

## Elizabeth Savage

### **After Eden: A Review of *Weaving a New Eden* and *No Eden***

Sherry Chandler. *Weaving a New Eden*. Wind Publications, 2011.  
Sally Rosen Kindred. *No Eden*. Mayapple Press, 2011.

Sherry Chandler's *Weaving a New Eden* and Sally Rosen Kindred's *No Eden* pursue the implications of literal and figurative mothers for history and for personal survival. Inventing or recovering women who have disappeared into "the fogs of history" impels Chandler's work, while Rosen Kindred's poems find "the dark mean fruit, put there/by your mother's hands" miraculously converted into sustenance and compassion. Grounded in Kentucky's and the nation's early history, Chandler's *Eden* often speaks from the position of a descendant. Quite differently, Rosen Kindred's conclusively titled *No Eden*, reiterating the Fall and its ultimate separations, encounters motherhood from the emotionally acute perspective of the child, as vulnerable and obedient to her flawed creator as Noah was to the God of Genesis.

Chandler's poems voice an intelligent, emotional resiliency handed down to the occupants of the present; these poems claim with humor and humility the inheritance for which they've fought. Beginning with the imminent death of Mother, who "has lost the will to read," the poems of *Prologue* start the book in the present and immediate past. In "Evening Song," the mother asks for light in the form of "a quiet, undemanding God,/. . .to see/the things I have to see when I'm alone." In the sections, *The Grandmothers*, *The Frontier*, and *North Yard*, God and chronology become less and less certain. "God must shine his light/on cannibals" in the death-filled wilderness, and luck replaces blessings.

As Chandler's title suggests, weaving signifies both women's work necessary for survival and the prosody she employs to capture the marginalia of history. These poems do much to pick up the dropped and broken threads of women's contributions to the present, but *Weaving a New Eden* also works to unravel narratives that disguise women's presence altogether or domesticate them in cartoon versions of femininity, like those casting Rebecca Boone as Daniel's sex-goddess and earth mother of a wife, "generous to the bone," who in such tales represents far more the sense of entitlement sustaining heroic visions of westward expansion than it does any actual woman.

## *Kestrel*

A pantoum entitled “The Generosity of Rebecca Boone” savors as it mocks the nearly pornographic wish fulfillment of American legend:

Every man wants that woman generous to the bone,  
a woman always waiting in some cabin door,  
ready to feed him or bed him as his appetite requires.

And who wouldn’t want such a woman, so selflessly accommodating to her man, who “alone is conquering a continent”? This poem displays Chandler’s bone-dry wit and sharply observant feminism, but her most impressive accomplishments are in the service of the nameless. In “The Old Dutch Woman Speaks,” we witness the poet’s ability to convey resounding silence while breaking that silence. A footnote to the story of Shawnee captive Mary Ingles, Chandler’s Old Dutch Woman concludes the tale of her survival:

I ate. I slept.  
And I found the horse! Older, like me,  
gone gray and lame, like me, but just as soft  
of muzzle, warm of breath. Clever me,  
I made a bridle, all of leatherwood bark,  
threw my leg over and we rode till my hallo  
brought the men who claimed to rescue us,  
the men who took me away nameless,  
to an unnamed place, and I was lost again,  
nothing left of me but my hallo  
and the little bell tinkling on my horse’s neck.

It is that capacity for joy amidst such misery that leaves me grieving each time I read this poem and she is “lost again,” extinguished by the limits of imagination and memory and marked only by the tinkling bell.

In the poetry of Sally Rosen Kindred, grief swims up suddenly out of memories unmoored through the banalities of raising children. In “Raisin” a small red box of Sun-Maid raisins “pulled from the pantry//and stuffed in a paper bag” resurrects unnamable terrors of first grade, circulating around separation from home and mother and the beginning of doubt:

you will never trust the alphabet now  
as it lists its frivolous phonic pleasures—  
its ice cream MMM, its red Apple too sweet

from the start. And Mrs. Zwicky a gold doll,  
Elise with her thick, smooth braids—  
they are the mistaken country.

These memories of daily exile, so easily glossed by adult expectations about what childhood should be or is, correct the mistaken vision that youthful innocence provides sanctuary from fear and sadness. On the contrary, the vital imaginations for which children are celebrated generate nightmares that follow well into the waking hours. The speaker of “Legacy” worries her child will have “nightmares/as I did” and be torn by guilt over the deaths of goldfish, harassed by bees on the playground, and tormented by hateful kids:

I’m afraid being small  
will flatten you against  
Spite’s windshield, against the great  
  
planetary meanness  
inevitable as Ruthie next door  
with her fistful of sticks.

The mother’s catalog of recollected fears—and her fear of passing them on to her child—ends with a definitive covenant to remain and protect and the practical advice to “keep your fingers moving//and your pockets full of rocks.” Those moving fingers may write, paint, or play when they aren’t hurling rocks back at the likes of Ruthie. Let your hands release what you cannot tell nor understand, the poem seems to say; survive this, and you will have art, if not perfect security.

Throughout *No Eden*, Rosen Kindred demonstrates that, contrary to popular belief that abuse is an unshakeable legacy, great strength and love also come from pain. Noah and the flood of Genesis, “God’s/mean story,” serve as the framework for many poems in the collection. “Least Breath” considers passing this story on to a child who sleeps while “You sit and read ‘*and all flesh died*’”; the viciousness of the tale is concealed in the surrounding nursery’s colorful decor yet heightened by the vulnerability of the napping infant. Will the fear of losing—or destroying—one’s child lead to abandoning a God who killed his children on purpose? Or can the story become a model for starting one’s family over, with new promises? “To Noah” provides an answer: you pull yourself together and take care “of your own righteous hungry people.” Forget about covenants. Forget about gifts.

For all its anti-Romantic views of childhood, *No Eden* is ultimately about empathy and compassion made possible by trauma,

## *Kestrel*

both personal and cultural. A great deal of that compassion is offered to the offending, failing parents, as well as the earlier self, the child waiting to be remembered and brought home. In “A Cold Rain,” both mother and child are wished “a corner, // . . . a place to wake from memory, / a bed that’s warm and dry.” The wish remains after the dream has evaporated and becomes ground for forgiveness. A childhood backyard often tropes this resilient emotional ground; “Twilight, 1974” narrates the collapse of each summer day into evenings of anxiety. “This is when it goes wrong” the poem begins, and goes on to describe the moment in late afternoon when the mother rocks wordlessly on the screened-in porch, her “gold beer asleep in the glass.” She is visible, but she is not present for the child who watches tensely from the backyard:

Now she’s wrapped in some darkening mesh,  
her own season,

and I am dangling out on a warped swing.

The child’s vigilance is painful to experience, and Rosen Kindred makes us feel every strained muscle, but her finely tuned attention gathers comfort and hope from the narrow surroundings when blue faces appear out of time:

the four o’clocks open hours late, into night,  
pushing their silk cheeks up against June

and tipping their sudden hearts toward the sky.

The benevolence of such a common miracle—and in the South, four o’clocks are as common as weeds—reflects the girl’s ability to open her heart, despite the pain doing so invites, and take in the many signs of a transcendent imagination. The ability to console oneself in the darker seasons is faith itself, both of and beyond the individual personality and makes possible both forgiveness and self-consolation for us citizens of the post-lapsarian world.

