

# A Slant of Light

*Contemporary Women Writers  
of the Hudson Valley*

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*Laurence Carr & Jan Zlotnik Schmidt  
Editors*



Codhill Press books  
are published for David Appelbaum

First Edition

Printed in the United States of America

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ISBN 978-1-930337-73-2

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Cover and text design by Alicia Fox

Cover art by Amy Cheng, *Dusk Revisited*, oil on paper, 2010

*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data*

*A Slant of Light : Contemporary Women Writers of the Hudson Valley /*

Laurence Carr & Jan Zlotnik Schmidt,

editors. — First edition.

p. cm.

(includes bibliographical references and index.)

ISBN 978 1-930337-73-2 (alk. paper)

1. American literature—Hudson River Valley (N.Y. and N.J.) 2. American literature—Women authors. 3. Hudson River Valley (N.Y. and N.J.)—Literary collections. I. Carr, Laurence, editor of compilation. II. Schmidt, Jan Zlotnik, editor of compilation.

PS548.N7S58 2013

810.8'0928709747--dc23

2013019688

## The Valley of the Kings

Heather Hewett

I peered at the itinerary clipped onto my handlebars and read the name: “Abbaye de Pontleroy.” In front of us, the sign read “*Fermé*.” “Strike two,” my husband said, getting back onto his bike.

We had left Montrichard that morning, planning to tour some of the Loire Valley’s lesser-known castles. It was late September, after the high season — still good for biking but not, apparently, for smaller tourist destinations. First a château and now the abbey: both closed. To make matters worse, after four hours of cycling, we still hadn’t found lunch.

I was beginning to regret our decision to explore places that barely merited any mention in our guidebook. We were traveling by bike because we wanted to resist the impulse that so often compels us to visit five cities in five days but then leaves us exhausted and irritable. What better way than a bike, we reasoned, for slowing down? And where better to slow down than in the Loire Valley, where France’s kings built their magnificent summer homes?

Yet after miles of pedaling along meandering roads, my stomach wished we weren’t moving quite so slowly.

At the next village, we headed straight for the sole restaurant in our guidebook. Closed. Sighing, we pushed on.

At 2 o’clock, the hour when lunch in France usually ends, we reached a small town. Newly built, compact houses and piles of fresh dirt: It must have been built yesterday, because it wasn’t on our map. A small sign announced its name: Feings. We arrived at a nondescript brick building with lace-curtained windows and a chalkboard with the day’s menu. *Voilà!*

A few customers still lingered, smoking cigarettes and bantering with the bartender. We sat down at a tidy table, and a waiter brought us fresh bread and steamed mussels. We ordered a carafe of the house white wine and dove into our feast, eating

each course placed in front of us — savory duck, pungent goat cheese, and the perfect *tarte Tatin* for dessert. The sugary apples and flaky crust melted in my mouth.

The chef emerged from the kitchen, smiling at our empty plates. We thanked him and contentedly rubbed our satisfied stomachs. At last we paid our bill — the cost of one sandwich and a Coke in Manhattan — and drifted back out into the warm sun, ready to explore.

We biked past old stone houses trimmed with red flowers and thick with ivy.

At the edge of town, we came to a field of fading sunflowers. The blackened, bowed heads startled me. They weren't at all what you see on postcards, and yet somehow, they were still majestic. Towering beside the road, they looked like elderly kings humbly shedding their crowns. It was autumn, after all, and the summer tourist season was over; now was the time for harvesting grapes and drinking new wine.

The sunflowers swayed gently in the wind. And now we biked as slowly as we could, reveling in the majesty of the Valley of the Kings. ☼