

Songs of a Pagan

A Study of Anne Brigman's Poetry

by CAROLE GLAUBER

Afoot and light-hearted I take to
the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me
leading wherever I choose.
Henceforth I ask not good-fortune,
I myself am good fortune....
Strong and content I travel the
open road.¹

Walt Whitman

Once described as “radical, virile, unafraid,”² Anne Brigman traveled the open road seeking inspiration from the natural world. Clambering up the rugged foothills of the Sierra Mountains in Northern California, she would rise “among pine and fir where clear streams rushed under drooping alders.” Soon “the timber line [would begin] to thin and jagged peaks cut black against the cloudless evening sky. Honey-sweet of sage and buckbrush filled the air, breath of the summer sun in the woods — outposts of God’s high country.”³

In such settings — the high Sierras with its rocks, junipers, pines, and moody weather, and later, the beaches of Southern California — Brigman found the source of her photography and of her poetry. She sought “the long steep trails that lead zig-zag, mile

after mile, away from trees and brooks, up, up into the heat of rocks blessed by the sun, where your lungs ache and your heart hurts from the struggle — then you find it — the Vision! — the glory of the things beyond.”⁴

In 1949, at the age of 80, she brought together her photographs and poems in her only published book, *Songs of a Pagan*. By then, Brigman had devoted over four decades to her craft as a Pictorial photographer and writer and had more than fulfilled the prophesy of one of her contemporaries, writing in 1907, that her life was of the kind to “develop poetry as well as character. It has been one full of beauty and adventure....”⁵ With her camera and with her pen, Brigman celebrated individual freedom and portrayed the glory of the natural world. In *Songs of a Pagan*, she demonstrated the power and significance of a life unfettered by cultural constraints and experienced with deep-felt passion and sensitivity.

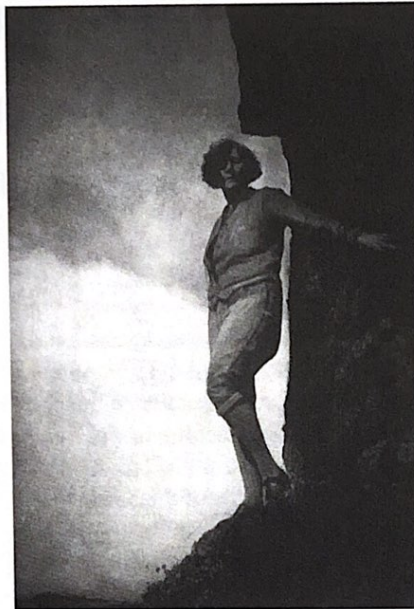
Intrepid and independent, Brigman embraced the philosophy of English socialist and rebel Edward Carpenter and carried Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* with her on journeys to the Sierras. Carpenter, a Cambridge-educated scholar, penned *Towards Democracy*, first published in 1883, “mainly in the free-verse form of Whitman, with occasional rhymed lyrical poems of great beauty and strength.”⁶ His vision of democracy equated “brotherhood and unity,”⁷ and he regarded the ideal community as one that lives in simplicity in housing, dress, manners, and food. Simplification, he suggested, leads to personal freedom — particularly for women. In his lectures, he advised people to live in cottages furnished only with the necessities, thus eliminating excessive labor and up-



Anne Brigman: *Soul of the Blasted Pine*, 1907

keep; to maintain gardens for food; to prepare one-pot vegetarian meals; and to dress in a practical style.⁸

In a self-portrait reproduced in *Songs of a Pagan*, Brigman appears high in the Sierra Mountains standing on a sloping ledge, framed by rock and sky, gazing down at the camera. Wearing pants, vest, and rugged boots, she appears strong in mind and body. Brigman is the independent woman choosing her own path. She once quoted Carpenter: "Freedom has to be won afresh every morning,/Every morning thou must put forth thy strength afresh upon the world,/To create out of the chaos the garden in which thou walkest."⁹



Anne Brigman: *Self Portrait*, 1928 (from *Songs of a Pagan*)

Much of Anne Brigman's life was a rebellion against traditional Victorian middle-class conventions. Born December 3, 1869, as Anne Wardrope Nott into a missionary family in Honolulu, Hawaii, Brigman desired autonomy even as a child. She recalled trying "to sit still on a haircloth sofa during long Sunday morning prayers...the ache in [her] legs for flight; of the hunger for air in [her] nostrils; of the wild, wonderful need to stampede."¹⁰ Instead, the drama of the lush Hawaiian landscape infused her dreams and creative vision.

