cabin at the time of the incident, is agitated by the whole display. He plants himself square beneath the bunk where*
LATIMER lies, cranes his head up, and clears his throat. She leans over the side of the bunk and looks down at him. LATIMER thinks he looks like an Irish cherub.

LATIMER

I’m sorry about that.

IRISHMAN

(Irish accent.) Do you believe in look\(^{11}\)? Destiny? Well, I do. When a man works and works and then can’t get where he wants then it’s look that keeps him back. Are you going to get married soon?

LATIMER

What? —

IRISHMAN

No? Don’t you worry someone will ask you soon. I bet you already have plans. I been in New Zealand, all over, always the same look. I can’t hardly get enough to feed me good. Everything is look. Destiny. You know when you work as hard as me.”\(^{130}\)

LIGHTS.

9. The “Victim and Saint”

LIGHTS.

Autumn 1925. The interior of Zona Gale’s home. Fire crackles in the fireplace. LATIMER reads the first draft of the novel We Are Incredible to GALE. GALE pours a glass of tea from a pot. LATIMER sits down across from her. GALE crosses her legs beneath her large white skirt and nods for Latimer to begin. LATIMER shudders to read in front of her. She begins reading but we cannot hear.

NARRATOR, LEO, and LE SUEUR stand downstage.

LEO

At first Latimer and Le Sueur, disciples of Gale, relished her love, which they felt would propel them on their literary careers. Gale made Latimer feel important, as if she represented some cosmic ideal of femininity: the isolated woman artist, freed from grotesque patriarchy and maternal imprisonment. Latimer wished more than anything to be loved, to be special, and to be seen, so, at first, she was a perfect student of Gale.

\(^{11}\) “luck”
But from her time in the city and in modernist circles, Latimer came to doubt Gale’s definition of the feminine and artistic ideal, with its apparently complete rejection of sexuality, normative or otherwise. According to Le Sueur, Gale’s worldview meant that there were only two paths for the creative woman:

**LE SUEUR**

One of vengeful hatred of the male work, the other the spiritual seductive power of the victim and saint.¹³¹

---

*Zona Gale, 1920. Photograph by Trimpey, Ephraim Burt. 5 X 7”* ¹³²

**NARRATOR**

Latimer’s resentment shows itself clearing in *We Are Incredible* (1928) with the figure of Hester Linden, a cold, sexless, domineering small-town woman who manipulates and sucks the life force out of her small band of followers, eventually driving them to their deaths. Linden obviously was a stand-in for Gale, but for Latimer it was not an indictment, but a cry for help—a cry which Gale did not answer.¹³³ The book didn’t end their relationship. Latimer still saw Gale
most days, drinking tea with her in the parlor of that white house, and watching ice flows on the river.

*Lights focus on room with LATIMER and GALE.*

LATIMER

*(Reading from her draft.)* She went to the window and looked out at the stretch of woods, the tall trees so thick and green, and in a moment that would be thin and gray, dotted with leaves like flocks of scarlet birds—

GALE

Excuse me, I have the take the spinach out of the oven.

*GALE exits.*

NARRATOR

Gale, Latimer recalls, interrupted her countlessly when listening to the novel, always with some little chore that needed to be done right away…As she approached the ending of the long day of reading, Latimer felt:

LATIMER

*(Aside.)* Like I couldn’t go on anymore, as if some essential part of me was withering, as if leeches were sucking away at my blood…I looked up at Zona, expecting something, but she just sat there, always superior to nature, softly sipping her tea, beyond emotion, poised, remote.  

*GALE returns.*

GALE

Go ahead. I’m ready.

LATIMER

*(Reading from her draft.)* She went to the window and looked out at the stretch of woods, the tall trees so thick and green, and in a moment that would be thin and gray, dotted with leaves like flocks of scarlet birds and beyond them would be gold turning to deep brown and then the rains would come and drive them to the ground in wet piles and snow would finally cover it all.  

LEO

In *We Are Incredible*, she tried to work out her experience with Gale in a way she was unable to do in her own life.

NARRATOR

She learned from writing her book, for one, that…

LATIMER
(Aside.) We make our bondage with all our deliberate, unconscious nature, we seek our thralldom and then try to destroy it intellectually when all the time that is what we want, the suffering, the actual physical pain of it.\textsuperscript{136}

LEO
And yet she was terrified that the only person the work meant anything to was herself. She feared that she could never be understood. She wrote to Blanche Matthias about writing this novel:

LATIMER
The other day I was just trembling and burst into tears, and I knew that I was working in a vacuum and that all the time I being torn just as the position of the words on the page, the sound of them, the patterns they made, the look and feel of the people – that it was lost to everyone but myself. It is the horror of completion, that feeling, as if you have found the way of satisfying yourself alone in a pit of half articulated feelings that rise into works almost hysterically and rush and vibrate and kill you a hundred times.\textsuperscript{137}

NARRATOR
At this point in her life, she had no desire to return to New York, to see Kenneth, or to stay in Wisconsin and marry Douglass, a midwestern boy who Gale approved of. All she wanted was to write.

LATIMER
Is there any man in the world that I could say to: (even temporarily) “You mean more to me than my writing, my comfort, or myself”?\textsuperscript{138}

LIGHTS.

\textbf{10. A Puppet Show.}

\textit{LEO stands beside a wooden puppet theater. He is stressed out.}

LEO
Here I am with Margery Latimer.

\textit{(LEO holds up a puppet of Latimer.)}
Or rather, a puppet of Margery Latimer. This thesis is getting weird now, isn’t it…. But we’re in too deep, and my other passion is theater. As of late, I’ve been fascinated by puppet theater…Briefly, the history of this genre suggests it as perfect for this moment in my thesis-play because it is explicitly interested in how a single artist constructs an individual character. Unlike theater with human actors, puppet theater allows the director complete control over the appearance and gestures of his puppets, but they are also limited by the character emerging from an object rather than a living thing. I feel both this power and limitation when trying to figure out who Latimer was and render her in this story.

\textit{(Pause.)}
Latimer is someone I wish I knew but will not. Ninety years have passed since her death and those who knew her as she lived are also long gone. All we have now are her letters, her literature, and the writings of others about her. And now this: a puppet built from those sources.

(Pause.)

Despite more than a thousand hours of research over the last two years, I still find Latimer confounding, particularly the complex and frequent intersections between her life and literature. I know her only really as a literary construct, one she made in her own imagination and articulated through her letters and literature, and one articulated by those that knew her best: Toomer, Le Sueur, Fearing, and Gale. She presents herself in many letters as an unhappy puppet of people, trying to break free sometimes, and other times clinging to those that she is bound to.

(Takes out puppets of Toomer, Le Sueur, and Gale.)

The two people who did the most to preserve Latimer legacy were Toomer and Le Sueur. They each had their own agendas and reshaped Latimer’s memory in the process. Le Sueur wanted to preserve Latimer’s literature; Toomer, her life. Oh, and Gale, here, at least in my reading of it, wanted to smooth out Latimer’s corners, subsume her in her sentimental vision of Portage.

(Pause, holds up Le Sueur puppet.)

Le Sueur wanted to establish Latimer as a radical early feminist writer. While I generally agree with this assessment, it is not the whole story. It skips over Latimer’s unfinished final novel, The Ship, about her experience during the Portage experiment, which celebrates a strong, traditionally masculine teacher. This teacher, a stand in for Toomer, frees the protagonist from her neuroses and help develops her into a full woman. Latimer, like James Joyce, also admired Otto Weininger’s 1903 treatise Sex and Character, a pseudoscientific text which argues that human beings are composed of male and female substance, the male being active and logical and the female being passive and amoral. Of the book, Latimer wrote to Carl Rakosi:

LEO (as Margery Latimer puppet)

I am still heavy with its weight and sad and desperate…Whether all he says is true or not I have certainly accepted it as true. Women are empty, he says, and I agree with him.139

LEO

(Holds out Jean Toomer puppet.)

Toomer, on the other hand, was motivated, at least in part, to publish Latimer’s collected letters so that he could share his spiritual lessons in the introduction and use the story of her life as evidence of his power. He explains the arc of her life as one of spiritual growth, instigated by his teachings, which transformed Latimer from self-alienation to a unified sense of experience. He marks the high point of Latimer’s life as their marriage, which he says symbolized, in fact, realized for her a “moment of exalted integration.”140 He goes on to admit that the scandal of their marriage thrust Latimer back into her separateness, but that before her death she was on the proper path to sustained objectivity and freedom from her personal ego, after years of self-inflicted alienness. He claims, perhaps misogynistically, that Latimer’s life was more interesting than any of her literature.

