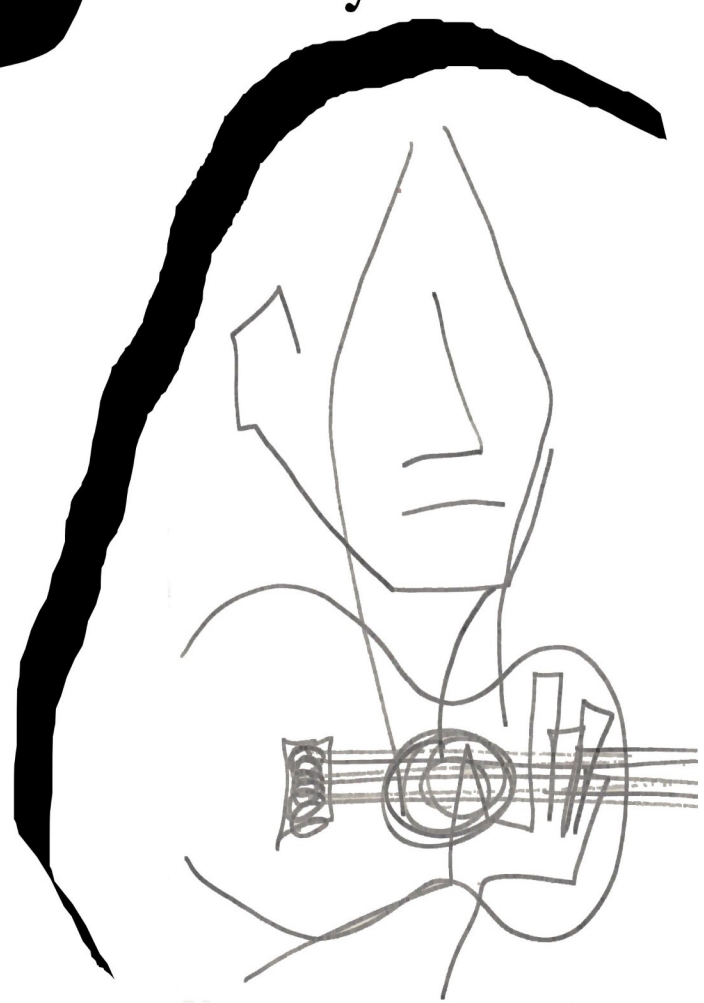




**BIRDWATCHING,**  
by Matthew

**LOIS  
LEARDI**



There are altars in these woods. I see 'em, they blossom out of nowhere, bright blots of fresh cut flowers, certain tilted slabs of shale or granite, hewn grottoes, offerings, some leave offerings, when, who knows, and there you have the mix of the eerie and the sacred, like smoke, like old campfire rings with something left behind in haste, like a shoe or a pipe, there are altars here as old as, as old as who knows, you come across them like a battered up old couch in the woods, like a washing machine down in the depths of the foliage, only these are altars, living things, antlers laid lovingly on them, a statue of the Virgin, a bowl of stones or water. Deep, down away off the deer runs, the narrow pathways, you find 'em. They make you think, like, Druids, or Catholics, or some native ritual of place, of this place, of this wood, of this floor of the world, the ground, the earth. I don't know nowhere else. I'm here, I come from here, I know these altars all my life, and they are secrets, seductive, sensual, spooky. Spirits hang out here, I know it. Who comes here? Who lays out these things, who caretakes these places? The very ancestors whisper 'round here. They could hollow right on into the nape of a person's neck with their breath. You just feel 'em. And the evidence, well, these altars have been since before I know.

You get oriented on the earth by the river if you are from here. The Hudson, she's off to the west. You know your north and south that way, you always know where you are on account of always knowing where the river is.

And the river lays out like a woman on fine silk sheets. Her beauty is salt. She's a humid woman, sweat-soaked from loving, she's all thighs and thick honey cheekbones, her loveliness sprawled like that, splayed in the hot sun, like a woman on a bed in the woods, arched back after lovemaking,

her hair spread over the pillows, the river is like that. You come bounding down out of the hem of the woods and there she is. She knocks you down, you can't but hardly breathe.

The rushes, the reeds, the estuary, all the wild aroma, heady and dense and hormonal, and she lays all moody and pouting and seductive, with diamonds all through her hair, her moon-face all ruddy and you are smothered with the wanting, the longing, the lust. I've seen her on mornings that have made me cry, that have made the salt run down and catch at my lips and drip from my jaw, that Hudson, that river. I've seen her go to fire at the end of day.

The ancestors are silent, as silent as tree bark, the ancestors are a still life. The ones who have gone before are, really, the troublemakers. They don't leave us. And they don't leave us alone. They caw at us like crows, they babble like magpies, their voices run like looping cassette tapes, they scream like rubbing locusts.

Yet there are altars in the woods.

They made 'em, we make 'em, we lay out sticks of incense in the forest, we pack pipes of stuff and smoke sitting cross-legged on the floor of the world, we stuff feathers in rock joints, tiny skulls on flagstones we have arranged, and the wildflowers in the little glass jars, oh. These forest altars, a mown cemetery can't hold a candle to them. This is where the real action is. And only the rare one of the woods knows about them. Hikers tromp by without even knowing they are there. Hunters, maybe, but they skirt them, paying no mind, unconscious, bent on prey. The silence of an altar in the woods, come upon, there's nothing like that. It runs clear up the spine. It runs up like crazy fever.

