“A Chance Meeting” is the title of the first of the “sketches” in *Not Under Forty*, as Willa Cather referred in the Prefatory Note to the pieces she gathered together in her 1936 collection; “sketches” also is how she characterized Sarah Orne Jewett’s writing.¹ I will be discussing Cather’s story of an unexpected encounter — “It happened at Aix-les Bains,” it opens (3) — and its relation to aesthetic theories offered in that volume, but I also want to stage my own chance meeting of her “Chance Meeting” with “Old Mrs. Harris,” the central story of the three gathered in *Obscure Destinies* (1932), the last volume of her stories published in Cather’s lifetime.² Melissa Homestead, as part of her ongoing project to show how fully collaborative Cather’s writing practices were with her partner Edith Lewis (they lived together from 1908 until Cather’s death in 1947, and lie buried beside each other in Jaffrey, NH).³ Working from extant manuscripts, Homestead details substantive changes made by both Cather

¹ Parenthetical citations are from Willa Cather, *Not Under Forty* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), v, 77, 89.
² Parenthetical citations are from Willa Cather, *Obscure Destinies* (New York: Vintage, 1974).
and Lewis. In some cases, sentences that seem quintessentially Cather can be shown to have been the result of emendations made by Lewis. In a 2017 essay, Homestead examines the manuscript of “Old Mrs. Harris” that Cather sent to her publisher. Its final page is reproduced in Homestead’s article; it shows that “Old Mrs. Harris” originally ended with what is now its penultimate sentence, supposedly the thought shared by the two Victorias of Cather’s story, mother and daughter (Mrs. Templeton and Vickie), as they will come to look back on the death of Mrs. Harris, their mother and grandmother respectively. “I was heartless because I was young, and so strong, and because I wanted things so much,” it read. The final sentence that follows this one in the published text, “But now I know” (190), was added, Homestead imagines, only when Cather and Lewis were reading proofs. Lewis characteristically read them aloud; Cather, Homestead supposes, hearing the original last words, wrote the new final sentence to register her own relationship to the story: it is based on her own family (Victoria stands for her mother Virginia, Vickie for herself). Cather’s mother had just died, and now she knew what she had not known at the time.

Also found on the last page that Homestead reproduces is a change made in Cather’s hand. Originally, after the story’s final words, Cather had indicated where and when it had been written. “Aix-les-Bains, 1930” has been crossed out; below it, Cather wrote “New Brunswick, 1931.” That date registers that Cather now knew about the death of her mother on August 31, 1931, news of which reached her on Grand Manan. The original date and place points to the coincidence, the chance meeting I pursue here. Cather was writing “Old Mrs. Harris” at the time of her encounter with Flaubert’s niece, the meeting recorded in the sketch that opens Not Under Forty. No mention that she was writing “Old Mrs. Harris” occurs there, although Cather’s first conversation with Mme Grout (before she knows her name or who she is) does take place when she goes to write, “to write letters” (6), only to find the “old lady” there too. Cather had been eyeing her, “her fine head, so well set upon her shoulders and beautiful in shape, recalling some of the portrait busts of Roman ladies” (4); “the old lady was always impressive,” we are
told likewise of Mrs. Harris, “Perhaps it was the way she held her head, — so simply, unprotesting and unprotected” (81).

Mme Grout returns Cather’s gaze. They start talking — in English — about music, until the French woman interrupts the conversation to ask about a word she has just used, she fears, incorrectly: “[I]t is almost September, the days are lowering now” (8), she had said. Cather remarks that although “growing shorter” would be more idiomatic, “lowering” is “a very good word.” “Mais un peu poétique, n’est-ce pas?” ‘Perhaps; but it is the right kind of poetic” (8). It sounds, Cather explains, like a usage that she had heard among “old-fashioned farmers” in the us, in the South, Cather’s place of birth, as well as that of the Harris / Templeton clan in “Old Mrs. Harris.” Cather records her satisfaction in the old Frenchwoman’s “special feeling for language” (10), or, to be more precise, she tells her reaction to the “friend” with whom she is traveling, the unnamed Edith Lewis. Some days later, still not knowing with whom she had been speaking, she and her friend return to the “writing room.” Mme Grout is there again, and from remarks she makes, Cather realizes that she is “the ‘Caro’ of Flaubert’s Lettres à sa Nièce Caroline” (15–6). From that moment to the end of the sketch, the conversation of the two women is almost entirely about writing.