LEO (as Jean Toomer Puppet)

While she lived, her personal influence was more felt and far-reaching than her books…And more often than not she felt that her books were the great things, she little or nothing as a writer. The truth is that she herself was larger than anything she wrote.141
Yet, for Latimer, her life was her work. She felt her life as subordinate to her literature, fodder for it. She reimagined art as place for pure emotional expression, so her life and art were in a kind of endless loop feeding one another. It makes sense then why she distorts some facts in her book to make them more literary.\(^\text{12}\) It also explains her need for neologisms in the essay “The New Freedom.” Only through new words and ways of expression can she realize her manifesto for a new art and a new life.

Leo (as Margery Latimer puppet)
I am dense and dumb until I have lived something myself - no one can make me understand until I do. That’s another reason why I am unsatisfactory I suppose. I simply cannot grasp anything I haven’t lived but when I have lived it, no one can argue or convince me out of it.\(^\text{142}\)

Leo
She was, at least in her two novels and many of her stories, what was later commonly called a confessional writer. It seems true that her books were like extensions of herself. She sought herself in them. This is why she was so devastated when her books were criticized, or her characters described as selfish or neurotic. Because if her work was misunderstood, she felt more alone than ever.

Leo (as Margery Latimer Puppet)
I can only live bravely when I feel that I am just like others – when the terrible feeling that they all know reality and I don’t is quelled.\(^\text{143}\)

Leo
Latimer wrote prolifically in her short life. She wrote hundreds of letters, often many in a single day, essays, reviews, novels, and many stories. She was called to write and was rarely interested in anything else, apart from the Gurdjieff Work.

Leo (as Jean Toomer Puppet)
The sheer necessity behind all she wrote puts to shame many of her better-known contemporaries. While some of them were writing “cleverly” or “acceptably” with an eye as to how the world would reward them and give them a “name,” she wrote because she felt that if she did not write she would die.\(^\text{144}\)

Leo
Le Sueur’s and Toomer’s arguments can both be true. Latimer is worth remembering for her life and her literature. But the most thrilling place is the intersection of the two. She has, in almost all her work, a preternatural ability to diagnosis and describe her emotional experience and the

\(^{12}\) TOOMER: “When she spoke of the ideas of others she was often inaccurate, owing to the face that she was prone to give, not the ideas themselves, but what they mean to her; and she seldom stopped to distinguish between the ideas themselves and her interpretation of them. The same is true of what she did with facts. Indeed as regards life in general she had a tendency to distort — as she herself realized.”

feeling of being dependent on or connected to someone in a way that is not entirely healthy. In life, she tended to feel the world deeply and to cling to people with the hope that they will deliver her. Most of her letters are not exactly correspondences, with the normal contact and exchange I expected. More so they are intense expressions of Latimer’s own state of mind: like soliloquies rather than monologues, a place where she worked out her life on the page and sought personal understanding. In fact, her genius might be most obvious in her letters, in their lack of polish and clear emotional vulnerability combined with astute observation of her world and her inner life. In fact, numerous passages in her published literature are first drafted in her letters.

Alright, enough, it’s time we see her writing. Oh, and Gale here…

\[\textit{LEO throws the Zona Gale puppet under the theater. He places the Toomer and Le Sueur puppet on edge of theater. He takes out a tiny desk, phonograph, and typewriter and sets up a small bedroom.}\]

This is Latimer’s childhood bedroom in Portage where most of her writing was done. Here is her desk, a typewriter, and a phonograph. Here is a window, \((\textit{LEO brings out a little window on a string})\) looking out on the street. It’s December 1929. Let’s say that it’s snowing. \((\textit{Leo sprinkles some snow.})\) We’re in Wisconsin after all.

\[\textit{Margery Latimer puppet is typing. Wagner plays from the tiny phonograph. The puppet looks out the window.}\]

\((\textit{whispering})\) Latimer is finishing \textit{This Is My Body}. In my opinion, it is her most realized work, which captures a question at the heart of literature, namely how people hope for and seek meaning in a world that disappoints. The novel is about a sensitive writer named Megan Foster who in her young adulthood experiences varied forms of disillusionment: in learning, sex, love, and family. At the beginning of the novel, she finds her ideals shattered at college and with her family in Midwest. And then in the second half, she is beaten down by the culture of bohemianism and sexual freedom of New York City, which culminates in a scene of abortion. Megan longs for things of substance: genuine love, experience, and art, and is devastated in her fruitless pursuit. The novel is Latimer’s most clearly autobiographical work: an outpouring of the grief of her young adult life.

\[\textit{LEO (as Margery Latimer puppet)}\]
I felt this way writing it – oh people, everywhere on the cement, in the sky, in houses, on bridges, in the ground – let me give you my soul and body. I am lonely. Don’t shove me away.\textsuperscript{145}

\[\textit{LEO}\]
To tell the story she must, much like a biographer, recreate four people: her young self, Kenneth, her mother, and her father. The novel begins with an evocation. For Megan Foster, she writes:

\[\textit{LEO holds up small puppet of Megan Foster which looks just like Latimer.}\]

\[\textit{LEO (as Margery Latimer puppet)}\]
Girl that I once was, come out into the light. Let me look into your face, let me see your body...Now I see the world you expected to find, the perfect situations where you were always to emerge triumphant, the people who were to fit miraculously into your images. O girl, how can I pity you?

_Leo holds up two small puppets of Latimer’s parents._

And you two who made me, come out from your places and bring with you your dreams of me and throw them far from you. I have carried you both. I have carried words that were never spoken....

_Leo holds up a small puppet of Ronald which looks just like Kenneth Fearing._

And the boy who brought me into the real world. You are the hardest of all to bring into the light. You brought me into the world of jealousy and passion and growth. O shine for me now. Burn through all the darkness and the light and the confusion of what has happened to us separately....

_Leo puts the Margery Latimer puppet down and pauses._

In life, Latimer felt like she was alone. She felt others act upon her, but that she herself was denied an understand of experience that other had access to. Her literature was an attempt to escape being a puppet, to liberate herself by taking control of her story.

_Leo (as Margery Latimer puppet)_

All four of us come together and act this story for me. Act what did not happen as if it had happened, fit into forms as if they were yours. Let me have my hands on you for the first time—you girl, you parents, you boy. Now I can make you act and I can feel my hands on your bodies, pushing you where I please. You have no choice now. You all belong to me. This is my story. You are my characters. I will it that you shall forget everything you have ever been.

_Lights on puppet theater fade._

_Leo_

I’ve said what I wanted to say. I’m going to try to step back now and let the story run its course. After all, that’s why I hired a narrator.

_Lights._

---

11. Living in the Village
LIGHTS.

NARRATOR and LEO stand alone in front of curtain.

NARRATOR
Latimer moved in with Fearing permanently in the late spring of 1926 and stayed there for two years. They shared a ratty apartment on 62 Barrow Street in the Village with Kenneth’s friend, Leslie Rivers, a red-cheeked, curved-nosed young man who was halfheartedly working on a novel and never bothered to clean up after himself. Latimer despised him, calling him the kind of person “who used to eat flowers” as a child.149 In their time apart, Fearing’s poetry career had taken a meteoric rise. So had his reliance on alcohol, and the number of his mistresses.

Immediately after moving in, Latimer was disgusted by living with the two men, who spilled their cigarettes ashes on the floor, left their dishes in the sink, and didn’t bother to wash the sud-stained bathtub.150 The house was filthy: mice played with the peach pits in the trash can and bed bugs burrowed in the sheets. She hated cleaning up after these men, who assumed their work was more important than hers.

LEO
Gale’s warnings of the dangers of domesticity rang in her ears. Latimer tried to convince herself that the destitution of bohemian life would inform her work.

NARRATOR
Indeed, Latimer enjoyed some of the spontaneity, the spiritedness, of living as a Bohemian artist in New York, scraping out a living and trying to make a name for herself. She felt freedom from the buttoned-up of world of Wisconsin and Gale’s columned house.

In the village the couple was surrounded by many prominent New York artists, including Maxwell Bodenheim151 and Eli Seigel.13

One a hot night in the summer of 1926. 1:15 AM. ELI SIEGEL, a friend of Latimer’s and Kenneth’s, shows up the apartment with a copy in hand of Vachel Lindsay’s The Congo (1914), a book of poetry inspired by the chants of Congo’s indigenous people, meant to be performed not read. Lighting up a cigarette and throwing open a few of his shirt buttons, SIEGEL jumps on the kitchen table and began to scream like “sixteen men crying of bloody throats.”152

SIEGEL
… Then I heard the boom of the blood-lust song
And a thigh-bone beating on a tin-pan

---

13 Bodenheim was a poet and novelist famous for his derelict lifestyle, known in the 20’s as the king of the village bohemians. Seigel, a Russian born poet and critic, is best known as the founder of the philosophical movement called Aesthetic Realism and for his book of poetry published in 1958, Hot Afternoons Have Been in Montana. Williams Carlos Williams, said of Seigel, that “He belongs in the very first rank of our living artists.13
And "BLOOD" screamed the whistles and the fifes of the warriors, "BLOOD" screamed the skull-faced, lean witch-doctors, "Whirl ye the deadly voodoo rattle, Harry the uplands, Steal all the cattle, Rattle-rattle, rattle-rattle, Bing!... SIEGEL throws open the kitchen window wide to take a deep breath of the night air. Below him in the street an amazed crowd gathering. He continues, louder!