The ancestors are mighty silent, but oh how we make them talk, our heads rattle with their unvoiced lives. They lived mostly mute, like beaten down brute beasts, they skimmed the land with barely a trace, hardly kicking up dust, and they left obscure, some without even a marker, yet we breathe life into them, we write the myths of them, of who they were, we pencil in what we never heard, what we would have liked to have heard, what we believe, what we believe in about them despite our doubts. We draw ourselves based on them. We claim or deny their characteristics. We observed them. We observed them back in our own small time of being, our own little wretched childhoods, and they were big as trees then, and silent and unmoved as trees. As rock. And now we lay rocks on the shrines of them.

The ancestors are as mysterious as the Holy Eucharist.

They have been handed down to us as the bread of life.

Religion is in the woods. Religion will eat a body up. Screams and yowlings and terrified horror take place in the woods. As does transubstantiation. The woods become the body, and it becomes a body to nourish itself on the soul of the woods. The altars tell it: it is not the woods we worship, but the creator of them. The ancestors worshipped the one truthful God here, in caves and groves and they danced and whirled round trees and swamps and waterways. They always knew the focal point, the living God. When they sang, the rare song, they sang praise, adoration, to God. They snuggled up into the armpit of God and sang of safe haven, here in these woods. They were rich as kings.

Those were the rare songs.

The rest was silent.

The silent muddy boots. The silent stains of sweat across the back of a dress. The silent and deformed hands, bones bursting with work. The silence after the ringing shot fired, the silence after a thud of prey. The silence of the bedroom of the woods.

The child-silence. Absorbing, absorbing, watchful, taking in the lessons and the beliefs and the superstitions and the mystery and the bread.

We come from it. We are steeped in it.

The world takes place in sepia-tone yet.

They just always called the woman Bird. And they just always said, "oh, Bird, she's an anti-social." Bird would sit down in the woods for many hours, writing in a notebook, one of those marbled composition books such as a child would use, with a thick greasy pencil, making novels. These novels took years to make, and then off they would go to the printer, and out on into the world, but they never went far, they never strayed their way into big fame, like Bird herself, who shied away from the interviews and book signings, the tours to tout these novels, and, because she was obscure and anti-social, those novels were reviewed only in deeply literary circles where only deeply literary people knew about them, found out about them, read them. Bird liked words more than people. She could get along with words.

You see, Bird had a bad life, and by the time she was grown, she was no longer interested in communicating with humans. She was this great observer, but in speech, she believed bad things about herself. She believed she was a hypocrite. She believed she was insincere. She had a big heart, a loving heart,

but she was always caught up in being the Wise Earth Mother persona, and she did hate herself for it, because this was not who she wanted to be, so Bird shut up in life at some early point and took to writing. She went to the woods and wrote. And in the woods she learned as much about humans and their living business as she could have anywhere else out in the world. It's not like she was doing a Thoreau gig, no, Bird was being Bird. She was writing novels, with interaction, and dialogue, and all manner of plot and description, deeply and skillfully, as if Bird were gaining her whole education about humans by writing them. They were not sunny books, and they were not popular books of a mainstream quality, they were more twisted and tortured and devastating, but never hopeless. They were solid and responsible and emotionally astute. Bird knew a lot, because Bird had lived a lot. Bird's was the introspective life of one who practiced the art of reflection with an intensity that was truly profound. Few knew that, but the people who read her novels did. Still, Bird thought little of herself. At base, she thought she was a loser on a grand scale. She was a lonesome and sad person, a woman of sorrows, and isolation, and neglect. Bird hurt, a lot.

And me? I am the prologue.

I am what came before Bird evolved into a great writer. She was then like a child dabbling with language, and I knew her strong and right and true then, as I still know her now. It doesn't matter to me, her books and stuff.

She comes out of a smoky Italian immigrant background, out of an enclave of accented and broken American-ese, dark and shadowy, mysterious and foreign, not the loudmouth backhanded ways of the Italians who settled in the boroughs of

New York City, nor the noisy and gregarious stereotypes of second generation big family assertive-types who got education and so called cultural pride, not the 'greasy wop spaghetti eaters' of grade school taunts, no. Bird comes from the silent houses of dim 'off the boat' superstition and fearsome terrors and face to the ground timidity, and the struggle of ditch digging stone wall building mud caked sweat and seamstress in the back room sewing and no English and no money and be invisible and be quiet and shut up and close in on yourself and hide your ignorance type of Italian, where the very air around a body is thick with dust and some unruly sort of shame deep in the system.

She comes from ignorance, the wise kind. The kind that is so misunderstood that no one tries anymore to fathom what that was back there.

They ended up on the banks of the Hudson. The Italians had one street to themselves. A lone block of tomato plants and work boots set on steps and back yards with goats. They spread out like spiders, to jobs, returning to the core come evening. The gold teeth, the gold medal of Mary Immaculate, the lacework and the demi tasse cups and the Sambuca, the sleeveless undershirts and the black dresses. Bird comes from there.