After talking one evening, Cather wanders out into the moonlight: “[T]he full moon (like the moon in Salammbô) stood over the little square and flooded the gardens and quiet streets and the misty mountains with light” (23); Salammbô was Cather’s favorite Flaubert novel. “The old lady had brought that great period of French letters very near” (23), so near that Flaubert’s moon fills the sky. As the story moves to its close, Mme Grout wants Cather to have one of her uncle’s letters, but Cather demurs: “the things of her uncle that were valuable to me I already had” (33); indeed, his niece has them too: “It was the Flaubert in her mind and heart that was to give me a beautiful memory” (33). That is what they share. So, when an envelope containing a letter of Flaubert’s to George Sand that Mme Grout sends Cather is pilfered in the mail, Cather claims to have no regrets at its loss. In the interval in her sketch between her last glimpse of the niece and the news of her death that ends the story after the misarrival of the purloined letter, Cather reads
again Flaubert’s letters to his niece, finding that “the personality of Madame Grout sent a wonderful glow over the pages” (35); Cather reports that she feels as if she might be reading her own family chronicle, finding it especially moving that Flaubert had taken in his niece, the daughter of the sister he “had devotedly loved” (36), making her part of a new family composed of Flaubert and his “old mother” with whom he lived (37).

*    *    *

In “Old Mrs. Harris,” one plot point involves granddaughter Vickie’s desire to go to college, something unheard of among the women in the family. The question is discussed by her mother, her grandmother, and Mrs. Rosen, the German-Jewish next-door neighbor; the Rosen home, filled with books and pictures, was “the nearest thing to an art gallery and a museum that the Templetons had ever seen” (103); a library, too, as Vickie borrows books from the Rosens, including Wilhelm Meister, Goethe’s artist’s bildungsroman. Mrs. Harris wonders if Vickie’s desire for an education means she has fallen for a young professor with whom her granddaughter had spent some time when he and his students had been on a dig; it was from them that she had learned about a scholarship for women students at the University of Michigan. Victoria pooh-poohs this explanation: “There ain’t a particle of romance in Vickie” (150; romance of the Southern belle type is Victoria’s essence, although it has led her to marriage and a house full of children, one more on the way as the story ends, ruining the life she wants to lead, and which her mother encourages, taking over much of the housekeeping to help Victoria sustain her romantic illusions). Mrs. Rosen objects: “But there are several kinds of romance, Mrs. Templeton. She may not have your kind” (150). Mrs. Harris agrees, setting the stage for the ensuing plot, in which she helps Vickie attain her desire for a college education.

The romance of letters in “A Chance Meeting” is played out in “Old Mrs. Harris” once Vickie gets a letter of acceptance and offer of a scholarship from Michigan. Taking the unopened letter “from the box, such a wave of fright and weakness went through her that she could scarcely get out of the post-office”
(155). Hiding the letter, she heads to a neighbor’s backyard, to “her hammock, where she always felt not on earth, yet of it.” She lands there “without seeing anything or knowing what road she took” (155). One might be reading Sappho’s Fragment 31 with its similar conflicting feelings to those felt in this place just slightly suspended above the ground and yet offering Vickie something more than earthly experience. She lies in her hammock with her finger throbbing; she has a cut infected with ink. “It was a kind of comfort to feel that finger throb; it was companionship, made her case more complete” (155). Her case? The bittersweet love in writing.

*    *    *

In a groundbreaking 1984 essay, and in the 1987 biography of Cather that followed it, Sharon O’Brien was the first to make the case for how consequential Cather’s sexuality was to her writing, even if explicit lesbian relations are not evident in her fiction. Sappho helped O’Brien make her case, noting, for example, a poem of Cather’s, “The Star Dial,” that carried the subtitle “A variation upon a theme of Sappho’s” when it appeared in *McClure’s Magazine* 30, no. 2, in December 1907 (22). This poem was not included when expanded versions of Cather’s *April Twilights* (1903) was reprinted in 1923, 1933, and 1937. Fragment 168B lies behind the poem: “Moon has set / and Pleiades: middle / night, the hour goes by, / alone I lie.” In Cather’s poem, her speaker waits for a lover who never appears as a dawn arises that would, in any case, have necessitated their separation. Theirs is a secret love; although no gender is explicit, the fourth stanza of Cather’s light-drenched nocturne is particularly sapphic: “All my pillows hot with turning, / All my weary maids asleep; / Every star in heaven was burning / For the tryst you did not keep.” She burns to the end of the poem. O’Brien

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imagines the poem in the context of Cather’s affair with Louise Pound years earlier, but perhaps Edith Lewis was its inspiration (they had met in 1903 and were on the verge of living together).