SIEGEL

Or Mumbo-jumbo, God of the Congo, And all of the other Gods of the Congo, Mumbo-jumbo will hoo-doo you. Beware, beware, walk with care, Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, boom, Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, boom, Boomlay, boomlay, boomlay, Boom.

Before long, two burly police officers and the downstairs neighbor, a Columbia professor in pajamas and a nightcap, angrily knock at the door. After assuring the police and the professor that Eli’s excitement did not come from alcohol or delirium and that such a performance would never happen again, the police leave. Laughter from LATIMER, FEARING, LESLIE, and SIEGEL. Scene dissolves.

NARRATOR

As 1926 ran into 1927, Margery increased urgency to move forward with her life. Despite We Are Incredible being on track to be published in 1928, a few of her short stories published and well received, and two stories chosen for the prestigious American Caravan Anthology, Latimer felt trapped. She was almost 27, had been dating Fearing in some capacity since college, and had lived with him for two years. She felt that if she was going to stay with Fearing it was time get married and have children, to bring something into this world more than a novel. Fearing was adamantly opposed to both. The relationship began to collapse.

In his introduction to The Letters of Margery Latimer, Toomer wrote:

TOOMER

Latimer tended to see the man related to her, rather than herself related to the man. LATIMER
Kenneth criticized me for always needing to be flattered.

NARRATOR
In a letter to Carl Rakosi, she wrote:

LATIMER
I admit I used to fantasize about making money from my books and financially supporting a man, or many men, so they would be helpless without me. It was Zona who made me feel like a precious doll, like no man was good enough for me… I wanted Kenneth, but in a twisted way. I didn’t look up to him, or worship him as men want you to but instead treated him like a child. I thought that was why Kenneth wouldn’t marry me, so I decided to give myself entirely to Kenneth—allowed myself to be dominated. The more I fought to give all of myself to Kenneth the more he retreated.

NARRATOR
In the fall of 1928, Latimer said to Fearing that she wanted, more than anything, to get married and have a child with him. Fearing felt that a child would interfere with his work, which was the center of his life. The following dialogue is Latimer’s record of events.

LATIMER and FEARING’s apartment.

FEARING
You’re not a real woman! You’re too dominating, you’re-!

LATIMER
(Aside.) Perhaps I never had desire for him, but only the desire for power, because I often though if we did marry, I would instantly leave him.

FEARING
You’re a distraction, a fucking distraction.

LATIMER
Well, you’re a fool. You missed something you’ll never experience now. You don’t know someone beautiful when you see her. Never mind, you’ll be sorry.

FEARING
People only like you because they think you’re going to be famous! I can’t compete with half-witted adolescents who flatter you and send you Victrola records. I’ll never be that weak. I’ll never be submerged by you.

LATIMER
(Aside) When I was six years old, I saw a bird flying through the air and I stared at it with my mouth open. It was not in fact a bird, but a baseball, which hit me in the face and left a blackeye and a bloody nose. (Beat.) Kenneth cured me of my idealism.

NARRATOR
The bird is rarely a bird. It is often a baseball.

*On a cold night, LATIMER watches FEARING and LESLIE take an oil painting off the wall, pull the wood frame from it, and throw the frame into the fireplace to warm the house. She knew it was already over, but this is the final straw.*

LATIMER
The disharmony, dirtiness, and ugliness that most artists live in is absolutely deadening.¹⁵⁹

NARRATOR
Soon after witnessing this sight, she packed up and took a train back to Wisconsin.

_Latimer boards the train._

In a letter to Blanche Matthias, Latimer wrote:

LATIMER
I tried to discover what Kenneth needed and I did but I can’t live that way anymore. I had to give everything—my peace of mind, my whole self, every kind of attention, and expect nothing.¹⁶⁰

LEO
This final explosion built for some time.

NARRATOR
Latimer said to Blanche Matthias all the way back in October of 1925:

LATIMER
For a time when I felt bound to Kenneth I felt like a bone in a dog’s mouth, a bird being shaken and torn and then when he wrote that–he felt self-sufficient and that I should not try to understand him but should occupy myself with his diet I was suddenly in the light for the first time in years, it seemed. I loved Kenneth–I still do I suppose–but he used me as a shield for the times when he felt sick and weak and while I was with him I didn’t write.”¹⁶¹

NARRATOR
Zona Gale considered herself vindicated: a woman can either be a wife or an artist. There is no in-between.

LATIMER
Kenneth is constantly at me for being weak and shrinking from reality merely because, if I understand it, he has used me as a symbol of his own mental state that demands the dream while his will destroys it. Of me he knows nothing because he insists on seeing me though his own blindness and then calls me blind—which I am, of course, but not so blind as they think.¹⁶²

…He never sees that all the time, drunk with dreams, as he would say, I am facing a reality of dirty dishes, parents who look for their own unsatisfied dreams in me, words that always fall short of my meaning, no one to talk to about anything and feel the satisfaction of spoken words,
nothing to go to — no music, theaters – and because I see life at the core instead of the covering I am a dissipated weakling who is leading him astray. Then he takes it all aback and destroys himself for having said it and assures me he is ill and cannot help it, and will tear out his tongue if he ever says it again.\textsuperscript{163}

\textit{LIGHTS.}

12. Returning to Gale: “Your Slave for Eternity”\textsuperscript{164}

\textit{In the Garden of Zona Gale, After 1928. By Ephraim Burt Trimpey.}  
Girl on the left is Leslyn, the adopted daughter of Gale.

\textit{LIGHTS.}

\textit{Portage Wisconsin. June 1928. NARRATOR and LEO on stage.}  

\textbf{NARRATOR}
Latimer rushed home to Portage. She had lived up to Gale’s vision for her. She had come back to sit on the wicker furniture in Gale’s, be accepted once more, and return to the way things used to be. But Gale’s life had changed tremendously in the time Latimer was away. Gale, at the beginning of 1928, about six months before Latimer returned home, quietly assumed guardianship of a homeless two-year-old girl named Leslyn. Gale had also, on a trip to California, run into William L. Breese, a platonic friend from childhood and a recent widower in his mid-sixties, ten years older than her. Breese, a conservative Republican and a Presbyterian elder, ran the hosiery factory and lumber yards in Portage and was also the president of the local bank.
Latimer’s family would lose all their savings at this very bank during the depression.

Gale was in numerous ways the opposite of this man: an ardent progressive, who had long ago given up on traditional Christianity and gravitated to other spiritual movements. Most importantly, Gale had never expressed interest in any man before, and adamantly preached the many pitfalls of marriage to her students.

Despite differences, a courtship ensued, and Breese and Gale made plans to be married. Gale wanted a family. Her mother has died in 1923 and now her father was dying.

But no one, including Gale, had the courage to break the news to Latimer, even after she had returned to Portage. Latimer had no idea of the courtship until the day before the wedding, June 11, 1928, when the local newspaper announced the event. Convinced that the statement must be some sick joke or an accident, Latimer ran down the familiar road to Gale’s house and knocked frantically on the door. Gale kept her waiting for over an hour and then without inviting her into the house, said, without further explanation, that it was true.

Why didn’t Gale tell Latimer? Did Gale feel ashamed? Guilty? Embarrassed at her own weakness in wanting a family? Perhaps she feared that the news would be crushing to Latimer?

Who knows? What we do know is that Latimer was heartbroken. Her ensuing depression was so debilitating that her parents considered hospitalizing her. She barely got of bed. She barely ate. She wrote handfuls of cruel letters to Gale and received, what were to her, maddeningly rational and calculated responses, all mementos of Gale’s “goodness.”

Gale destroyed these letters.

Latimer fantasied about killing Gale’s young daughter, Leslyn. Drowning her in the river, she thought would be as easy as drinking milk. She also feared the sexual element, a latent lesbianism, in her love for Zona. These awful thoughts taxed her tremendously, brought guilt on her head. In the night she would wake with one thought.

Zona is the Christian world, and I am the pagan trying to defeat her. I am Judas who sold Christ.

Through the falling leaves and the snow, she sat with her cats up in her room and typed short stories. The publication of We Are Incredible and the excellent reviews which followed did not
break through to her. Despite her grief, many of Latimer’s stories written during this awful time, and published in her final book, *Guardian Angel and Other Stories (1932)*, are the sharpest works of her career, and were received with overwhelmingly positive praise when they came out.

In July 1929, Margery began work on next novel, *This Is My Body*, a radical work, cathertically recounting the agonies of female adolescence.