It's essential. The altars in the woods, the ancestors, the language and lack of language, these things are essential to a knowing of Bird. You wonder, how did she make her way up and out and yet still dripping with the whole of it, how did she come to a view of herself as one who dwells in two worlds, Old Country and America, how does she somehow breathe, and become Bird, let alone Bird the literary novelist? Is that not a

schizophrenic world? Is it not a world of contradicting and conflicting voices? Then how does she keep track of them, and render them so well, and pull them apart with words like taffy, all dense and yet pliant? She can talk real good, and she can talk real poorly, which, I suspect, is why she hardly talks at all, least not out loud. But when she does, it's a mish mash. One minute she's all articulate and proper, and then next she's all dialect and regional and incorrect, and then you can see her, tilting her head to right herself, like a tossed and troubled ship, and she's talking all elegant again.

It comes from that life of hers, I know it.

The startling sound of a mourning dove winging up in fright.

I didn't mean to scare it, it just flushed up out of the bushes.

They panic, and then I shudder because they rise up so fast and noisily.

I try to walk the earth, the woods, as gently and silently as possible. I'm trying not to leave much of a trace. But the truth is, that I have begun this book about here, about the woods here, about Bird, about religion, and how does that work, when a person wants to remain buried and unseen in life? I know there are hermits on the land, even these days, modern hermits dwelling in caves and huts, and not just outlaws and people who mean to hide, but people who mean, essentially, to live a life of service, the service rendered by seclusion, the generosity of a praying recluse. It doesn't count for much with most of the world, it cannot be understood or measured, but these people, well, there are some even around here, in this Hudson Valley, and they are tucked deeply away from the society, and yet they



are influencing it, in some esoteric way. It's like the land breathes more spaciouly on account of them. I guess that sounds like hogwash. Hermits: the stuff of ridicule. It's like the world is back in high school, calling out the absurd little losers, a cutting glance, a walking past, a smirk.

That's not how it is, though. The inherent holiness is entirely unmarked, missed.

The delicacy of solitude, palms upraised, its fingers aflame, as it is said: "Why not become fire?"

I think Bird knows about this. I think what was hurt and damaged in her gets made whole when she comes here, when she walks in the cool of the day with God in this garden of overgrown vegetation and altars.

I was then living in a sort of low to the ground treehouse, kind of a platform a few feet up with a tarped teepee contraption of a roof, just on the edge of the woods, semi visible, when I first met Bird, lots of years ago. It was in that place that she and I were lovers. I had in there a futon, musty and damp, and I would lay down with Bird, and it was our trysting place, back when she was in school, back when she was going to the fancy college on the fancy scholarship, the devil's scholarship, we called it; she was lonesome and out of her league among rich kids who took being there for granted, a rite of passage, and there was Bird, the writer, on autumn walkways of leafy stone, out of place up to her neck. She kept coming home every weekend, only home was increasingly out of place, Bird was becoming distraught with the two way pull of the tides, her very language showed it, and when she remembered me one day, she came and stood under the

treehouse and raised up her face as if in supplication, and simply said: "Matthew."

And I was there that day, smoking something funny, and I pulled back the tarp, and said, "Well, come on then, Bird."

And she climbed up, smelling like textbooks and garlic, and she was stinking of confusion and dismay, sad hurt Bird, and there were my arms, and there was that.

In the years I've known Bird, studied Bird, I have come to believe this about her:

Bird would love to scream.

Bloody murder.

And I think that's why she's a writer. Bird's works are some of the most silent howls and screaming that a nervous system can contain, if you ask me.

It's a little girl, caught between languages and culture clash, that's who I hear in her novels, no matter what sort of story-line she's working with. That scream is the signature thread, to my lights.

So, oh yeah, Bird climbed up into my treehouse that day, and we became lovers. We were these twentysomething hippies, a real sight to see, all ragged and decked out in love beads, being nature kids, although there was nothing new there, no novelty to us, but the suburb-types were discovering what we knew from the cradle, and so we went on along, wearing our workingman's best, doing our part. Bird was this college student, this high honors on her way writer, and damn if she didn't lug a portable Remington typewriter up into my place, hung from her back in a knapsack, setting it on the floor

by my guitar, and that was cozy, I tell you. We didn't even know each other, save by sight, from down by the train depot, I guess we'd watched each other as far back as childhood without much interest, until that day, when she mouthed my name, and me not having known she even knew it. So Bird said: "Matthew." That was good enough for me.

She sat right down on the wood planking and this was the first thing she asked me:

"Do you like people?"

"Not in particular," I answered. "I guess I wouldn't stay here if I did."

"Did you go to Woodstock last summer?"

"I did."

"Then you must like people," said Bird.

"Wrong. I went because I don't like people all that much. I went up the thruway and looked at that ocean of people, and it wasn't much. It was pretty stupid. Everybody all full of themselves. I came down here and made this treehouse."

Bird shrugged.

"I don't like people. And I don't like school. You can't be a writer in college. It's impossible to be a writer there."

"So that's what you want to be?"

"Uh huh."

"Then you should be that. Fuck college."

Bird's face shot up in my direction, bright, like the lightbulb had turned on.

Then we had this long pause.

"Damn," she mumbled. "Shit, you are right."

"Well," I said. "You shouldn't spend all that money."

"It's all scholarship."

"Then somebody else ought to get it. You don't want it. You don't want some damn education to be a writer. You want some quiet, and some life, and this typewriter you carry round, and to get on away from people and write, seems to me."

Bird put her hand thoughtfully to her throat.

Wouldn't y'know that Bird was a virgin? I knew it when I saw her put that hand to her throat. It was a wonderment to me. Here she was, this sophisticated college student, out of this primitive swamp of mud spattered work boots, feeling her way to greatness of a sort, and she was a virgin. I'd have thought she was all rebellious and enraged counterculture, the angry type who whored about, gathering experiences right and left, but then, oh, when she put her hand to her throat I saw clear as anything the holiness. I saw the pure clean light and lines of her.

