Janet Emig

MINA PENDO SHAUGHNESSY[1]

Like many of you, I first met Mina Shaughnessy at a CCCC convention—in 1972, at New Orleans. I had missed her splendid keynote address because of a late plane, but I did attend the afternoon discussion she chaired. Almost immediately, we both realized that we had begun an important friendship; and subsequently, we came to attend certain NCTE and CCCC conventions together. Like many of you, we ate our Thanksgiving dinners in some exotic, non-seasonal places—once, an oyster bar in the French Quarter. Then, like many of you, I learned of her death, from cancer, at yet another convention, our most recent. Marilyn Maiz, her wholly devoted secretary and friend, had tried to reach me; but I had already left for Kansas City. Ed Corbett, a survivor, informed the Commission on Composition the Tuesday morning before the convention. The circle closes.

The mailing address is Spearfish, South Dakota. From Mount Rushmore, take the left fork, alternate 14, past Lead, that astonishing perpendicular mining town, back toward the main highway, where 90 turns into 14 and 85. The Pendo ranch extends up those mountains and down that valley, one of the most contained and limpid in the entire West. Mina Pendo Shaughnessy lies buried there, next to her mother's grave.

In every way Mina is home. She had hoped to live there again: on napkins in Manhattan restaurants she would sketch for me the cabin she planned to build, halfway up a mountain, on land her family had given her, a cabin with windows and a front porch looking out over her cherished Black Hills.

Mina could not be understood without understanding that she came from the West. At the December 8th memorial service for Mina at City College, speaker after speaker spoke of Mina's coming from the West; yet it was obvious that, for some of

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them, the West was a romantic blur. But the West, like the East of course, is highly specific. Mina's West was—a lush corner in a beige prairie state, near the moon surface of the Badlands; a corner in which a herd of 200 bison can still amble or rumble across the vision; where wild ponies block a car.

There were those eyes—in my experience only certain sailors and Westerners have those eyes, with a purity of vision, coolly undeceived, and a fatality that comes from looking out over indifferent expanses—of sea or mountains or prairie grass. Then, related, the clarity about what was central, bedrock, and what was peripheral, surface green; and an ability I think regional, never to reverse the two.

From Lead, Mina went East. Initially, East meant to her Chicago, as it often does for those in the Dakotas and Nebraska, although, later, it came to mean far more powerfully, New York itself. Specifically, she left to attend Northwestern. I can remember how she described disembarking from the train in Chicago, dressed, she claimed, like Greta Garbo. She helped earn her way through college by doing readings in the local Lutheran churches, selections she had arranged from *I Remember Mama.*

She was good enough as an actress that when she did move to New York after graduation and read at try-outs with a roommate who desperately wanted to get into the theater, it was Mina who would get the part—once, I believe, the lead as Antigone in an off-Broadway production. Whenever I see Vanessa Redgrave, who so resembles Mina physically, as say, Guinevere or Julia, I always think Mina would have made a splendid actress. Indeed, she was a splendid actress in the forum, the theater of academe, that she chose over the absolute certain uncertainty of the actual theater, for which she knew she was temperamentally unprepared.

Eventually, she went instead to graduate school at Columbia, where her passion was Milton. Just two weeks ago, Paul Cubeta, the director of Bread Loaf School of English, described a meeting with Mina last October in which she was attracted to teaching at Bread Loaf not only because she could teach a course in writing but also that, at least, she could teach a course in Milton as well.

For Mina came to her interest in writing the way most of our generation, especially women, came to it—through a back door. She stayed, as many of us did, for visceral, as well as ever-deepening intellectual, reasons. She once described this scene at City College. It was at the end of the sixties; and one of the

first groups of SEEK students was taking the placement exam, the very exam Mina analyzed into clarity and importance in *Errors and Expectations.* It had been raining, and the hair on the bent heads caught the ceiling lights so that all seemed to Mina nimbused, angelic. These were the same students, by the way, Mina would dance with in the cafeteria at Shepard Hall when she grew tired of counting syntactic and spelling errors.

Mina lived long enough to watch at CUNY, her university, what many of us are watching at our own—the quite systematic dismantlement of what she had so laboriously built, to which she may have quite literally given her life. She was even asked to participate in the demise and destruction; for the Savage Seventies are nothing if not thorough in trying to divest us of our most hard-won beliefs and actions.

There is, I believe, only one adequate and appropriate memorial to Mina: that we enact her courage; that we fight the current retreat—no, rout—into the elitist irresponsibility of earlier decades, where once again we agree to teach only those who can learn without our active and imaginative efforts; back to those mean, haemophilic responses to "What is knowledge" and "Who shall have access to that knowledge?" Mina truly believed, without sentiment, in the republic as the shining city on the hill. And she would undoubtedly agree with many of us that unless, as a community, we reverse ourselves and the direction that our schools, colleges, and universities are currently taking, this country is truly no longer morally habitable.

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Note

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