Her family moved to Los Gatos, California, around 1886. In 1894, she married Martin Brigman, a sea captain, and traveled the seas with him for a number of years. They settled in San Francisco in 1897, where they built a Victorian house and separate studio for Anne. To satisfy her creative needs, she painted Impressionistic landscapes, dabbled at playwriting, acted in local theatrical productions, and wrote short stories. She made her first photographs in 1901 and "found in it at once what seemed to her the most interesting art medium. It enabled her to get at the best and most interesting in people, and the most poetical and significant in nature...."¹¹ In January 1902, her work hung in the San Francisco Salon, sponsored by the California Camera Club, at the Mark Hopkins Institute of Art. This exhibit marked the beginning of a substantial,

life-long national and international exhibition career.

The following year, after striking up a correspondence with Alfred Stieglitz, Brigman accepted membership in the Photo-Secession. The two did not meet until 1910, when Brigman made a pilgrimage to New York and Stieglitz's 291 gallery, which she later referred to as "Mecca." Visibly moved by her experience at the gallery, Brigman wrote, "There the deeps within deeps of people, pictures, conditions and myself were revealed.... This little place, the Man in back of it, the fellows in back of him and yet shoulder to shoulder, stand for one of the great storm centers of my life."¹² Earlier that year, Brigman had separated from her husband. She explained, "He had his way of thinking and I had mine and we developed along different lines. So here I am, working out my destiny."¹³

Stieglitz promoted Brigman by publishing five of her photographs in *Camera Work*, first in January 1909 and again in April 1912. In the 1909 issue, Stieglitz assured his dubious Eastern audience of the authenticity of the photographs; evidently some people believed they were created in a studio.¹⁴ Over the years, Brigman and Stieglitz maintained their friendship through their correspondence. In 1942,

Stieglitz wrote for the frontispiece of *Songs of a Pagan*, "One who had achieved distinction among Camera Workers is Anne Brigman of California. In her particular field she has done pioneer work.... I have watched her development for many years. I deeply respect her as a worker."¹⁵

Brigman invoked her twin ideals of simplicity and freedom in her photographs and writings. To make her mountain photographs, she and her models — often including her sister Elizabeth — hiked high into the Sierras, sometimes spending weeks waiting for changes in the weather. There she would select gnarled, twisted pines, shaped by the wind and storms to pair with her models. Often posing nude, Brigman's women are rendered as being at one with nature. "In all my years of work....," she wrote, "I've dreamed of and loved to work with the human figure — to embody it in rocks and trees, to make it part of the elements, not apart from them...."¹⁶

To Brigman, the act of posing nude brought her models "an exaltation of mind and soul."¹⁷ In 1926, she reminisced, "Rare humans, rare in their minds as well as in their slim, fine bodies, have given me of their simple beauty and freedom, that I might weave them into the sagas of these windswept trees on high peaks."¹⁸

Titles such as "The Dryad," "Pan," and "The Pine Sprite," reflected her interest in paganism. She once described her photographs as "the partially realized fancies that flourished in the golden or thunderous days of two months in a wild part of the Sierras where gnomes and elves and spirits of the rocks and trees reveal themselves under certain mystical incantations."¹⁹ Brigman considered "Tryst With the Wind"²⁰ one of her "most pagan lyrics."²¹

Soft, cool wind from the desert peaks...
Fragrance of sage and musk...
Shrill of a nighthawk's sharp-winged
flight
And a great white star in the dusk.
Around my feet, small, dry leaves whirl
In a dusty dance with the whispering
trees...
And it's glad I am of the wind in my hair,

And glad of its kiss on my breasts
and face
And its lift and swirl as I stand here bare
For my tryst with the wind
In the night
With a star.

In 1929, Anne Brigman left her beloved mountains and moved to Long Beach in Southern California to be near her sisters and help care for her ailing mother. The relocation required adjustment: "My swing from the mountains to the sea was a drastic experience and I saw nothing pictorial in the endless, arid beaches for about three years."²² Finally, in 1932, she made what to her was a discovery: the sand erosions in the beach. "Here on the shining sand one morning I saw for the first time the patterns that are cut by the drainage of the outgoing tide," she wrote. "I stared at the delicate loveliness and noted the height of the sun on the eastern horizon.... I turned and sped home two blocks away for the Graflex. And then I was back again, breathless but with power in my hands."²³

Brigman continued to photograph tidal inlets, sandy basins, patterns in the sand created by the movement of water, or distant figures walking on the beach. She described their reflections as "fantasy, the wet and rippled surface making them as elusive as reflections in a mirror oxidized by age or at times as vivid as a block cut."²⁴

From 1936 to 1938, Brigman began an intense exploration of poetry, immersing herself in the study of word forms and experimenting with verse. She found that she "had the same touch with language" that she had with "form and emotion with the camera."²⁵ Under the tutelage of Helen Mathews, Brigman honed her skills and then allowed her imagination to run wild. In "The Gods,"²⁶ she writes:

They are not dead...the Radiant Gods!...