And I myself grew spacious and kind and clean and holy as I beheld that hand, there, that steady hand, not trembling, not skittish, just deep in the thought, deep in the decision, to make a leap over a certain chasm. We both knew in that moment that Bird was going to quit college, and that she and I were going to join.

We didn't like people.

There was that in common between us.

I guess we were two people that had had enough of people, world weary already at a young age.

I was a king that day. I was king of the treehouse in the woods.

Bird was pretty. Well, no, not the way you would think, she was more striking than pretty, or exotic in some forbidden fruit way; she was very un-American looking, hers was the stuff of old tin-types, loaded with the features of ancestors in black dress holding rosary beads. Bird was as handsome as a Roman cathedral, as glorious as the Hudson at dawn.

Damn if I didn't reach out just then and touch my thumb to her earlobe.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm sorry I don't know more."

"You don't need to," I said. "I know for both of us."

And then I saw her face relax, and her throat, and her shoulders. I saw that Bird was going to let me love her, and I saw inside myself that I'd loved Bird a long time, just not knowing it, just busy, busy being nobody, and there she had been, and here she was. I'm religious, I thought to myself. That's what this is.

I don't know why I thought that, but it came to me plain.

I think Bird brought that to me.

Her jaw was like licking at a comb of honey. The sweetness of the hollows below her eyes. And then her lips, the berry juice of her lips. And then it was me and her. And then it became me and her.

Nobody had told Bird nothing. None of those backwoodsmen she came out of had said anything, nor the old beaten down women. It was all fresh and new to her, and she took to me with wide eyes, and it was all a wonder and a mystery with her. She let love come to her world, she allowed me, so tender and calm and possessed of herself, yet so into it, this love, so immediately just there. What she gave, I didn't know that giving like that existed, but she brought that to me, out of me, that sacred thing, that awesome thing.

On a funky mattress in a treehouse in the woods with the river close by at the west and all the greenery curling in through the rips in the tarp, and the forest floor running with humid trails that lead off to altars where flowers were grouped in glass jars and incense smoked the dense air with fragrance.

And after we were hungry, and I drew out bread and cheese and a goatskin of cheap wine, and we fed each other silently, because there was nothing to say.

I didn't know you could just

Let me start again. I didn't know Bird, and then I just knew her. It was as if I had always known her, that day, and people talk like that, I realize, like it's a cliché, but there it was, that I knew her, that I had seen her a long time, and then she just crossed the threshold of me in a rush and I knew her. I was a young man, and an irresponsible man, and a loner and a rebel of sorts, and no one had called my name up into that treehouse before Bird did, and it's not as if I had been pining for any one thing in my life, and then Bird became, in a single afternoon, all that I had been pining for. And that's so sappy and mushy, and that's what happened, and it didn't feel one bit sappy or mushy, it felt mature, grown up, it felt like I was then a manly

man in the woods with a woman, and like that settled that, we were there, Bird and I had arrived at some landmark and we were breathing hard. It was crazy that way. It was insane. It was very rooted and grounded and solid and insane in the way of being right and true and honest, all the things the world subtly deems insane.

Bird said: "One time a few years ago the Pentecostals made a big driftwood bonfire down at the river, and I saw you there. You were dancing all loose and like you were stoned, and all your limbs were keeping time with the tambourines and the clapping."

I prob'ly was stoned," I said with a grin. "I was prob'ly just hanging out, and there was a happening, those people, and I just jammed right on in with 'em."

"Then you ain't religious?"

"Oh, yeah, I am, but not in that way. I'm quiet religious."

"Like the stones in the woods?" Bird asked.

"So you know the altars."

"I do," she said. "They're from long time before my people came to this country, but I know them from a girl, yes, wandering round the woods you come to them."

"If you get off the trails and game runs."

"Yes," she said and nodded, sitting there in front of me, and she was solemn, and we had just made love, her first love, my first being in love with the one I made love with.

"Are you okay, Bird? Did I hurt you in any way?"

"No. I thought it would, was s'posed to, but it didn't one bit."

She smiled shyly out the curtain of her hair.

"Good. I'm glad for it."

Bird presently dug her typewriter out of its sack and put it on the floor in front of her. She rolled in a sheet of rag paper, a yellow second sheet that she had a sheaf of, and began to tap. She had strong forearms and her hair hung down to the crooks of her elbows, and she was naked yet.

"You writing 'bout us?" I asked.

"No," she answered plainly.

I flushed up, embarrassed for that she might think me vain.

"What about then?"

Bird shrugged, concentrating.

"About what I do. About a sort of story I've been working, it's not about here. Remember, before, when I asked you if you went to Woodstock last year? It's that I heard there were some nuns up there, a little group of them, and it's a story about a woman who stays with them where they live, a wayward girl sort of woman that they took in and —"

Bird stopped abruptly. She looked uncomfortable for the first time since she had come up into the trees.

"You don't like to talk about it," I said.

"Yeah."

"I like privacy," I said. "I'm a great respecter of it."



And Bird seemed to breathe out air.

“Anyhow,” I said, “I’m gonna go down the trail to the river and catch us a couple fish to put on the fire, and you can work all quiet and nice. Is that good?”

“That’s very good,” Bird said, and lifted her fingertips over the keys.