**LEO**

The central theme of the novel is of growing from girlhood to womanhood and seeking experience that is truthful, both in art and in the body. It tackles the violence and hypocrisy of male sexuality and patriarchal domination. The novel is also about, both in art and in love/sex, the dissonance between the youthful expectation and the reality of the adult world. *(He takes out the Margery Latimer puppet and the Megan, Ronald, and parents smaller puppets.)* There is a spiritual nature to Margery’s writing, an attempt at personal discovery and an exorcism of the people in her life who have caused her to suffer. Meridel Le Sueur wrote that in this novel, Margery Latimer:

**LE SUEUR**

…tried to kill the slave girl image of love, as servant, the ideal of purity, of virginity as a special granary in a barbaric society, the transformation of sex out of the gross Christian body of defamed women.*"\(^{168}\)

**NARRATOR**

The novel poured out of her, at times sweetly, and at times with great difficulty. In a letter to Mark Schorer, Latimer said:

**LATIMER**

I feel like a consumptive. I look and feel awful. Perhaps I should denounce writing completely.\(^{169}\)

**NARRATOR**

And to Shirley Grove:

**LATIMER**

I wondered what I can make for God. Certainly not books. He wouldn’t care about reading. A baby perhaps. He would like that.\(^{170}\)

**NARRATOR**

Other days, so exhilarated and inspired, she felt as if her time on earth was running short and God was delivering her a message. To Ruth Ware in July of 1929, she wrote:

**LATIMER**

I feel as if everyone on earth has his ear opened to me at last and now, I am resting on the soft, soft breast of the world and whispering and raving to it. Now I like writing again. All my particles are spinning inside me. I can’t remember grief or torment or anything. Make it last.\(^{171}\)
NARRATOR
When the book was finished and sent to the publisher in the winter of 1929, she emerged from this fever and fell back to earth.\(^{172}\)

LATIMER
My book is coming the twentieth of January. I have read half of it in galleys, and I am in despair. It sounds awful. Awful. Like crap, tripe, swill, dish water. Too clever, surface, rapid, adolescent. I know you don’t like it anyway, but I once loved it. I felt so gloriously fulfilled giving all of myself through it and now it seems pretentious my calling it that and comparing my feeling to Christ’s — “this is my body; take, eat.” I shall be the laughingstock.”\(^{173}\)

NARRATOR
Despite anticipating the poor response, when the book came out on February 16\(^{th}\), 1930, and critics mostly agreed that the book was too raw and emotionally vulgar, each review felt like a cutting personal rejection.

LESLEI CAMERON IN THE EVANSTON REVIEW
Her second novel *This Is My Body* was a shock to many who cared for her and wished her well.

LATIMER
(Aside, walking by the frozen river, wearing a scarf.)
I didn’t want to be subtle in this novel. I wanted to lay everything out in the sun, full of life, full of itself, for people to pick up and eat. I want my characters to be so real and normal and living that you have to throw your arms around them and feel their cheeks and suddenly offer your whole life to them forever. What I want is to give the sensation of great complete life and awareness of the body, mind, soul, motion, fingernails even.”\(^{174}\) … This is why I hate the term selfish or neurotic to describe my characters. I can only live bravely when I feel that I am just like others—when the terrible feeling that they all know reality and I don’t is quelled.\(^{175}\) … I can never face my writing meaning more to me than to others because I modestly want to be the life force itself, present in all, and have each aware of me.\(^{176}\) (Beat, laughs) … But what can I do? I must eat the truth and grow.\(^{177}\)

NARRATOR
Two years after the marriage, Gale still tormented Latimer. She sent jovial invitations to Latimer for dinner, as if the last two years had been a simple misunderstanding. When Latimer ignored these invitations, Gale upped the ante, inviting Latimer on expensive trips with her to Chicago or New York to see the theater and listen to the Gurdjieff lectures. As she opened each of these invitations, Latimer often wept, and felt ashamed that at 30, she was still so fragile. She wrote curt letters of rejection.

Margery tried to exorcise her self-destructive obsession the only way she knew how, through her writing. The result was a short story titled “Guardian Angel,” whose main character, Fleta Blain, a passionless painter who destroys everything spontaneous and playful in her protégées, was an even more damning portrait of Gale than Hester Linden had been. Latimer and her friends doubted if the story should be published, but then it was chosen by Scribner’s as winner of a $5,000 national short story contest. There was no choice but to go ahead with it. The cruelty of
the piece did not provide any relief to Latimer. It just added to her shame. She felt she should be arrested for what she did; she felt like a murderer. She went to the local stores and bought up all the copies of Scribner’s she could find so no one in town would read it... The following scene is built on letters from Latimer to Mildred O. Green and Meridel Le Sueur.

_The spring 1931. GALE shows up to the Latimer’s house unannounced. She knocks and stands in the doorway wearing a large spring hat and a gown. Her chin is up, her hands interlocked in front of her waist. LATIMER opens the door._

GALE
Sweetheart, it’s good to see you. Let’s go for a walk. Please, darling.

*Unable to say no, LATIMER puts on her coat and walks out into the spring morning. There is a great gap between the two as they began to walk, silently at first. LATIMER crosses her arms and looks up.*

GALE
(Making a calculated step over a puddle.) Margery. Please, come with me to Chicago. There we can make amends. Begin again.

LATIMER
(Calm.) Zona. I can’t, I won’t, suffer over you anymore. I won’t go with you. I won’t be pitied.

GALE
(She stops walking and faces LATIMER, sincerely.) Margery, I am your child, you are the mother, you make me feel like a little hurt child when you criticize me. And still I forgive you for everything—the cruel letters, the novels. I forgive you. I love you sweetheart.

LATIMER
(Tears in her eyes.) If I have to keep suffering over you and hurting you, I will go insane. I swear to God; I will go insane! Please let me be. (Approaching hysterics.) Let me turn my back on you! You have your family. I have nothing. Let me go! Let me grow up. Don’t—don’t keep me here like a child, loving you to the exclusion of everyone—let me go, I don’t want your love, let me go.

GALE
I will never let you go; I will never turn my back on you, never.

(LATIMER turns to leave.)
Let’s go for a lark, you’ll change your mind, let’s go...

LATIMER runs away. A few hours later. LATIMER in her bedroom. Orage, her cat, named after the teacher, is in her arms.

LATIMER
I don’t regret that I once gave my whole being to Zona and lived in her, that I have confidence and always revealed my whole self—I am glad—because the transformation and the emotion
itself of being possessed by another is all the payment one really needs—just the privilege of having given and felt and been not yourself but another is enough. But the thing that torments me at times is that I never saw her; I never touched her being. I was always looking at an image I have made, and I feel injustice to her and I feel the loss of never having understood her or known her real self. I cannot believe she is the ruthless, cowardly, pitiful, starved little sparrow my mind sees now.\footnote{181}

**LEO**

It was worth it she says. It’s true this giving of self was necessary to Latimer’s stories.

**NARRATOR**

Latimer wrote to Jessie Gruner on November 6, 1930.

**LATIMER**

Perhaps the answer to life is to be vulnerable, accessible, giving everything – and then after a certain point, all of that is a cancer, a rotting, and one must rise out of it and stand alone. Afterward though. Yes? But I don’t know any answers to anything. I know that being intelligent and avoiding things isn’t a rich way of living, either. But I think this – after one has been deeply owned, created, and bound to another, so that walking in the cold when it is fifteen below is divine – after that any bondage is short. How I treasure it! I am rotting, rotting.

Did you ever feel that there was something in you locked? That you could strangle and struggle and knock your head and body against the wall and never get it loose? Something that is intwined inside you cannot face. I keep wondering what it could be because I am so aware of the obvious sexual repression etc. I can’t imagine. But my whole future lies wound up in it. I either rot and rot or discover and live. I suppose the technical name is neurosis. It isn’t that I want to be free and independent – lord no, not for me – but I want to understand and know. Like a secret closet that is locked, locked forever, so hard and still and iron clad that the sweat comes out on me.\footnote{182}

**LIGHTS.**

\section*{13. Portage Potential}

**LIGHTS.**

\textit{Bonnie Oaks, Wisconsin. The interior of a rustic cabin. NARRATOR downstage. Behind him LATIMER and KATHERINE are setting a table. TOOMER is reading.}