On these wild mountain heights
The glorious Nike moves within
the forms of eerie trees
Upon whose breasts the storms of
centuries have raged...
And here great Jove with growling
thunders

Hurls dazzling shafts of flame
Across the midnight sky
Where Venus walks in splendor
on the waters of the dawn.

Deep in ravines where silence broods
With sounds of waterfalls...
Pan flutes among the pine and
cedar groves
With hermit thrush and flame-winged
tanagers...
And whispering dryads...floating
with the evening wind
Sway to the naiads of the icy brooks
And laugh with them
The silvery laughter of the ouzel's call...
They are not dead!...the Lovely Gods!...

Elsewhere she writes of love, sadness, pain, loneliness, and death or portrays themes of freedom and passion for the natural world. In "Nirvana," she discussed the emotional implication of her move from the mountains to the ocean.²⁷

I have left my mountains
I have come to the sea
Gone are my peaks and granite wilds
And the glorious twist of the juniper
tree.

My heart cries back for the sheer,
wild heights
For the rocky trails and the starry nights



Anne Brigman: *The Limpid Pool* (from *Songs of a Pagan*)

For the campfire's glow and the icy
stream
For the whisper of winds and the
cougar's scream.....

I have come to the shore
With its age-old song
Its endless horizons and terrible deeps...
I have come to the ocean...and I belong.

To compile *Songs of a Pagan*, Brigman linked 38 photographs with 38 poems, mostly by mood and emotion, as a "kinship of verse and photographs."²⁸ Opposite "Nirvana," for example, is *Sun Dazzle*, an image that depicts the bright sunlight rippling across the ocean, with a thread of horizon stretching across the top of the frame. Opposite "The Gods" is *The Amazons*, showing a snag leaning at an angle in front of a straight, tall conifer. Both emerge from a rocky outcrop with cumulus clouds amassed in the background. A promotional flyer for her book echoed these themes: "The gleam of sunlight, the repose or gloom of shadow, the contrast of earth and sky or sky and sea — these are as integral a part of the verse as they are of the magnificent photographs. But the poet-photographer has not confused the media she has chosen. Her verse extends, intensifies, or modulates the emotion suggested in her camera studies, and are in no way mere platitudinous description of them."²⁹

In 1941, Caxton Printers in Caldwell, Idaho, accepted *Songs of a Pagan* for publication, but the outbreak of World War II delayed its appearance for eight years. In a 1949 letter to Paul Anderson, she testified, with a sense of relief, to the difficulties she had encountered, "The going has been long with the search for engravers who would do justice to the prints, but that is accomplished (38) jewel half-tones [sic]."³⁰ The following month, she added, "I shall have to ask them [Caxton Printers] about the negatives, which at one time I thought of destroying, for no one but myself understands them in the manner of printing."³¹

Reviews assured the 80-year-old Brigman that her efforts had been worthwhile. John Proctor Mills wrote, "This dual personality has not only



Anne Brigman: *Sun Dazzle*, c.1933 (from *Songs of a Pagan*)

seen, heard, and felt the emotional pulse of life, but has given voice to its heart-warm appeal through colorful, meaningful words, and an abundance of unforgettable photographs which so faithfully portray the moods of her poetry.”³² Virginia Kirkus said, “There is a classic quality brought into modern stream by the beat and rhythms, the variety of verse forms, while in content, in seeking for faith in beauty of imagery, the modern and the traditional are blended.”³³ One observer aptly summed up Anne Brigman: “It is her art, and anything she pictures becomes her own by right of the infusion of her soul.”³⁴

Anne Brigman died on February 18, 1950, at her sister Elizabeth’s home. Along with an unfinished book of poetry and photographs, titled *Wild Flute Songs*, and a children’s book, *Child of Hawaii*, illustrated with her pencil drawings,³⁵ she left behind *Songs of a Pagan*, the culmination of her artistic life. Included in that book is a poem called “Invocation,”³⁶ in which Brigman wrote about aging and evoked an atmosphere of individual freedom and the glory of the natural world.