I went down to fish.

I was still astonished.

There is a feeling, it’s come over me a handful of times in my life, a sort of intangible settling of divinity, like a mantle over one’s shoulders, over mine, that cloaks the body in nobility. I was feeling that feeling, scrunched down on my haunches on the riverbank. It’s like the air around me is electrified with sweetness, like I am, was, extraordinarily awake in all my senses, and even beyond them, a state of being hyper alert. There’s an elation to it, as if goodness is coursing all through my system, as if something had rubbed off Bird and created a vast and pungent atmosphere that included only me and her. I could still feel her, even though she was back at the treehouse, as if our energy field was one thing, her writing, me fishing, the whole of it seamless and dancing and beautiful. It was trippy, though I was no longer stoned.

I felt a hit on the line, and snagged a white perch, a sizeable one, and bagged it and recast. Almost immediately, I had two in the bag. I relaxed for a moment, fiddling with the split shot and looking out dreamily on the river-glory.

Sometimes a person comes into your life all in a moment, and that moment just stretches on and on for years. At least that

was what happened, and there I was, in the moment it started up, and I was looking down the years before they ever even unfolded. I just plain knew. My whole being knew. It was going to be me and Bird.

I was just this young guy. I certainly wasn't expecting a thing like this. I was a loner, kind of adrift in life, stopping in at my folks once in a blue moon to say that quick awkward hello that young people do, dodging the questions of what I was doing, if I was working, eating, what my purpose was, and the undertones of judgment and disappointment and whatever. A hasty all American meal, the offer of money for a haircut for God's sake, Matthew, and then I was off again after a friendly shoulder punch to the younger siblings and a sigh of relief.

I wasn't doing anything. Odd jobs, minimum wage failures, never anything I could stick with, just scraping by, just being a deadbeat and a drop out on this life of the times, like every other young guy of those times, hearing the music of those times, living along with the lyrics, rebellious, romantic, free, and peace-out. It was fine with me. It suited me. I guess I'd been waiting for these times to roll round since I was a little kid having problems with the status quo.

And then suddenly I was doing something. All at once, I was being part of two people. I was doing this thing called being in love in one fell swoop.

What did that look like? It looked like the river stretching out like a lazy mountain lion, and it felt like a third perch on my line, and it caught like laughter in my throat as I pulled up that fish with which I would feed this woman.

I thought she might not like me anymore by the time I got back to the clearing, but there was Bird, down on the ground, and she had a little fire going in the stone rimmed pit, and she was rummaging through her pages, reading with a furrow to her brow, and the typewriter there on a flat rock, and all of it hopeful and bright, especially the fact that she was wearing my denim shirt, the sleeves rolled to the elbows.

I let out a low whistle from a distance, and held up the fish, and she glanced up and smiled without showing her crooked teeth, a shy smile, a smile that said she worried I didn't like her anymore either, and that, hearing my whistle, she was reassured, and her eyes relaxed, and she was all beautiful about the forehead, all shadowed by her hair flopping down, and the whole of her seemed to say I'm not going anywhere, Matthew.

I loved her for that.

"How's the work?" I asked.

She shrugged, riffling the pages.

"It takes a lifetime maybe to even ever know," she answered.

And that was mysterious and good, I thought.

And I was not a sweet boy, back then, and I was not a pretty boy. I was a bit rough around the edges, the kind of guy you find in bar fights and seedy spots doing sordid things, the kind of punk who is out to get back at the parents, or some dim childhood experiences never processed, or some even more dim projection of myself as some major 60's player, like I was going to turn into a guitar hero or a drug dealer or a burn out of obscene proportions, like I was going to generate awe from the people in some form. Just like every other young man then.

Like I was going to be the sprite of the woods, the wisdom saint of the forest. The people would come in droves to listen to me, before I dismissed the multitudes to turn back to my stone altar, gaining my strength for the next onslaught. The hermit monk archetype, you know, with the busted lip and the drug habit. It was all very romantic in my head, how this would play out through the decade, how before long I would be a household word, spoken of in hushed reverence.

God.

Bird was so evolved from all that bullshit. She wasn't seeking attention in this world. She didn't need accolades, she didn't need a family, she for sure didn't need or want to be part of some damn crowd. She was straight up in all she wanted, which was basically to be left alone. Maybe she wanted me, then, but I felt she wouldn't forever, not the way I felt about her. Bird had a refusal to be attached stamped into her like a brand. I could see that in her smile from the fire pit. I could see that her vision would always be clouded by the arrival of humans, for her eyes were on a prize that was otherworldly, and not quite here, on this earth, in this forest by the Hudson.

But me, I was going to love her. I was going to love her, and save my own self in the process. Because me, I was going nowhere fast at the time.

Y'know, you latch on to a person in life who refuses to cling, who has zero attachment to other humans, and you start to almost groove on that, in some way you know is going to either hurt or make a saint out of you, and I swear, Bird was my very own "Teflon girl" in that way; not a thing having to do with affection could stick to her for more than a second, but shit, how I loved those seconds, those flashes of her emotional

embrace, before the veil dropped back over everything that was intimate and lovely. Bird was a woman who lived in fits and starts, every nuance of feeling was shadowed by a drawing back. I learned quick to stop looking for progress. This was who Bird was, take it or leave it. The heart was warm, hot even, but the follow through was a hasty withdrawal that cut and seared.

I told myself, Matthew, you deal with the quirks when you decide to love somebody.

