Jacobs knows the art world well, and Hannah’s judgments about painting are authoritative without being opinionated. Unlike other curators, she never believes that she knows more about a painting than the artist who painted it. (Just as a literary critic doesn’t know more about a story than the writer who created it.) She understands that you must look at a painting for hours before it reveals itself. The same is true for a novel: you need to reflect on it and read it more than once before it reveals itself. Indeed, nearly everything Hannah says about painting is true of literature. She is involved in the restoration of art—and as we ponder the novel, we see that she is involved in nothing less than the restoration of her own life, trying to repair the damaged parts of her existence caused by her mother’s early death, her father’s self-absorption and alcoholism, and her boyfriends’ lack of understanding. “Only art clarifies things—for a moment anyway” (p. 30), she tells her former lover, the painter Leon Kaminsky, who is anxious to resume their relationship in Nepal. The two characters could not be more different. “Loving is so messy,” he declares; she points out that the opposite is true for her: “Love order things” (p. 62). Part of Hannah’s attraction to art is that it gives her the order and control she needs. Similarly, part of the pleasure of reading The Distance from Home is that we see how Jacobs portrays Hannah’s pursuit of love and order while trekking through Nepal. She knows that love is not always enough, but without love and self-esteem, she cannot imagine the possibility of happiness.

Hannah’s mother remains an absent presence throughout the novel. There are more than a dozen references to the woman who wasted away from metastatic cancer while her daughter looked on helplessly. Hannah cannot exercise the image of her mother’s harrowing eyes. “Her eyes seemed to grow bigger and more frightening,” Hannah recalls. “They took over my dreams and my waking” (p. 36). She sees the eyes everywhere, including in the paintings that hang in her museum. Anyone who has lost a loved one to cancer will identify with Hannah’s anguish. Pru Albright plausibly suggests that Hannah’s problem with men reflects her fear that love will inevitably end in premature loss. “We all have ghosts haunting us” (p. 26), Hannah tells Leon. Many readers of American Imago will immediately think of Hans Loewald’s famous distinction.
between ghosts and ancestors. “Those who know ghosts tell us that they long to be released from their ghost life and laid to rest as ancestors” (p. 29). Hannah contains the spectral traces of her deceased mother, and her challenge is to find a way to transform her mother’s ghostly spirit into an ancestor.

The other characters in The Distance from Home are convincing, particularly Leon, who evokes Hannah’s acerbic wit. Leon’s paintings, she remarks, are far better than his lovemaking, which “had that urgent, grabby quality some men never learn to control” (p. 24). Surprised to discover that Leon has been invited to Nepal, she confesses to feeling awkward when meeting former lovers: “finding myself vertical instead of horizontal, talking because there is nothing else for us to do” (p. 3). Leon insists that he has changed, though she still finds him irritating. The non-Jewish Hannah ends her relationship with Leon when she comes across a letter his father had written to him. “How could you do such a thing to your mother? Living with a shiksa”—to which his son had replied, “Papa. Don’t worry. It’s not serious” (p. 24).

The psychoanalyst in the story, Paul Levin, is considered to be “promising” at the New York Psychoanalytic. His article “The Candidate’s Transference to his Supervisor” has recently been published in The Psychoanalytic Quarterly. Jacobs satirizes the subtle affectations of his profession, as when Hannah observes that Paul “had that sad pensive look that psychiatrists learn to cultivate” (p. 69). Hannah is close to Paul’s wife, Miriam, who suffered a breakdown after her first husband died. Marrying Miriam, Paul finds himself unable to compete with the dead: “Perpetual strength and beauty preserved like marble in her memory” (p. 73). Nor can Paul bond with his step-son, Bobby, who accompanies him to Nepal while Miriam remains home with her other child, Zoe. Self-pitying and resentful, Paul believes that Miriam’s insistence on a closer family life is interfering with his career. It’s always significant when a psychoanalyst writes a novel that contains a psychoanalyst; the latter usually reveals the former’s attitude toward his or her profession. There’s something comic about Paul’s over-reliance on his analyst to help him figure out his marital problems, as when Hannah asks him what his second analyst, Shapiro, thinks about Paul’s marital situation:

He shrugged. “He won’t answer. Just keeps mentioning Odysseus. I’ve read The Odyssey three times since my analysis began and I still don’t get it. ‘What are you trying to tell me?’ I ask. You know what he says? ‘When you’ve answered that question, you’ll be home.’ Everyone says he’s the best. My first analyst was nice, a good woman, but limited. I think maybe I married Miriam because I couldn’t marry her. But she wasn’t rigorous. Gave advice instead of interpretations. I don’t know how she got as far as she did.” (p. 73)

When Hannah tries to cheer Paul up, reminding him that psychoanalysis is a profession, not a business, he testily responds, “Tell that to Dr. Shapiro. He just raised his fee. Sixty dollars an hour to hear myself talk. And then he starts again with his Odysseus shit” (p. 78).

To make matters worse, Paul is obsessed with his wealthy patient, Martha Klingman, who pursues him, with his ambivalent approval, to Nepal to have an affair. Paul becomes a comic figure, swearing each person to secrecy while making a spectacle of himself in the throes of countertransference love. Once she arrives in Nepal, Martha sleeps with Leon, to Paul’s mortification, and he finally discovers the truth of Shapiro’s veiled analytic truth: “she is my inner Circe” (p. 215).

During the trek, Hannah falls ill from dysentery and must return to Kathmandu with her sherpa guide, Pemba Golu, a man utterly different from anyone she has known. Jacobs succeeds in capturing Pemba’s otherness, including his Eastern mysticism, his devotion to the desperate plight of the Nepalese people, on whose behalf he has become a revolutionary, and his indifference to materialism. Learning English from a guidebook, he speaks with Hemingwayesque terseness. Running his hands along poppy pods, he instructs Hannah how to set the seeds free: “If lucky, seeds find home and marry ground” (p. 106). Is this a foreshadowing of their future marriage? Pemba offers wisdom that one cannot find in the novel’s psychoanalyst. Pemba knows that Leon “Need balance with self” (p. 125). Attuned to mythology, folklore, and spirituality, he often speaks in parables, as when he explains to Hannah what makes a mountain angry: “Wanting only, no giving” (p. 97), a life lesson
she takes to heart. Everyone suffers, he reminds her, suffering caused by wanting. Sometimes he speaks like a philosopher, as when he says, “Easier to climb hundred mountains than know own heart” (p. 128). Pemba’s eyes convey warmth found in none of the other men. He accepts the cultural tradition of arranged marriages, which are often more successful than romantic marriages. “Love not something need to marry. Grow with man and woman when live together, have children, when eat from same plate” (p. 105).

In two of the novel’s most evocative sentences, Hannah explains why she is drawn toward Pemba, a man who is not particularly handsome. “His rutted face contained the mountains I’d climbed, the rivers, however terrifying, I’d crossed. I saw in him, too, the things I’d missed, that I’d not had the strength to face” (p. 150). Pemba is willing to make sacrifices for his people, including his life, if necessary, and he embodies an awareness of social and political injustice that separates him from the others characters.

Pemba may strike some readers as too good to be true, but Jacobs doesn’t minimize the cultural differences that separate the sherpa’s world from Hannah’s. How can she marry a man who feels comfortable only when he is trekking? Marriage is unrealistic, but when Hannah becomes pregnant with Pemba’s child, she decides to keep it. “May is the name her father and I agreed upon, though she was born in August” (p. 11). She remains Hannah’s miracle child, giving her life meaning and purpose. The story ends in 1994, Hannah fulfilled in work and love, having changed her life.