When I am very ancient
God give me wits that I shall not be
garrulous...
but like the high-crest junipers

On storm-worn peaks...
Whisper with deep-laid quiet in myself
Of the gone years...nor tell a racing
world, gone mad...
That having lived a short eternity
Bound in this human form...
That I have found that love is good
And Work and Play...and Grief.

Carole Glauber is a photographer/writer from Portland, Oregon. The author of Witch of Kodakery: The Photography of Myra Albert Wiggins 1869-1956 (Washington State University Press), she writes about women photographers.

Endnotes

1. Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road,” from *Leaves of Grass*, as quoted by Anne Brigman, “The Glory of the Open,” *Camera Craft*, 13 (April 1926), p. 155.
2. Brigman, “The Glory of the Open,” p. 155, quote from introduction by Sigismund Bluman, Editor.
3. Brigman, “The Glory of the Open,” p. 59.
4. Anne Brigman, “What 291 Means to Me,” *Camera Work*, 47 (July 1914), pp. 17-18, and reprinted in Peter Palmquist, *Camera Fiends and Kodak Girls* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 1989), pp. 211-215.

5. Emily J. Hamilton, “Some Symbolic Nature Studies from the Camera of Annie W. Brigman,” *The Craftsman*, 12 (September 1907), p. 660.
6. John Spargo, “Edward Carpenter, The Philosopher: His Gospel of Friendship and Simplicity,” *The Craftsman* 11 (Oct 1906), p. 51.
7. Spargo, p. 54.
8. Edward Carpenter, “The Simplification of Life: Extracts from an Essay in ‘England’s Ideal.’” *The Craftsman* 9 (October 1905), pp. 405-413.
9. Edward Carpenter, “The Secret of Time and Satan,” from *Towards Democracy*, as quoted in Anne Brigman, “The Glory of the Open,” p. 156. See Edward Carpenter, *Towards Democracy*, (New York and London: Mitchell Kennerley, 1912), p. 359.
10. Brigman, “What 291 Means to Me.”
11. Hamilton, “Some Symbolic Nature Studies from the Camera of Annie W. Brigman,” p. 660.
12. Brigman, “What 291 Means to Me.”
13. Susan Ehrens, *A Poetic Vision: The Photographs of Anne Brigman*, (Santa Barbara Museum of Art, 1995), p. 29.
14. See “Our Illustrations,” *Camera Work* 25 (January 1909), p. 86.
15. Anne Brigman, *Songs of a Pagan*, (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1949).
16. Brigman, “The Glory of the Open,” p.162.
17. Steven Lavoie, “Blithe Spirit: The Poetic Vision of Anne Brigman,” *The Museum of California* (Summer 1997), pp. 10-16.
18. Brigman, “The Glory of the Open,” p. 162.
19. Anne Brigman, “The Prints at Idora,” *Camera Craft* (December 1908), p. 466.
20. Brigman, *Songs of a Pagan*, p. 32.
21. Letter from Anne Brigman to Paul Anderson, March 27, 1949, courtesy Women in Photography Archive. Paul

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Anderson (1880-1956) was a Pictorial photographer and author of several books, including *Pictorial Photography* (1917) and *The Technique of Pictorial Photography* (1939).

22. Letter from Anne Brigman to Paul Anderson, dated "Tuesday the 25th," courtesy Women in Photography Archive.

23. Anne Brigman, "Awareness," *Design for Arts in Education*, 38 (June 1936):19

24. Anne Brigman, "Awareness," p. 19.

25. Letter from Anne Brigman to Paul Anderson, February 6, 1949, courtesy Women in Photography Archive.

26. Brigman, *Songs of a Pagan*, p. 18.

27. Brigman, *Songs of a Pagan*, p. 62.

28. Virginia Kirkus, March 15, 1949, courtesy Women in Photography Archive.

29. Order form for *Songs of a Pagan* from Caxton Printers, Caldwell, Idaho, April 15, 1949.

30. Letter from Anne Brigman to Paul Anderson, February 6, 1949.

31. Letter from Anne Brigman to Paul Anderson, March 27, 1949.

32. John Proctor Mills, founder and director of "The Montgomery Manuscript Society," and formerly Southern editor of *Rainbow Magazine*, New York, October 7, 1949, courtesy Women in Photography Archive.

33. Virginia Kirkus, March 15, 1949.

34. Anne Brigman, "The Glory of the Open," p. 155, quote from introduction by Sigismund Bluman, Editor.

35. Ehrens, p. 83.

36. Brigman, *Songs of a Pagan*, p. 46.