**NARRATOR**

In May 1931, so invigorated with her night in Chicago, Margery invited Jean Toomer, the Lanes, the Groves, Katherine Green, and Yvonne Duppee to stay in Portage for a week to conduct an experiment in communal living. Toomer concluded that the first week was such a success that the experimental workshop should continue for the rest of the summer. Four women and four men—businessman, bank cashier, Toomer, salesman, Latimer, a clubwoman, a justice of the
peace, and a newspaper reporter.\textsuperscript{183}— lived together for two months in a small cabin in Bonnie Oaks, the woods near Briggsville, Wisconsin. Toomer, the leader, outlined the goal of the collection as follows:

\begin{quote}
\textbf{TOOMER}

Adults can be reeducated to become as natural as little children, before civilization stamps out their true or subconscious instincts.\textsuperscript{184}
\end{quote}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Margery Latimer and Jean Toomer, on their honeymoon in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California, 26 March 1932. Photograph by Bettman.}
\end{figure}

\begin{quote}
\textbf{NARRATOR}

The summer was to act as a trial run for Toomer’s dreams of establishing the first permanent spiritual community in the United States, modeled after Gurdjieff’s institute in Fontainebleau. Margery arranged the rental of the small wooden cottage in Bonnie Oaks for thirty-five dollars a month. The house sat precariously on the edge of the water, so close you could fish off the back porch. There were three bedrooms upstairs, one downstairs, a parlor, a kitchen and a dining room with a long wooden table and benches. Beside the outhouse and the red water pump was an abandoned wigwam frame.\textsuperscript{185}

While initially put together by Latimer, Toomer was, of course, the orchestrator of the summer. The “Portage Experiment,” as it was later dubbed, made up of the devotes mentioned above, plus some other students who would stop in for a week or so, was, to Toomer, a vital psychological experiment, “a laboratory of consciously controlled events.”\textsuperscript{186}

The day-to-day proceedings were all overseen by Toomer, from the lecture topic and discussions to the designation of chores, the seating arrangement (which included a “Captain” and “Chief Officer,” both men, at either end of the table), and rest. (All the women slept in one room and the men in another.) Toomer’s purpose was to establish a community where people could break free
from culturally programmed and habitual behavioral patterns to discover their true unfiltered human capacities.\textsuperscript{187}

From the day Toomer arrived, Latimer was infatuated. She found him beautiful in the water, dancing, playing gold, driving the car, speaking, embracing everyone, laughing, eating. She found what she had longed for in men—rebirth. Initially, Latimer was jealous of all the physical friendliness Toomer had with the other women, but then that thing in her that “causes so much suffering” seemed to change. She describes having a complete realization, a complete experience of life, and the following day when she realized that Jean was trying to give this to everyone, she thought she couldn’t live. She wrote to Le Sueur

\textbf{LATIMER}  
(aside). I want to be new. I want to give. I want to share.\textsuperscript{188}

\textbf{LEO}  
(Walking on.) Toomer’s and Latimer’s love had a Pygmalion quality to it. Toomer saw in Latimer, with her guilt towards Gale and need for validation, a perfect candidate to discover her true human potential. She was his special project for the summer. He had the goal, central to the Gurdjieff program, of converting her from a purely emotional person to a person whose physical, emotional, and intellectual centers were in balance and integrated. He would, according to him, free her from her habit of self-pitying, of working herself up to tragedy.\textsuperscript{189}

\textbf{NARRATOR}  
Indeed, Latimer had long been aware that her interest in the self and the emotional life caused her turmoil. In a letter to Gale in 1924, she wrote:

\textbf{LATIMER}  
Until I annihilate my Self I shall be miserable anywhere and most of the time. But when I think it is dead I find it was only tired and resting. I wondered this morning if I could work out some logical reason for doing one thing or another - I feel as though million of hands are upon me and I dare not break their dream of me – but I can't cope with all of them and I can't disappoint them and I cannot be dominated by them. It is all my youth that causes the struggle and cannot distinguish what is important and what is not. I thought love was and I thought the faculty that selected Kenneth instantly was the only one I could follow; but that was imperfect as I see it now. I can’t go by that. Then I think of writing. Logically that is unimportant and so am I except for some other place. My principles of action are youthful because they lead back to self and the desire for a superficial freedom. There is nothing to do but watch others live and try to stay free of them.\textsuperscript{190}

\textbf{NARRATOR}  
Toomer saw that Latimer’s self-esteem relied almost entirely on her creative talent, which when criticized or ignored, left her so vulnerable that she would explode in anger. Throughout the summer, Toomer placed Latimer in positions where she had to relate to others without writing. One way of achieving this was by making Latimer play sports, like volleyball in the river. At first, she felt awkward and insufficient in the presence of the women who could move so
gracefully in the water, but in time and with the help of Toomer, she attained a competence that was deeply fulfilling for her.

HELEN DUPEE
A part of his psychological experiment consisted of making members of the colony do things they hated. This was done to develop those sides of the personality that had been neglected.\footnote{191}

\textit{Evening. A large table, set with of chicken, fresh fish, and watermelon. Ten people at the table. Late June, the final night of the first week.}

NARRATOR
Latimer had tried to discuss with Toomer her tortured relationship with Gale at various times throughout the week but could never broach the topic. Toomer knew the situation, and knew what Latimer wanted, but intentionally did not raise it, so that Latimer could come to realizations about the relationship herself. That night at dinner, Latimer felt vulnerable enough to broach the topic of Gale directly. She told the whole story and asked for advice from the table. Toomer replied simply:

\textit{TOOMER
(To LATIMER.)} Human relationships are mostly like a ball rolling, gathering the mud and refuse of the persons acting. They keep rolling back and forth eternally. The only way to grow is to stop throwing out the evil and pain and hold it inside of us.\footnote{192}

NARRATOR
And just like that, the conversation moved on. The response felt undermining and patronizing to Latimer, who expected more empathy from her companions after sharing such an intimate experience. She found Toomer’s response to be mere platitude, lacking any substantive advice on how to heal.

\textit{LATIMER throws her napkin on the table, walks out of the cottage, and sits down on the wet bank of the river. After a moment watching the water, it strikes her that the whole experience was providing her with the answers she needed. She feels like a fool. She reenters the dining room apologetically and sits back down. After a minute, she speaks.}

\textit{LATIMER
Forgive me for asking that. You covered it all last night in your talk.\footnote{193}}

NARRATOR
The next morning.

\textit{LATIMER
One morning was like the morning of the world, and I went into the stable and there was the straw and the manure gleaming and a proud rooster and little kittens all grey and white with their faces gleaming white and their throats and bellies. Then I saw a three-day old calf and he turned those new liquid eyes toward me, and his coat shone with the physical new gleam.\footnote{194}}
NARRATOR
She brought her friend Katherine to see the animal and the two wept at the sight. Tears flowed. Latimer said they felt like purification. She writes to Le Sueur that she had no cognition of any of it, only the direct physical experience. As her tears seemed to rain down, she felt washed clean of all that was within, and was only a body calmly and safely holding Katherine’s suffering and her own.

LATIMER
I felt like a huge cantaloupe with the rich burning part inside and the cool sections all pressed together in wholeness so that I could hold it in my hand.”

NARRATOR
Even with these moments of enlightenment, the experience was by no means easy for Latimer.

August. The group sits around the fireplace. LATIMER reads one of Meridel Le Sueur’s essays aloud as a topic for discussion. It is met with nothing but mild interest as well as some open derision and the topic quickly changes. LATIMER is amazed that such an “enlightened” group would ignore such art. She gets up.

LATIMER
How I hate all of you! You can’t be casual about essential things!

LATIMER exits.

NARRATOR
She left the cottage and returned to her home in Portage.

LEO
To her, art was always greater than an individual. She didn’t want to be objective, passionless, deliberate about everything as the Gurdjieff Work apparently demanded. She would sacrifice anything for art. She had sacrificed Gale and Fearing. She would sacrifice Toomer if she had to. Latimer wrote to Le Sueur.

LATIMER
Now I see that every crisis in my life has ended in this same thing, disillusion, the desire to destroy, and the crawling back into my illusion of myself as unique, special, deserving of great love and great homage.”

NARRATOR
Two days later, Toomer drove to Portage and begged her to return. He told her how much she had grown in her capacity to experience unfiltered life over the last two months, and she admitted that there was still work to be done to free her from her possessives, her vanity. She agreed to return to the cottage, but her pain remained. In a letter to Ruth Ware she writes,
LATIMER
I could never urge another person to embark on this. It is too painful, too horrible.\textsuperscript{197}

NARRATOR
Perhaps, it was at this meeting that Toomer admitted to Latimer that he was in love with her too.

LEO
We don’t know.

NARRATOR
What we do know is that by late September, shortly after the experiment ended, Latimer and Toomer were engaged.

\textit{LIGHTS.}

\begin{center}
\textbf{14. The Honeymoon}
\end{center}

\textit{LIGHTS.}

\textit{In front of the Episcopal Church in Portage. The wedding takes place behind the \textsc{NARRATOR} and \textsc{LEO}.}

NARRATOR
The wedding took place on October 30, 1931, at St. John's Episcopal church in Portage. Latimer wore a black velvet gown and overcoat with a black galyak\textsuperscript{14} hat.\textsuperscript{198} As Latimer stood on the altar beside Toomer, and watched the children sitting in the choir seats, she felt miraculously happy.\textsuperscript{199} Most of the town came to the reception which followed in Guild Hall, where ice cream was served, and a large game of tag played.

