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Review of "Horizon's Lens: My Time On The Turning World" by Elizabeth Dodd

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HORIZON'S LENS
MY TIME ON THE TURNING WORLD
Elizabeth Dodd
University of Nebraska Press (\$19.95)

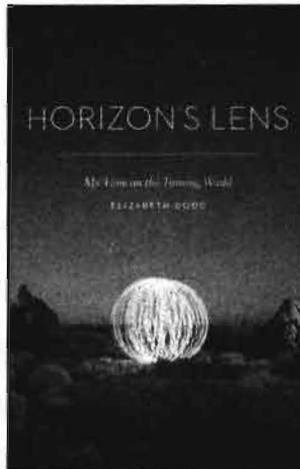
by Justin Wadland

In *Horizon's Lens*, Elizabeth Dodd visits prehistoric sites that bear traces of human attempts to align with the cosmos: the etched and painted rocks of Chaco Canyon, a medicine wheel high in the mountains of Montana, the megaliths and burrows on the Orkney Islands, Mayan temples on the Yucatan Peninsula. Often timing her visits with solstices, equinoxes, and lunar events, she seeks to circumscribe the consciousness that once inhabited these landscapes: "Stay put long enough and the patterns take form not only before your own eyes but before the eyes of memory. From one generation to the next, the knowledge of *where* and *when* rises, like water collected in a cistern. And in that communal well you can sometimes glimpse the whole of the heavens—a kind of special relativity hinting at order that you want to touch, but you can't." Through the fragments that remain on the landscape, Dodd wants to submerge herself in the cistern of this communal knowledge.

For the most part, she succeeds. The best essays in *Horizon's Lens* are peripatetic—both literally, because they occur while walking, but also figuratively, in that they follow the delightfully meandering course of the author's curiosity. A hike along the west fork of the Santa Barbara Trail in the Pecos Wilderness leads to an exploration of the etymology of the term "fork" to describe when a river splits. Dodd learns that this usage of "fork" was largely derived from early explorers trying to differentiate tributaries from the main flow. This discovery raises the question of what terms indigenous people had for the same features, and she rummages through the languages of several Native American tribes, finding that while their words connote both convergence and divergence, they tend to emphasize movement of the river through the landscape.

Another compelling essay titled "Assemblage" achieves aphorism early on: "Life rises, writhes, inscribes our epitaphs in sediment. I'm thinking of pollen in pond water, ash in the surf." As it continues in a segmented form, the essay assembles observations of various efforts at conservation in the author's home state of Kansas: collecting pollen samples on the prairie, holding the torch on a controlled burn of tallgrass, reintroducing bison and black-footed ferret. (The synopsis of the near extinction of the black-footed ferret is one of the most memorable sections of the book.) As she does in so many of these essays, Dodd cultivates a passionate attention to landscape and language that manages to make the natural world both personal and universal: "This fall I've looked for ways to stitch myself more tightly to the landscape where I live."

It is a wonder that the rich research behind these essays did not influence their form, as they did in *The Mind's Eye* (University of Nebraska, 2008), her first collection of essays. Dodd often combines unlikely topics and writes of fascinating things,



such as the linguistic abilities of Uto-Aztecan languages, but tends to lodge the information in a discursive style that sometimes relies a little too heavily on apostrophe. Occasionally, the prose expresses a desire for experimentation and yet remains bound by convention: "Dear Reader, did you see what happened? Language cast up a great slow arc, reaching sunward, then dipped low into particularity, where a single stone room stands in ruin in an arid canyon, and then rose up again, beyond the standard one-inch margins of the text." For this reader, the language stayed on the page.

These feel like quibbles, though, in light of the insights contained within *Horizon's Lens*. The essay titled "Long Count," for example, blends an exploration of Mayan time and space with descriptions of the earthquake and tsunami that hit Japan, hinting that the longest count may be the geologic events that shaped life on our planet. Dodd is a naturalist who can communicate a glimpse of the ineffable sublime that is chilling in its clarity: "But for a few hours in the middle of my life, along the waters of the Middle Fork, I lay cocooned in nighttime attention. Here's what there was, then: the sound of moving water, earth-utterance in syllables I can never separate or recognize, and the spectacular confluence of lightning, meteor, and the galaxy's dazzling arm caught poised in its whirling reach. It was a river; it was a road." ♦



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