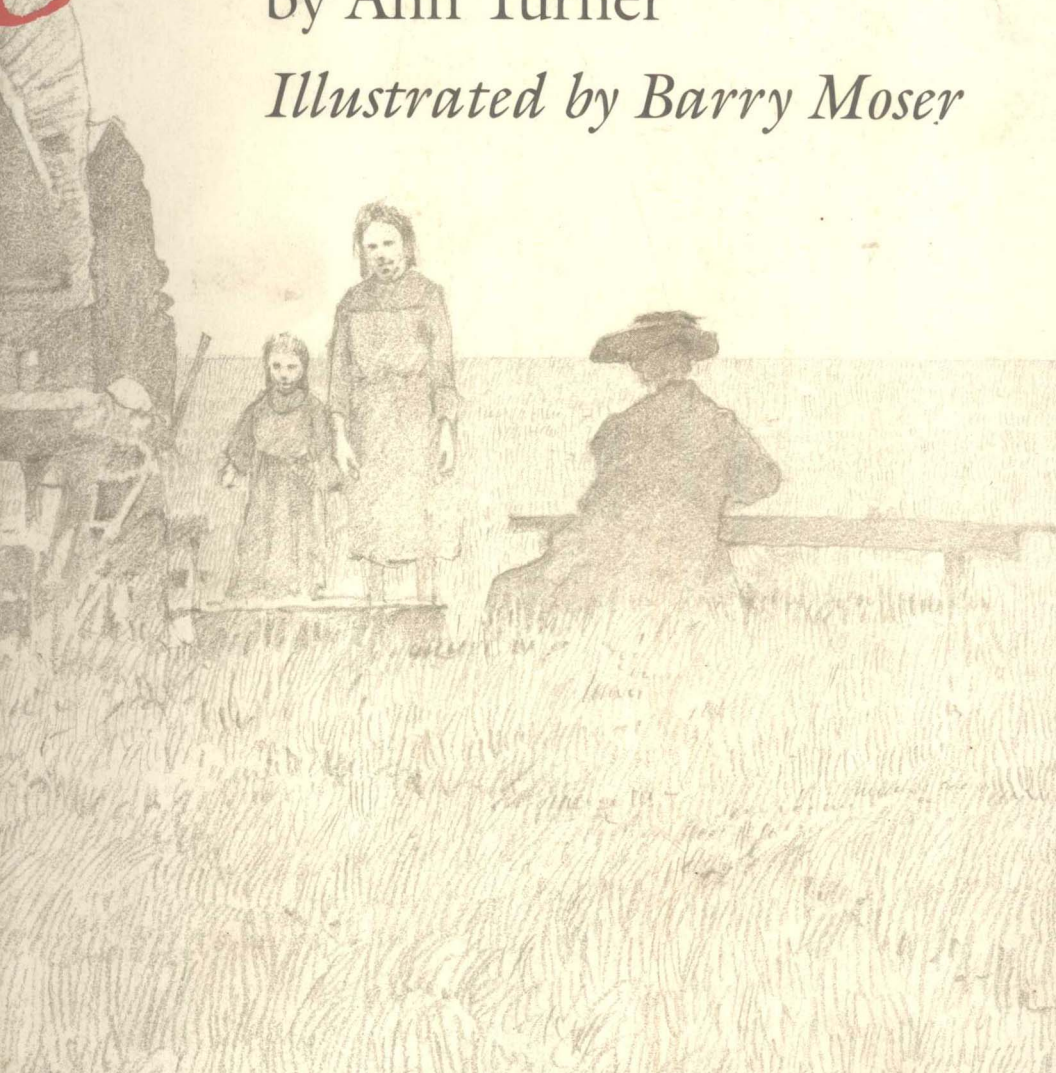


Grass Songs

by Ann Turner

Illustrated by Barry Moser



Poems of Women's Journey West

A HARVEST/HBJ ORIGINAL

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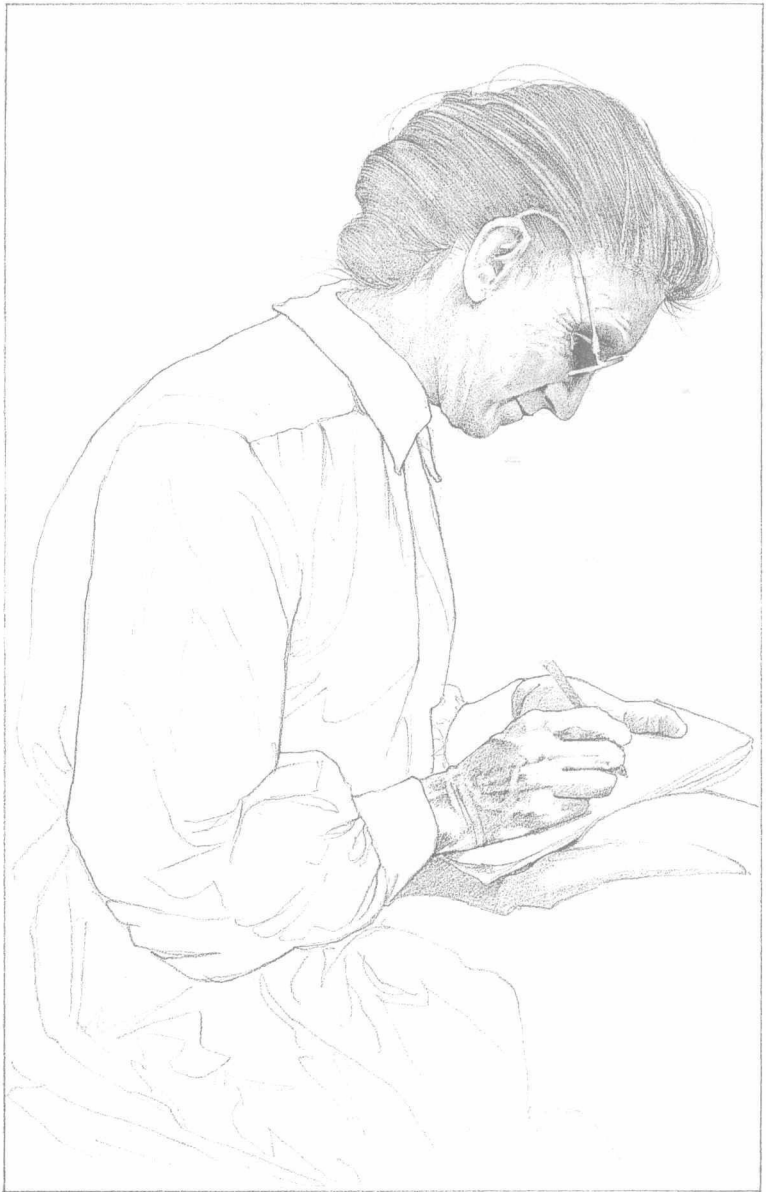
HBJ