LEO
Latimer felt then that she had also joined in union with her desire, her parents, and her town.

LATIMER
I feel a part of the great stream of living.\textsuperscript{200}

NARRATOR
Latimer and Toomer honeymooned in Chicago and Montreal before heading out to Santa Fe in late November in search of a permanent home for Jean’s institute. In Santa Fe, they lived in an adobe house high in the foothills, full of bookshelves, a fireplace, and large windows which overlooked the city below.\textsuperscript{201} Latimer worked on \textit{The Ship} and Toomer worked on \textit{Portage Potential}, both accounts of the summer’s experience. \textit{Portage Potential} is a sort of pseudo-

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} \textsc{LEO}: What is that?
  \item \textsc{NARRATOR}: Galyak is a moiré fur derived from the pelt of a stillborn lamb.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
scientific psychological manuscript evidencing Toomer’s techniques while *The Ship* is a more novelistic account of Latimer’s personal experience of spiritual transformation. Latimer was writing ferociously.

**LATIMER**
I have never felt so full of things that have to be written.\(^{202}\)

**NARRATOR**
In December, Latimer woke up early and walked the snowcapped hills alone. She felt warm and clean as she looked out at the pale blue mountains rolling out into the desert. She realized that day that she was pregnant. In a letter to Le Sueur, Latimer wrote:

*On a snowcapped hill in Santa Fe, New Mexico. December 1931.*

**LATIMER**
My stomach seems like the sun, quite light, burning with heat and hundreds of tiny golden things with wings, perfectly shaped into bodies, but small, are bounding out from the central sun returning, going back, returning. There is a feeling of ceaseless activity, not whirling but back and forth movements, lightning movements, so that my whole womb is alive with movement, so stirring I feel I could break into an amazing song any moment if I let myself go. I feel strange, really as if I would have a child, millions of children, as if my stomach rests on my knees and the next as if there is nothing there and the New Mexico wind is sweeping through and I am in two parts—upper and lower—with no middle.\(^{203}\)

**NARRATOR**
After New Mexico, the couple drove out in their 1927 Paige Roadster to San Diego and then Pasadena, staying at the homes of various friends of Toomer’s. During this time, Latimer’s fourth book, *Guardian Angel and Other Stories*, was accepted for publication. Toomer had come to the conclusion that his best hope for establishing an institute would be back in Chicago, where the bulk of his followers were based. As they were making plans to return from Pasadena, Miss Buckley, who ran the Carmel Gurdjieff group, offered the couple a redwood house by the water in Carmel-by-the-Sea where they could stay and work for a few weeks before returning to Chicago for the birth. They took up this offer.

To gain publicity for his lectures in Carmel-by-the-Sea, Toomer spoke to a reporter from the Pine Cone, a local paper which wrote for the arts community in the town. He spoke idealistically to the young reporter about his vision for the spiritualization of America, free from racial and class divides.

**TOOMER**
Americans probably do not realize it but there are no racial barriers anymore.

**NARRATOR**
This story and an article written a few months earlier in Wisconsin News in Milwaukee with light gossip about the Portage Experiment was picked up by a Hearst reporter in San Francisco
who turned the story into a nation-wide miscegenation scandal. The newspapers depicted the summer as scandalous experiment in communism, nudity, and interracial sex.

INTERNATIONAL NEWS SERVICE
POET TOOMER PREDICTS NEW RACE
204

WASHINGTON TELEGRAM
NEGRO WHO WED WHITE WRITER SEES NEW RACE.
205

WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL
Gossips get Thrill from Novelist’s Mate.
206

MILWAUKEE SENTINEL
TOOMER LOVE CULT STORIES STIR CHICAGO.

NARRATOR
In this story, the police chief claims that during the experiment the participants nestled in the trees like squirrels. The scandal culminated in a piece by *Time* magazine which belittled what it saw as Toomer’s overly extensive justification for marrying a white woman, titled:
Portage exploded with racist vitriol. Toomer’s mailbox was flooded with hate mail and Portage was in such an uproar that Latimer’s parents had to flee to her sister’s house in Montana for a few weeks. Margery’s love for and commitment to Toomer did not falter, but she was tormented by the pain the scandal caused her family.

She once again felt tragically ostracized from her community back home. With her marriage, she had longed for union with her home and its people, but now she was thrown into separateness once again.

Latimer and Toomer began the long drive back to Chicago, slowly, so as to not disturb the baby. They stopped first in Chicago. Fear and grief overcame Latimer initially as Toomer drove into town, when she was back in her home, she felt more peaceful. While walking with Toomer she ran into Gale, who looked old and impotent to Latimer, like a witch without power.

I could see Zona looking at me out of her dark face, as if somewhere in her in that part that always sees things are going to be slaughtered and going to be ruined and so on, she was trying to see that I was unhappy, and ruined, and lonely.

For the birth, Latimer and Toomer went to Chicago. Toomer rented a large airy apartment on Division Street, with separate rooms for the midwife and for Latimer’s mother. In the days leading up to the delivery, writing her novel every day and editing a collection of short stories to be published that spring. In her body, she felt a sense of pure physicality, as if her flesh was mud, solid and sodden without consciousness of its motion and life and cells and blood. In a letter to Le Sueur, Latimer wrote:

How all my knowledge of my inadequacy in pain and life has vanished. Each day I look forward to this event, as if it is my first supreme meeting with reality. I can’t help looking forward, with all of me, to all of it."

And the day before the birth:

I feel ripe and round and ready. I haven’t before. I haven’t felt ready before but now I do, as if myself were about to fall ripened from a branch into the grass.
15. Latimer’s Death

LIGHTS.
Fall 1932. Chicago. Apartment on Division Street. NARRATOR, LEO, and LE SUEUR sit around empty room.

NARRATOR
On the morning of August 16, 1932, Latimer gave birth to a daughter. Her mother, Toomer, and a midwife were with her. She had just finished the final proofs for her collection of short stories, Guardian Angel and Other Stories, which critics said was her greatest work yet. Horace Gregory, literary critic and translator, said that with this book Latimer belonged within the tradition of Mansfield and D.H. Lawrence.

NARRATOR as GREGORY
Less exquisite, less frail, less delicately formed than Katherine Mansfield’s prose is hers, but the emotion behind the words cuts deeper.212

NARRATOR
During the birth, Margery began hemorrhaging blood.

LEO
Neither Toomer, Latimer’s mother, nor the doctors know exactly what happened. Toomer’s biographers, Kerman and Eldridge, suggest Latimer had a congenital leaky heart valve, which increases the risk of death in pregnancy 100-fold. But no one knows for sure.

NARRATOR
What we do know is that she was conscious long enough to hold her newborn for a few moments and smile before lapsing into a coma. She bled to death a few hours later. The baby lived.

Pause.

LE SUEUR
Her stories and novels are her tablets preserved in the terrible cold of her hemorrhaging death. She was bleeding all her life. She bled to death.213

LIGHTS.
16. Burial

LIGHTS.

The funeral in Portage. People gathered around an open grave in Silver Lake Cemetery. August 1932.

REV. DANIEL CORRIGAN
Her death was a fulfillment of life, a triumph. Her friends in general feel this. The birth was the thing she wanted in life and this she did splendidly. Her life was not cut short, but was rounded out, and really ended in triumph. 214

INTERNAL TRANSITION. Zona Gale gives Latimer an impromptu tribute at a Pen Women’s meeting in October 1932.

GALE
There was a wistfulness about Margery from childhood which made her a charming personality, and one which always craved to be at ‘oneness’ with the world. She brought her first story to me when a young girl and I was struck with the remarkable beauty of her expression. In some respects, she matured slowly and showed a childish naivete. She made her first trip to New York with me. Some of her comments were deeply philosophic and wise. The next moment she would ask a question such as “what floor is an editor’s office on?” Friends found it difficult to understand her when at a football game at the University of Wisconsin her associates were intent upon clamoring for a certain success in the game she only commented “the stands look like a page of print.” And when they went into raptures over a victory, “I don’t see how it can mean so much to you.” 215

...something meteoric passed across the sky and has left an indelible mark in the field of letters. Although we may not like everything she wrote, she possessed enormous beauty of expression and loveliness which made her altogether a charming person.” 216

NARRATOR
Latimer’s collection of short stories, Guardian Angel and Other Stories, was published two months after her death. It was critically acclaimed. The New York Times wrote:

NEW YORK TIMES
Margery Latimer knows and understands human beings, particularly those who have been treated none too gently in the course of their lives. The style of writing, the characterization and self-analysis are reminiscent of Katherine Mansfield. The heaviness and world-weariness of her stories are balanced by the excellent craftsman ship which is the outstanding feature of her work. 217

NARRATOR
But even in her death, the scandal of her marriage defined her. Her life and death were made evidence of the risks of interracial marriage.

WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL
Negro’s Wife Loses Life as Girl is Born. 218

CHICAGO TRIBUNE
DEATH ENDS ROMANCE OF TWO RACES 219

WISCONSIN NEWS
Margery Latimer Toomer Dies: Motherhood Costs Life of Writer 220

NARRATOR
Gale blamed Toomer for the death, claiming that Latimer lived for twelve hours after the birth but was not taken to the hospital. Some people in Portage were scandalized by the philosophical composure of Toomer and the other Gurdjieff members at the wake. They seemed to be indifferent. When asked why Latimer had died so young, Toomer replied.

TOOMER
It was her time. 221

Lights fade on scene above.

NARRATOR
While the community grew more hateful of Toomer, the Latimer family never blamed Toomer for Latimer’s death and retained a relationship with him for many years. Toomer gave his and Latimer’s daughter, named Margery “Argie” Toomer, to his students Max and Shirley Grove in Chicago, to raise her for him while he got back on his feet. In the spring of 1934, when Toomer was in New York collecting some of Latimer’s letters, he met Marjorie Content, a Jewish American photographer from a wealthy family. The two married on September 1st, 1934, in Taos, New Mexico, with only Georgia O’Keeffe and Content’s children from her first marriage in attendance. On their way back to New York, the newly married couple picked up Argie from Chicago and brought her back to the city.

At the same time, Toomer broke decisively with Gurdjieff. The separation centered around anger over money. Mabel Dodge, a patron of the arts, had given Toomer $15,000 to fund his institute in Taos, and Gurdjieff demanded that Toomer send all the money to Fontainebleau instead. 222 Gurdjieff accused Toomer of mismanaging funds and constantly demanded money from his students when he was visiting the United States. Toomer felt conned.

In December 1936, Content and Toomer moved to a farm in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, which Toomer hoped to make an institute of his own spiritual teaching modeled after Gurdjieff’s Fontainebleau. 223 Many of Gurdjieff’s students had a similar experience of wanting to keep studying and teaching his ideas, while making a clean break from the man himself. In 1940, having finally distanced himself not only from the man but from the Work as well, Toomer joined the Society of Friends. He self-published pamphlets for many years, but he wrote at least
23 books that remain unpublished. He died in a nursing home in 1967, at the age of seventy-two, after years of slow mental and physical deterioration.

LEO

His and Latimer’s daughter, Margery Latimer, who changed her named from Margery Toomer in her adulthood, died last year, on January 22nd, 2022, at the age of 89. In her childhood she was called “Argie” but in her adulthood she went as “Margot.” She was a Reiki healer, aromatherapist, and masseuse who helped people struggling with anxiety and pain. She lived most of her life on a farm in Bucks Country, Pennsylvania, but spent some of her happiest years in the coastal English town of Cornwall. (There, she fell in love with the undulating sculptures of Barbara Hepworth, who had a garden of her work there.) Margery Latimer is survived by two children, Philip and Michelle, and one granddaughter, Gabrielle, who described Margot as “sounds and motion,” a person whose presence was always felt. One of her sons, Sean, passed away, of congenital malrotation of the small bowel, when he was five days old.

Margery T. Latimer’s obituary ends with a quotation from her mother’s story “Guardian Angel” with the addition of one bracketed name: “Oh, she would go rocking off down the garden path sometimes, her golden head among the flowers, and lean against the apple boughs just to laugh, her face turned toward the [Barbara Hepworth] sky, her hands and body limp against the tree, open to sun and light.”

Jean Toomer with Margery Latimer Toomer at Shirley Grove Parent’s farm, Illinois, 1934
Photo by Marjorie Content Toomer, from Marjorie Toomer Collection. Beinecke Library.

LIGHTS.
17. The Final Page

LATIMER and TOOMER in their bedroom in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California. Redwood cottage. Every window has a view.\textsuperscript{227} March 1932.

NARRATOR
This passage is based on Jean Toomer’s account in his introduction.

TOOMER lies in bed, reading a handful of loose pages, while LATIMER, five-months pregnant, sits at her typewriter, her back to him. The spring sunlight pools on the hardwood floors. From her desk, LATIMER looks out the window and sees a craggy crescent of Pacific coastline: rocky outposts, fog rising where white sand meets water, and ghostly Cyprus trees, foliage flattened by wind. If she stands on the front porch, she can look up and see the mountains, green, yellow, and gray, which roll into the ocean.

Today, LATIMER isn’t going out onto the porch, or even into the front rooms. From there, you can hear the cars, which drive down the winding street and pull up to the house. She can see the families who stuck their heads out their car windows to get a look at the house.\textsuperscript{228} Families from all of California drive to Carmel-by-the-Sea, down the winding asphalt turns of Monterey Bay, to get a peek at the house where Jean Toomer, described in Time Magazine as a dangerous Black cult leader who advocated for interracial coupling\textsuperscript{229}, lived with Margery Latimer Toomer, his wife of seven months. There is a traffic jam down Ocean Drive, as the vehicles pull up to the house one by one like a procession.\textsuperscript{230}

LATIMER pretends to write. She is listening to TOOMER turning the pages behind her. He reads several pages from The Ship. This book has been emerging from Latimer with a painlessly urgency. Latimer longed to, inspired by Toomer’s teachings, write her first “novel of ideas,” rather than another drama dwelling in the depths of her inner emotional turmoil. She felt a deep, mysterious drive to, as she puts it, to “reproduce herself” in a great life-affirming work.

TOOMER stops reading. LATIMER senses it and turns to face him. They look at each other for a moment.

TOOMER
What is it?

LATIMER
You ought to know. I myself do not really know.

TOOMER is struck silent. LATIMER sits in the sun. To TOOMER, LATIMER is like a creation of another race from some other planet who suddenly found herself transported into the tortured mazes of human life on this earth.\textsuperscript{231}

TOOMER
It is the greatest passage you have ever written. What is it for?
LATIMER
The end of my book. I'm going to end it with that.\textsuperscript{232}

TOOMER
(Aside.) I see this now as the final page of her life. Here it is.

LATIMER
Live in my body, \textit{O my town and my people!} Do not perish! I partook of you and you partook of me, in this marriage, and it became two marriages—\textit{the marriage of myself to him, the marriage of myself to you and you to me, }O\textit{ town, O people. And inside you, Town, I had suffered, and from you, People, I had hidden and covered my face and walked alone. And now, through him and through you I have partaken of full life, you have partaken of full life, deep in us, living its strange life, we are ripe together and complete and round with this perfect taste of living fruit. And in this moment of marriage, of perfect tasting and absorbing and fulfilling, I received and ate the best of you, the marvelous fruiting of your lives, the complete willing surrender of you all, lifted for a moment into full bodied and sweet blooded giving with eyes and bodies radiant, never to die but always to live.}

So, live on in my body, \textit{O my town and my people, and when the evil river comes to sweep us down and away and along with its dark current, then, O then, do not die in me, do not be washed out of me, even though my body is swept along with yours and with all the wreckage and all the broken parts, O do not perish then, my perfect marriage!}

\textit{Live in my dark bones and burn behind my sightless eyes, if I, too, am swept away forever, forever.}\textsuperscript{233}

\textit{Beat. LEO enters. Scene fades out upstage.}

LEO
That's it. Thank you.

\textit{BLACKOUT.}

\vspace{1cm}

\textbf{18. EPILOGUE:}
\textit{Zona Dreams of Margery and Margery Dreams of Zona}

\textit{LIGHTS, soft. Empty stage.}

\textit{NARRATOR, LATIMER, and GALE enter.}

NARRATOR
After Latimer’s death, Gale had a dream where she saw Latimer as a full woman, at great peace. She sees her as the woman she longed for her to be.

**GALE**

It was not until some time had passed that the meaning came to me suddenly (as in Spring one will become abruptly aware that he has been hearing a grosbeak). It was Margery with whom I have been sitting—Margery, among her new flowers. Margery lies over at her house, by the fireplace, in a world of flowers—so beautiful, so incredibly adult. It is as if she had lived a lifetime in one year—so beautifully, so surely entering, even here, upon her *More.*

**NARRATOR**

In 1925, Latimer had a dream about Gale and Gale’s beloved mother who had recently passed away.

**LATIMER**

*(Spoken directly to GALE)*

Last night I had such a lovely dream about your mother and then I dreamed that I was awake and you and mama came into my room and we had all dreamed of her and told our dreams. And mama said: she stood with her hands crossed on the back of the chair and I saw her lovely rings. Then you nodded. Mine was all color. She was lying in a beautiful bed covered in silk shawls and there were deep windows and flowers and draperies that touched the floor. She was wrapped in gold chiffon, or some very fine silk, and she used her hands as she spoke, and she smiled that little contented way so that her teeth showed like a child’s and caught her under lips a little. But when I told you and mama you looked very sad and moved away and then I was alone.

