

Steven Peterson

Willa Cather at Age Seventy-Three

She fell asleep more often after lunch,
a thing she never did when she was young
and strong, forever in motion, mind clear.
Today she found herself alone, disturbed.
Where was she? France? Nebraska? Santa Fé?
She wrote so many places into truth.

Edith returned, apologizing quickly
for leaving her — *Just clearing off the plates.*
She nodded, almost falling back to sleep,
and then remembered what she had to say.
Edith was told to handle one last task:
to burn her papers once she died. *You promise?*

Yet Edith wouldn't promise but protested
by pointing to the desk and manuscript.
She looked at it and saw another place,
another time, emerging into form:
her cherished France, six centuries ago,
where she preferred to live, not here, not now.

Remind me where we are, she said. *New York,*
was the reply. *Oh, yes, but it had changed.*
She'd used these crowded cities of her life
to reach the empty spaces she could fill
with bright imagined souls. Finally, she spoke:
I'm sure New York has good incinerators.

Afterwards Edith said, *That's what she told me,*
explaining all the burning when she died —
her drafts, her letters, her unfinished novel.
She's buried where she wished to be: New Hampshire.
Since Edith died they're side by side again,
the gravestone carved with *Truth and Charity.*