This was more than a quirk, though. This was like some constant hiccup of the system, like a motor in need of maintenance, only no sign of the mechanic, and me, did I dream of being the mechanic? An impulse was there in me, but you know what I did instead? I squashed it down and told myself, this is her, this is Bird, you don't like it, you walk away, otherwise, you got no one to blame.

And I didn't walk, no sir, because I was, I admit it, fascinated by the ticking of Bird's motor, and, more important, I, for some unconscious and twisted reason, loved it. I loved the strange and exotic ways of Bird's navigation through this thing we had embarked on. Hell, I knew by the end of but a couple hours that I was in this relationship, by golly, yeah, I was in this.

We broiled up that fish and sat lazily picking at it, through the bones and we also had some wild scallion and dandelion leaves, and I was so happy. Bird lit up a Camel and lolled back on one elbow, there in the dirt, and I drew circles in the dust with a stick.

"Matthew," Bird asked, carefully, softly, "what do you want to be when you grow up?"

I sort of shrugged, maybe blushed a bit.

"Hell, Bird, did you always know you were going to be a writer?"

"Yes."

"How'd you figure? To make money and all? To live?"

"I didn't figure. I haven't figured yet. I took scholarship money. I'm still taking it, technically, though not for long. I don't know what I'll do. Be a waitress in a dive, clean people's houses."

"I do jobs," I said, defensively.

Bird smiled.

"Don't pout. It's not at all what I asked. Do y'have a passion? What's your thing? What do you groove on?"

I ducked my head.

"You. I groove on you, Bird."

And we started laughing, and wrestling around on the ground, rolling by the fire, all warm and young and full of play.

When we pulled apart, breathing hard, that was when I thought about Bird's question, because she pulled her typewriter back to her rock and started with the tapping and the industrious ding at the end of each line, and I sat there on my heels and got to thinking, I don't have that. I thought, I don't have that thing that turns me on so much that I'd scrub toilets all the day just to have that thing going on, that passion,

that drive, that need to create, and to generate some one gig in my life that could have the power to change the world, or, at the very least, my world. And I saw the far reaching consequences as well, that a craft or an art could rapidly tumble into an obsession, and tear a person away from the real interaction of life, the people connection, and then I thought, maybe it ain't so good to have a thing after all.

Bird kept working that afternoon, that first afternoon. She sat there on the floor of the world and banged at the typewriter, rattling on that stone, intense, highly concentrated, not at all like a woman who had just lost her virginity. I was at a loss. I mean, I had told her I didn't like people, and she had told me she was writing about the Woodstock nuns, and yet this happening had occurred in our lives that day, and by afternoon it felt disjointed, what we were doing, how we were not communicating, how we were was not what I was thinking it should be. I was uneasy. I could only watch her work so long before I wanted to make words, out loud ones, and I knew that was going to be taboo.

I don't think she noticed when I walked away.

I didn't hear that typewriter miss a beat.

I rambled away down into the woods, me, Matthew, the old ramblin' boy. I went off in search of one of my favorite altars, the one down deep, the one in the hollow close to the marshlands, where all the reeds and rushes blew pliantly in the breezes, where the ducks held splendid mating wars, where the odors of rank still water were rich and loamy and the earth was squishy with bottomland. There was an altar down in there that had always appealed to me. It seemed older than the others I had come upon. It was in a dank and stony place, wet, steamy

on hot days, yet cool, the stones were always cool to the touch. The altar stone itself was rounded down, and hollowed out like a basin, and I don't know who left things there, but there were always things there, and I did my share of leaving them as well. Glass rosary beads of various colors had hung there for years, and yellowed holy cards and scapulars lay about the stones. One time there was a photograph of a little girl, a blurry snapshot. That had disappeared awhile ago, as did a warped wooden crutch, also a rusty pennywhistle, and once a scrap of calico.

I emptied my pockets and settled on a tin button that had been decalced with the peace sign. I'd picked it up for twenty five cents in the music store. I laid it down reverently, beside a dried and fading cattail someone had left.

Out loud, I said: "Hey, God, Matthew was here."

As if I had stopped by, and already left, I thought. So I amended that, saying, "I mean, I am here."

And then I fell silent.

Mostly, the altars are places of listening, not so much talk. But I was fairly bursting inside with all sorts of talk, a whirlpool of emotions undefined, almost like usual, but this day was bigger, this day was like an avalanche. Truly Bird had started something up in my engine, and now all I could identify was a surly kind of anger, as if I was being ignored, shunned, or simply tucked away as a great experience of life that was being taken in a matter of fact way. I mean, did that mean nothing to Bird?

It meant a lot to me, Bird, I told the stones.



And somewhere in the looped up back of my mind I ran down the Italian block of our river town, me, about age seven or so, running scared and quick through foreign territory, on a dare, running down through all that was dark and dim and dangerous in that scalding hot way of childhood, absolutely sure that hundreds of eyes were following me.

When I got back to the treehouse Bird was not there.

I thought, well, all right.

Anger gave way to hurt, hurt gave way to shame. I figured I'd been dumped, and duped as well. My work shirt was lying on the ground by the kicked out fire, it was bunched up and crumpled and had sweat stains. I grabbed it, ready to throw it in the last embers, but there, under it, was the typewriter. Huh. That was something she would not have left behind. Maybe. Maybe, on her fancy scholarship, she had a dozen of them. Anyhow, she wasn't around. I pretended to myself that I was not hurried as I walked the path to the river, but my leg muscles, well. It didn't matter, she wasn't there, she wasn't bathing herself there. Back, she wasn't upstairs. She just wasn't anywhere. I thought to check one of the closer altars in the woods, but I did not. No, I was not going to chase after Bird.