*I scream into the wind,
race after cattle,
pluck the black river fruit . . .
and no one can say
I am not a lady.*

IN language as vivid and violent as the prairie sunlight, Ann Turner's poems reveal the intensity of the pioneer experience. No one who reads these lines, no one who sees Barry Moser's dramatic portraits, can be unmoved by the lives of the women who undertook this extraordinary journey across our country.

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GRASS SONGS



FOR JANE YOLEN,

with love and affection

—A.T. & B.M.

INTRODUCTION

HOT, drying winds and drenching down-pours. Oxen that get foot rot and go lame. Four children with the “summer complaint” if you are lucky; cholera, if you are not. A river that rises and drowns your cattle and, perhaps, your child. A husband who doesn’t know the route and fights with the other men about the best way to go West. Indian tribes. A flat prairie with no tree to hide behind, no place for physical modesty. A body nine months pregnant, struggling up and down mountains. You might reach a settlement in time for the birth; if not, you settle for the wagon in a rocking wind. Could you survive?

Many nineteenth-century women and girls did survive the hardships and dangers of the trip West. They wrote about the journey in letters home and in their private diaries, often using a vivid, homespun style. Their writings are the inspiration for this collection of poems. A few of the poems are based on actual historical figures. Olive Oatman was captured by the Apache and sold to the Mohave Indians. When recaptured by Anglos, she tried again and again to get back to her Indian husband and children.

As a friend wrote of her, “She was a grieving, unsatisfied woman who somehow shook one’s belief in civilization. In time we erased the marks from her face but we could not erase the wild life from her heart.”*

Another, Arvella Meeker, along with her husband, thought Plains Indians should plow and sow the land. The Meekers’ foolish and high-handed ambitions were finished in a deadly raid.

In most families, the men made the decision to go West. Few women wished to leave their friends and family. However, the young women and girls who did love the adventure gloried in the lack of restraint and were happy to be out in the wild air, free at last. And once they arrived, they put down roots, planted orchards, and took on the work of making a new home.

Their courage and resilience in the face of loss, disaster, and constant change inspired me. I wanted to give voice to these women as they journeyed West, as they cared for children under impossible conditions, as they formed communities in the wilderness. We have inherited their homes and their villages, and we are the richer because of it.

— ANN TURNER
June 1992

*Lillian Schlissel, *Women’s Diaries of the Westward Journey* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982, p. 69.)

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Grass Songs



Glad to Be Gone

I ran through the rain,
the rest huddled in oilcloth
or canvas,
afraid, each one,
of wind and rain.

I love
the needles on my face,
the wind under my dress,
my hair strung out behind.

*No one knows the confinement
of woman, sitting,
standing, bustled and trussed,
never allowed to run — sometimes
to dance demure.*

I was the only one
who never wept for home.
I scream into the wind,
race after cattle,
pluck the black river fruit,
and reach so high my waist tears,
and no one can say
I am not a lady.

Last night I washed clothes
in the moonlight, the river
soft and dark. I
dove, the water black-
streaming, the light
on my body.
I cried for its newness.

Now I watch
the canvas flap in the wind,
and I, like a sailor,
joyed at the rigging,
the slap and rush of the wind,
the land a wild sea
ahead.

Night's Beads

At first I could not tell my fear;
it had too many names.
But the wind pushed me into the wagon,
into my blue flannel nightgown;
I tied my cap down tight
and under the covers breathed prayers
to all the names of darkness.

Cat, are you there?
Sleep, cat, sleep.
Wolf, do you howl?
Quiet, go another way.
Snake, do you coil?
Swallow your breath.
Mountains, will you break us?
Let us by.
Rivers, do you reach for us?
Sink down, disappear.

Body, are you wounded?
Bleed not.
Child, will you be born?
Rest and wait.
Mother, do you grieve?
Think of me.
Husband, have you forgotten?
Remember.

These are the beads I tell each night.
Sleep will come
at the end of the beads,
and the journey will end
when the names are told.

Raspberry Graves

You remember the April rows,
straight and prickly, all stiff
in their red-bound skins,
and how I knelt with my leather gloves,
eyes shut, wrestling the canes
out — the spent canes down.

That summer you netted the berries,
white that blurred the red underneath,
and I made jam so tart
it puckered our lips,
and you said, “Sweets
for the sweet.”

You marked the rows with crosses,
a frame
for the netting.
I laughed and called them
raspberry graves.