*BLACKOUT.*

**END OF PLAY.**
Portrait of Margery Latimer, 1932.
Jean Toomer Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection.
Folder 66: Box 1514.
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library
Bibliography:

Archival Materials.

**Jean Toomer Papers. James Weldon Johnson Collection. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.**
Call number: JWJMSS1

**Jean Toomer’s Letters:**
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Katherine Dupee - box 2: folder 64.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Waldo Frank – box 3: folder 83-85.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Max and Shirley Grove – box 3: folder 93-95.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Georges Ivanovich Gurdjieff – box 3: folder 96.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Betty and Jeremy Lane: box 4: folder 127-129.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Clark Watt Latimer – box 4: folder 130-133.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Laurie Bodine Latimer – box 4: folder 134-137.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Meridel Le Sueur – box 4: folder 143.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Mabel Doge Luhan – box 5, folder 158-159.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Georgia O’Keeffe – box 6: folder 204.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Otis Raymond - Box 6: Folder 208.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Mark Schorer – box 7; folder 225.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Clifton Fadiman – box 7: folder 231.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Alfred Stieglitz – box 7; folder 243.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Margery “Argie” Toomer – box 8: folder 249.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Margery Latimer – box 8: folder 250.
- Jean Toomer correspondence with Marjorie Content Toomer – box 8: folder 251-253.

**Margery Latimer’s Letters:**
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Louis Fremont Baldwin - box 9: folder 293.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with G. Alfred Barnes - box 9: folder 293.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Edith Bentley - box 9: folder 293.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Caroline Mirza Bliss - box 9: folder 294.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Claude Bragdon - box 9: folder 295.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Laura Greshemer Chase - box 9: folder 296.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Jane Comfort - box 9: folder 297.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with August W. Derleth - box 9: folder 298.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Lucille Driftmier - box 9: folder 299.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Yvonne Dupee - box 9: folder 299.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Zona Gale - box 9: folder 300.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Mrs. Gerner - box 9: folder 300.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Perry Goldman - box 9: folder 301.
- Margery Latimer correspondence with Katherine "Tockie" Green - box 9: folder 303.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Mildred O. Green - box 9: folder 304.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Shirley Grove - box 9: folder 305.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Mrs. Heath - box 9: folder 306.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Irving Trust Company - box 9: folder 308.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Richard Johns - box 9: folder 308.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Lucile L. Keck - box 9: folder 308.
Margery Latimer correspondence with William & Karlton Kelm - box 9: folder 309.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Clark Watt Latimer - box 9: folder 310.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Laurie Bodine Latimer - box 10: folders 311-317.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Lucy Ann Leighton - box 10: folder 318.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Meridel LeSueur - box 10: folders 319-322.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Maxim Lieber - box 10: folder 323.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Mary Littell - box 10: folder 324.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Mabel Dodge Luhan - box 10: folder 324.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Ruth McClelland - box 10: folder 325.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Harriet Moody - box 10: folder 325.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Hilda Murison - box 10: folder 325.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Nashville Agricultural Normal Institute - box 10: folder 326.
Margery Latimer correspondence with National Association for the Advancement of Colored People - box 10: folder 330.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Georgia O'Keefe - box 10: folder 327.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Raymond Otis - box 10: folder 328.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Jessie Overholt - box 10: folder 329.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Phyllis Plater - box 10: folder 330.
Margery Latimer correspondence with John Cowper Powys - box 10: folder 331.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Carl Rakosi - box 10: folder 332.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Sara Roberts - box 10: folder 333.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Marian & Samuel Rogers - box 10: folder 334.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Mark Schorer - box 10: folder 335.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Harrison Smith - box 10: folder 337.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Camille Stewart - box 10: folder 338.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Zella Taylor - box 10: folder 338.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Ruth Ware - box 10: folders 339-340.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Mary J. Wilkeson - box 10: folder 341.
Margery Latimer correspondence with Unidentified - box 10: folder 342.

Unpublished Writings:
“On Being an American” by Jean Toomer, typescript – box 20; folder 513.
*Caracomb* by Jean Toomer, third draft – box 27; folder 623-626.
Toomer’s notes on *The Letters of Margery Latimer* - box 34: folder 733.
Early draft variation of *The Letters of Margery Latimer* - box 34: folder 734.

*Portage Potential* by Jean Toomer, draft and publicity - box 35: folder 747-751.

“The Hill” by Jean Toomer, first and second typescripts - box 46: Folder 944-945.

“America the World” by Jean Toomer and other lectures – box 47; folder 963-980.

Various essays on race relations including “The American Race” – box 51; folder 1106-1128.

**Family Papers:**

Jean Toomer’s “Autobiography” notebook, 1929-1930 – box 61; folder 1420.

memorabilia from Margery Latimer Toomer (daughter) – box 66; folder 1508.

Margery Latimer journals – box 66: folder 1512.

Margery Latimer newspaper clippings -box 66: folder 1513.

Photographs of Margery Latimer. – box 66: folder 1514.


**Rare Book Department, Memorial Library, University of Wisconsin, Madison.**

Call number: ocm17416679 and ocm21321280


Matthias, Blanche C. “Letters to Blanche C. Matthias from Margery Latimer and Jean Toomer; and to Henry Chester Tracy from Margery Latimer.” 19211934.

**The Zona Gale Collection, Wisconsin State Historical Society Archives.**

Call number: ocn173692546

M2012-052 MAD 3M/24/H5 MAD 3M/72/G2

PH 310 MAD 4 /89/B3 MAD 4 /88/B11

M97-080 MAD 4

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2. "Local People at Wedding of Miss Latimer," *Capital Times* (Madison, WI), 31 October 1931


Leo Egger
15. Byrd, Rudolph P. Jean Toomer’s Years with Gurdjieff. University of Georgia Press, 2010


**FOOTNOTES:**

*Abbreviations.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BM</td>
<td>Blanche C. Matthias</td>
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<tr>
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<td>JT</td>
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<td>Zona Gale</td>
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1ML to JG, 9 February 1926, 9 p.m.; Pasadena, CA. UW, MS 206. Box #2, ocm17415537.


5"History." City of Portage, WI government page. https://www.wisc.edu/about/historical-timeline/


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20ML to BM, early summer 1925; Portage, WI. UW, MS 207, box 2.


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35This was told to me in July 2022 by Judy Eulberg, a local historian in Portage and retired English teacher at Portage High School.


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ML to Blanche Matthias, February 1924; New York City. JTP, LML, 34: 735.


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60ML to Shirley Grove. May 1, 1931; Portage, WI. JTP, LML, 34: 742. P. 546.

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68Emily Otis to Jean Toomer and Jean Toomer to Emily Otis, 5 January 1930 to 29 June 1931. JTP, 6:208.


70Emily Otis to Jean Toomer, June 19, 1931. JTP, 6:208.


72ML to Jane Comfort, May 1931; Portage, WI. JTP, 9: 297.

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76ML to Laura Greshemer, June 1931, Portage, WI. JTP, 9: 296.


172 ML to Mark Schorer, Winter 1929; Portage, WI. JTP, LML, 34: 740.
173 ML to Jessie Gruner, no date. UW, 206: 6.
174 ML to MLS, January 1930; Portage, WI. JTP, LML, 34: 739.
175 ML to August Derleth, February 1930; Portage, WI. JTP, LML, 34: 739.
176 ML to Perry Goldman, 13 February 1930; Portage, WI. JTP, LML, 34: 740.
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178 ML to Mark Schorer, Winter 1929; Portage, WI. JTP, LML, 34: 740.
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183 Griffin, Michael, Wisconsin State Journal, 19 March 1932.
184 Toomer said to this Milwaukee reporter: “In 1931, eight people lived in a cabin near Briggsville to find the key to a better way of life.” By Craig Spychalla published in Capital Newspapers found in the collection at the Museum at the Portage.
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191 In 1933 Milwaukee Sentinel, pulled from Craig Spychalla piece “In 1931, eight people lived in a cabin near Briggsville to find the key to a better way of life.” From Capital Newspapers in folder at Museum at the Portage.
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196 ML to MLS; August 1931; Portage, WI. JTP, LML, 34: 743.
197 ML to MLS, September 1931; Portage, WI. JTP, LML, 34: 743.
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218 Wisconsin State Journal, October 1932.
Thank you to Professor John Gaddis for encouraging experimentation in literary biography and for reading my earliest drafts. Thank you to Professor Ernest Mitchell for introducing me to Jean Toomer’s work and for all the time you’ve made for us to chat about ideas and literature together.

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### Application Forms

#### Kaplan Senior Essay Prize

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<tr>
<td><strong>Senior Essay Advisor</strong></td>
<td>Karin Roffman</td>
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