I walked out to the dirt road, down to the two lane street and caught a ride by thumbing it. By three o'clock I was drunk in a local bar and engrossed in a game of darts that I was definitely losing out on.

She kept whirling in and out of my head.

"C'mon, Matthew. Get a fucking grip."

A big boned hand prying a fistful of metal darts out of my clenched fingers.

"Game's over for you, bud. Go sid'down. You look ready to puke."

I think I yelled something then.

"G'wan home. Go live in your tree, get outta here, Matthew."

Yeah.

I looked at the clock on the wall. I'd only been in there an hour, less than one.

She kept whirling in and out of my head.

I'm a holy fool.

That's the conclusion I've drawn of myself in life. I'm this guy who prays in the woods, but can't translate what happens in prayer to what happens in exterior life, life among people, life at jobs, life creatively; I can't make a single thing in this world that even remotely resembles what happens to me when I'm alone with God, walking and talking in the forest.

My behaviors just don't compute.

I'm a drunken brute with a foul mouth and a heavy fist in the exterior world. But, oh, when I get down into the leafy green, deep in it, I'm the saint of the altars, no longer banging my head in frustration at all that I just plain can't articulate about union, about religious experience, about the deeply felt sense of the presence of God.

How do you reconcile that without going crazy?

You might say I have behavioral health problems. I don't think it's that, though. I think when a man has had a deeply intimate encounter with the sacred, that man is never the same, and that man has no longer any way to communicate what goes on in higher realms. I can't hold forth on such. I simply can't.

Bird did come back. She came back that next morning, when the dew was wet on the typewriter I had left there on the ground by the fire ring. I didn't know it, I was in the stupor of sleep, in that vague zone of cotton headed and humid morning dreaming, until I heard it, again, that simple saying of it: "Matthew," she said, from down below the treehouse. Suddenly I was not hungover anymore.

"That you, Bird?" I called down, stupidly.

Gosh, she was up the ladder in a flash. She was snuggled into me on that damp futon.

"Where'd you go, Bird?"

"Shush," she said.

Bird wanted more. She wanted more of me.

I was so ashamed then, because my eyes welled. I was embarrassed as hell by that. That love bug had bit me, sure enough, and now was the instant in which there was never going to be any turning back. It tipped over, my world, with that droplet that ran like a rivulet out the corner of my eye, my eye that had been sleeping, sleeping through life until it tipped like that, just like that.

And didn't Bird just take a lick of that salt water that ran out my eye?

"I'm in love with you, Bird," was what I said.

She didn't answer. But she took me. We rode like the rolls of the river. We rode at the explosion of that dawn-sun, with all the dewy damp, with her typewriter down there on the ground all full of droplets from dawn-dew, with youth we made the love of youth, strong and true, two anti social critters of the woods, and I thought then that I would gladly light incense at the altars of the forest in gratitude for that morning of the great tip of my life.

We lay on the futon that very hot morning, Bird and I, and we were speechless, both comfortably, and perhaps, I sensed, also uncomfortably. There was an undertone to Bird, and I felt something that could have been a misgiving, if I had paid attention. I tried to pay attention. I tried to peer into it. It was something very old in her. That was how I thought of it. It was something way back in time, not even in the time of Bird, something even more ancient, primordial, something earthy and yet of a higher realm, all strewn in together, but, whatever it was, it was untouchable, and that was the rub for me, for I could not grasp it. It was that detachment, that mystical achievement of the soul; I was not going to be able to fathom that essential thing in Bird that was like a piece missing to me, and it frightened me, I was scared for myself.

Y'know, you fall in love, you figure you can handle it, you figure it is this great mysterious glob of mixed emotion, but that the intrigue of that is natural and organic to falling in love, and you imagine you are on this great adventure now of learning all the little tricks and ways and alleyways of a woman's personality, like you are going to hit that spot where you can say, yes, I am now arrived at intimacy with this woman, I know

her, to the extent that can be known, to the extent necessary and achievable in being a couple, in being a unit, a union, in the art of communing deeply with a soul, the soul of this particular woman a guy falls in love with, out of all the women, this one.

She was the one I thought that about. Bird was going to be that one. Bird was that one. We were laying in the treehouse all tangled in each other, and I was nervous and yet so sure, so confident, Bird was it, Bird was from there on out going to be it, and damn if she didn't become that, only, still, nagging, nagging on my, on my anxiety, chugging to a start in me, this misgiving, this nagging realization, that I was going to give more than her, put more into this than her, hell, love her more than she loved me, and that was a sickening and horrible rumble in my head, that red flag, that "it's not fair" that young people are always outraged about, and I was then a young man, and I was hooked on that equality, I wasn't going to not get what I was giving, uh uh, only I was, and I knew it, and I was like a toddler in a toy store outrage, livid, beyond reasoning, I wasn't going to get that toy, that love, and I could hold my breath till I tinged over with blue, but Bird was not going to love me the same, the fair and equal, and if I didn't get that through my thick skull, I was going to have to—give her up. I'd felt it before, I felt it again then, lying there in that tangle, that arms and legs and sweaty panicked tangle, and all I could do was deny, deny and survive, and crust my thoughts over with layers of glaze, I glazed over my thoughts as if with shellack, I made them protective and shiny, this bright resolve to "love her anyway", in spite of, despite the fact, and I always did, and I always have, on to this day, Bird and Matthew, it's always been and going to be.