Jacobs’ title suggests the challenge of locating the right degree of closeness and distance not only in relationships but also between the past and present. Only when Hannah is on the other side of the planet, thousands of miles from home, does she realize what she wants. The Distance from Home is a travel novel, conjuring up the spirit of The Odyssey. One of the novel’s many surprises is the limited value Jacobs attaches to psychoanalysis. Early in the story Hannah relates a recurrent dream that she has difficulty interpreting:

I am a girl of seven or eight running down a long hall. Perhaps in a hospital or school. Doors on either side. Some of them open. I seem to be looking for something or someone, but there is no one about. I push open a door and enter a room where I see a bed with someone lying in it. The body is covered with a sheet as if it were a corpse. I pull back the sheet and Leon smiles up at me. I scream and run away. I look behind and it is not Leon but my father who is chasing me. (p. 65)

Hannah has narrated the dream to many analysts, and Dr. Grossbart, “the best of them,” interprets it as meaning that she is running away from the various men in her life, beginning with her father. The interpretation makes sense to her, but she sees another meaning: she is running away from analytic treatment. Both interpretations may be correct, along with a third: the corpse in the bed is her deceased mother, for whom she has been searching in vain her entire life, a ghost a ghost who can’t be replaced by a man.

The Distance from Home is an absorbing, skillfully crafted novel that is worth rereading. Jacobs is at home in many different worlds: the high culture of museum studies; the rugged Himalayan mountains that span six countries; the turbulent political history of Nepal, and the teachings of Buddha. The story captures one of the Buddha’s most noteworthy spiritual truths: “By seeking enlightenment, we rise above what’s dark and muddy in our lives” (p. 88). Psychoanalysts do not often write novels with the spiritual power of The Distance from Home. Jacobs’s language rarely disappoints. I especially enjoyed Hannah’s thoughts upon hearing the director’s secretary saying on the telephone, “Office of the director. Whom shall I say is calling?” Hannah’s correction? “I keep telling her it’s ‘who,’ but it doesn’t sink in” (p. 21). But Hannah and Jacobs have mastered more than grammar in this well-wrought novel. Nepal comes alive in the story, and we can see why so many people trek there each year in search of transcendence.

Not everything in the story works for me. The novel opens and closes with the suicide of George Albright, the plastic surgeon who has organized the trip. Is Jacobs commenting on the despair of a doctor who attends to the surface details
of the body rather than more serious medical problems? Does George kill himself because of his many sexual infidelities? Some of Hannah’s inner musings during sex seem strained, as when she says about having sex with Leon, “At last, he placed me on him and I rode us where we needed to go” (p. 54). But these are quibbles.

What I found most intriguing about *The Distance from Home* is its insight into the lifelong impact of maternal loss on a daughter. Hannah has always been afraid of becoming a mother, fearful of the ghost haunting her life, but at the end the phantom has been transformed into an ancestor with whom she can live. While reading *The Distance from Home*, I was reminded of Hope Edelman’s 1994 study *Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss*. Citing Adrienne Rich’s observation from *Of Woman Born*—“the loss of the daughter to the mother, the mother to the daughter, is the essential female tragedy” (Rich, p. 237)—Edelman interviewed 92 motherless women in person and surveyed 154 by mail. Her conclusions were striking:

More than three-quarters of the motherless daughters interviewed said they’re afraid they’ll repeat their mothers’ fates, even when the cause of death has no proven relationship to heredity or genes. Ninety-two percent of the women whose mothers died of cancer said they feared the same demise either ‘somewhat’ or ‘a lot.’ (Edelman, 1994, p. 219)

And yet, more positively, Edelman remarks that throughout history, early mother loss has acted as a catalyst for a daughter’s later success. The key, Edelman adds, is the need to work through grief. “Some psychiatrists see mourning and creativity as the perfect marriage, with the thought processes of one neatly complementing the other” (1994, p. 265). Daniel Jacobs is presumably one of these psychiatrists, and he demonstrates in *The Distance from Home* how Hannah’s creativity—her devotion to art and to her daughter—enables her to come to terms with maternal loss and find the fulfillment she deserves.

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**References**