Writing about women poets in the *Nebraska State Journal* in January 1895, her last semester in college, Cather concludes that “there is one poet whom all the world calls great.” It is Sappho. “Those broken fragments have burned themselves into the consciousness of the world,” she continues: “If of all the lost richness we could have one master restored to us, one of all the philosophers and poets, the choice of the world would be for the lost nine books of Sappho,” this, despite the fact that her only subject was love — otherwise “she was unlearned” (1:147). Cather’s conclusion somewhat undercuts her praise and echoes with the estimation of women’s talents she offers on the previous page (as if she were not one): “A woman has only one gift . . . to feel greatly.” Love therefore would seem to be her only possible subject. But were we to follow Anne Carson’s prompting in *Eros the Bittersweet*, we would recall that love and the love of wisdom are akin. This is the direction of Vickie’s (Cather’s too), intimated when her youthful piece of journalism concludes by extolling where Sappho’s understanding of love lead: to the invention of “the most wonderfully emotional meter in literature, the sapphic meter with its three full, resonant lines, and then that short, sharp one that comes in like a gasp when feeling flows too swift for speech.” The unsaid says what otherwise cannot be said.

Sappho figures in two letters Cather wrote when she was more or less the age of her alter ego Vickie. However, it is a French Sapho in question there, Alphonse Daudet’s novel that attaches the name to a courtesan with a lesbian past who winds up a whore with a heart of gold. Writing to her friend Mariel Gere the summer before she entered college at Nebraska, Cather asks her “what power on earth, or rather under it, tempted you to purchase that abominable [sic] Sappho! I had fallen into that trap myself once, — the name of the book is both innocent and

classic—and honestly wished to save you the pain which it gave me. So you see you thwarted the one Christian effort of my life.” The joking tone belies the literal. Five years later, in a letter to a group of college friends, including Gere, she asks a favor of her; will Mariel retrieve her copy of Daudet’s Sapho that she had loaned to a girlfriend with whom she is on the outs? She professes to be “very fond” of the novel as well as its illustrations (25). In 1900, Cather saw a staged version of “Alphonse Daudet’s greatest novel,” as she terms it in the review she wrote for the Pittsburg Leader (2:688). She admired Olga Nethersole’s performance of “the glories, the horrible beauty of Sapho . . . this character involves shades and semitones and complex motives, the struggling birth of things and burnt-out ghosts of things that it baffles psychology to name” (2:688).

Once again, by way of Sappho, or rather, Sapho, Cather glances at the kind of feeling she enunciated as her goal in “The Novel Démeublée”: “without being specifically named . . . the inexplicable presence of the thing not named” (Not Under Forty, 50). Flaubert and his avatars are models of this for Cather, Jewett among them, as can be seen in “Miss Jewett” in Not Under Forty; it opens with a citation from one of her letters remarkably like Cather’s own statement of artistic purpose: “The thing that teases the mind over and over for years, and at last gets itself put down rightly on paper—whether little or great, it belongs to Literature” (76). Cather praises Jewett’s slight writing for the same qualities she found in Flaubert’s niece’s mot justе (“low-ering”). What Jewett calls “Literature” Cather pronounces in her “sketches” to be “not stories at all, but life itself” (78). In the final essay in Not Under Forty, on Katherine Mansfield’s exploration of the “double life,” Cather hails her ability to convey the secret life that lies beneath the “group life” of family and normative sociality, “the real life that stamps the face and gives character to the voices of our friends” (136). Plumbing that real life, “the very letters on the page come alive” (137). Mrs. Rosen seeks this when she tries to catch Mrs. Harris alone, “the real grandmother” (83). She enacts Cather’s writerly ambition. Her

name opens “Old Mrs. Harris.” “Mrs. David Rosen,” her point-of-view, her attempt to know the old woman, to further Vickie’s other form of love, coincide with the writer’s point of view without being absolutely identical to it. Not a member of the family, not southern, not Christian, she is a neighbor, a friend.

