

Pleasant and incomplete conceptions

HALFWAY through Willa Cather's *The Song of the Lark* (1915), the heroine, a young singer called Thea Kronborg, travels to the Southwest and takes for herself a little rock room among the cliff dwellings. She is accompanied by her soon-to-be-lover Fred Ottenburg – wealthy and secretly married – but the purpose of the pilgrimage is to be alone, to think and to strengthen her voice:

Here she could lie for half a day undistracted, holding pleasant and incomplete conceptions in her mind – almost in her hands. They were scarcely clear enough to be called ideas. They had something to do with fragrance and colour and sound, but almost nothing to do with words. She was singing very little now, but a song would go through her head all morning, as a spring keeps welling up, and it was like a pleasant sensation indefinitely prolonged. It was much more like a sensation than like an idea, or an act of remembering. Music had never come to her in that sensuous form before. It had always been a thing to be struggled with, had always brought anxiety and exaltation and chagrin – never content and indolence. Thea began to wonder whether people could not utterly lose the power to work, as they can lose their voice or their memory. She had always been a little drudge, hurrying from one task to another.

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