*   *   *

In September 1932, shortly after “Old Mrs. Harris” appeared in *Obscure Destinies*, it was reprinted in *Ladies Home Journal* as “Three Women.” To which group of characters does this title refer, the family group of Mrs. Harris, Victoria Templeton, and Vickie? Perhaps, although Vickie is only on the verge of womanhood. Might the third woman be “Mandy, the bound girl they had brought with them from the South” (88)? (“Girl” she may be called, but she is an adult.) She is attuned to Mrs. Harris, unlike either her self-absorbed daughter or granddaughter. She notices that she is short of breath, the sign in the previous story, “Neighbour Rosicky,” and here too, of impending death. Twice, she kneels before Mrs. Harris and rubs her feet, the second time too late to bring back the life leaving her. Self-abnegating Mrs. Harris does not ask “for this greatest solace of the day: it was something that Mandy gave who had nothing else to give” (93). Or is the third woman Mrs. Rosen? Mrs. Harris, who knows how much Mrs. Rosen admires her, turns to her when Vickie’s father refuses to supply the $300 she needs to be able to go to college; Mrs. Rosen promises her that her husband will find the money for Vickie. Mrs. Harris weeps: “Thank you, ma’am. I wouldn’t have turned to nobody else.” “That means I am an old friend already, doesn’t it, Grandma,” Mrs. Rosen replies. “And that’s what I want to be. I am very jealous where Grandma Harris is concerned!” (170). “Friend” is the word Cather has here and for the title of the final story in *Obscure Destinies*, “Two Friends,” to name the bond that can create alternate forms of sociality. (Cather uses “friend” for the Boston marriage of Jewett and Mrs. Field, as well as for their literary relations in the two sketches in the center of *Not Under Forty.*) This scene between Mrs. Harris and Mrs. Rosen ends with Mrs. Rosen “lightly kissing… the back of the purple-veined hand she had been holding” (170).
When Willa Cather learns the identity of the old lady in Aix-les-Bains, seeing in her “most of [her] mental past” standing before her, there is “no word” for “such a revelation. I took one of her lovely hands and kissed it, in homage to a great period, to the names that made her voice tremble” (16).

Cather wrote a poem about Marjorie Anderson, the servant who had accompanied her family when they moved from Virginia to Nebraska, upon whom Mandy is based. “Poor Marty,” first published in 1931 and included in the later printings of April Twilights, ends when the speaker of the poem (an imaginary male servant) imagines the old woman about to enter paradise, hoping that, too, will be his destination; he pays tribute to “Hands that never gathered aught, / But in faithful service wrought.”

* * *

Vickie has her most memorable conversation about her form of romance with Mr. Rosen:

“Why do you want to go to college, Vickie? He asked playfully.
“To learn,” she said with surprise.
“But what do you want to learn? What do you want to do with it?”
“I don’t know. Nothing, I guess.”
“Then what do you want it for?”
“I don’t know. I just want it.” (158)

Wanting it is all that matters: “[I]f you want it without any purpose at all, you will not be disappointed,” Mr. Rosen comments on the Kantian aesthetic life he, too, lives, though he also runs a profitable business. He continues the conversation in French. “Le but n’est rien; le chemin c’est tout.” James Woodress comments on this moment, claiming this as a favorite sentence of Cather’s. It is alluded to in Not Above Forty, in the piece on Thomas Mann, the odd-man-out in that volume, about his novel about Joseph and his “shepherd people” (the Jews; they are akin to Jewett’s coastal inhabitants or to the farmers that Cather
heard in Mme Grout’s language and depicted in her western novels and the three late stories joined in Obscure Destinies): “A shepherd people is not driving toward anything. With them, truly, as Michelet said of quite another form of journeying, the end is nothing, the road is all. In fact, the road and the end are literally one” (99).

My Google search did not yield the quotation as Mr. Rosen recalls it, but something quite close in the Histoire de France. There, Michelet is writing about tales of the education of knights in the fifteenth century. Invariably given exacting, austere educations from older women, amalgams of mother–wife and guardian angel, this feminine teaching adds a je ne sais quoi to the knight's formation. He learns that everything fades. “Au but, tout s’évanouit; en cela, comme toujours, le but n’est rien, la route est tout.”

This road is glimpsed as “Old Mrs. Harris” closes; it is where Victoria and Vickie will find themselves. “Thus Mrs. Harris slipped out of the Templetons’ story; but Victoria and Vickie had still to go on, to follow the long road that leads through things unguessed and unforeseeable” (190), the road of chance meetings that are the meaning of life, our obscure destinies. Mrs. Harris vanishes and becomes part of Vickie and Victoria. Their desires and hers coincide—their selfishness, her selflessness—in the purposeful purposelessness of life. In Eros the Bittersweet, Carson writes that from Sappho we glean an awareness of “the very structure of human thinking…. That is…we think by projecting sameness upon difference, by drawing things together in a relation or idea while at the same time maintaining the distinctions between them” (171). “The days are lowering now.” Mr. Rosen signs J. Michelet to a French sentence Cather made her own. But now I know.