And I wasn't going to fool with that. I wasn't going to let that little glitch steal true love from me.

It didn't matter enough.

Bird was tangled up in my arms, and she was wonderful.

That was what mattered.

"Bird," I asked, "where do you stay when you're not here?"

"At the family," she said.

She said it so simply and matter of fact, only there was a wariness, a quick warning, not to ask for elaboration. I knew I was going to dig anyway, out of fascination, a lifelong fascination, with that foreign block of sidewalk in our river town. That sidewalk seemed as if always in shadow, no minding the summer sun, it was a dim sidewalk, some would say it was thought of as dimwitted, it was a 'no entry' sidewalk, a place closed off, you didn't walk through there on a stroll for the hell of it. It wasn't like you feared violence or anything like that, what you feared there was only strangeness. You feared ignorance, and you feared your own ignorance. You feared, walking through there, that you could screw up, offend somehow, all that was being lived out there had nothing to do with you and your ways, and you didn't know enough to expect any warm welcome, only mute, guarded stares, from people frightened, and you frightened, and all the damned anxiety of that.

"I thought you lived at the college you go to down county."

"Not in summer. And I'm not going back in the fall. I'm done there."

"So you're living home."

Bird did not answer me. She turned her face away. That was cold. I'd only been trying to learn, to break through some defense that was suddenly up in her, like I'd ruffled her dander, like she wasn't going to talk about 'staying at the family'.

"You know, you're going to make it as a writer," I said. "You're going to do great things, make great books. I'm glad you're quitting school. It's the right thing, if you really want to be a writer. It's the industrious thing to do. You work so hard. You need to be working all the time at it, like full time. You have this drive, this gift, talent, you have—"

I was babbling like a fool.

Bird turned her face back and looked at me.

"It's not a family I want you to meet," she said.

I felt my eyes flick away. I felt shame.

"Matthew, we're good. You're a good man. Strong, thoughtful, generous. I just wanted to say thank you. I don't say that often in life."

That was what she said.

It was all right, then. It was so beautiful then. I was Bird's lover, she was mine, I needed to let that all be enough. We were the hippies of the forest. We were where it was at. We didn't need a past, we were the revolutionaries of our time, we didn't talk about family, about upbringing. I had to stop to reorient myself to this. I had to stop and just be that manly man again, not insecure, not having lost my bearings. I had to throw back

my face and laugh, and tell myself that me and Bird, we were Tarzan and Jane of the jungle, alone in the now of the now.

It was troubling Bird, I could tell, some 'it' that had to do with what she had just said about family, that I wouldn't want to meet them, that she wouldn't want me to, and then I saw a leap in her thoughts, made by the lowering of her eyes and a crease between her brows, and a general unsettling over her face, that she had moved on to what was perhaps a more troublesome reflection. I ached to know. I needed to know what was passing over like a summer thunderhead at the river when the heat is oppressive.

"Bird?"

She shook her head, but then she spoke. She spoke as if it was hard, hard to talk almost.

"It's about September."

A fluttering up of panic in my chest.

"Matthew, this scholarship that I am giving up, it's not an ordinary scholarship. It's not something I earned in high school or anything, and it's not some talent award, well, maybe it's a kind of recognition, but it's a personal thing, it's not from a foundation or some institution. It's from a real person. It's from an actual person. It's from a woman, this woman, she's a patron of the arts, she's a millionaire, she found me, she found my work, she contacted me and she said she was going to put me through school. It's personal, more complicated, like to quit college in the face of her. I'm scared to do it. And I have to. I need to get out of that environment to write this novel I want to do."



It was exhausting. Bird leaned back into the mattress, I let out a sigh of relief; this wasn't about me. Yet Bird was in this anxious situation, and I was trying to clear out my initial fear in order to be of some help, because she'd talked to me for the first time about something that concerned her. I wanted to help. I pretty much needed to help. I wanted to feel like the man. I wanted to solve a dilemma for her. I wanted to be Tarzan.

And then I watched her just shut down. It was fast and clean and sharp. It was just like when she described the book she was writing about the nuns at Woodstock, and just like what she had just done about her family, and now for the third time Bird shut down quick as the snatching shut of a switchblade. Whatever was private, whatever was secret, whatever was self disclosure, well, BAM, that was it, she was like a small girl covering her mouth, clapping a hand over it to take back what she'd said on the playground.

Shit.

"Bird."

But she rolled over against the treehouse wall.

"No," she muttered.

Her problems could not be my problems. It was that detachment again, that cold detachment this time, decidedly not holy or mystical, just a cold shut out of — of me.

Don't take it personally, Matthew. Matthew, damn you, don't.

But how can I love her and not get personal? What the hell is that?

That's loving someone and giving them their space, their freedom, their privacy. This time, in all our world, is about not clinging. This PEACE NOW time is about not clinging.

But I was clinging, and I wanted to cling and I wanted to embrace her and just plain crush her to me, and know all of it, all of her.

Impatience settled over me while Bird studied the wall.

Impatience rattled on into anger.

Anger rattled on into guilt.

Guilt got frustrated, and I got angry again.

But I wanted to relent. I wanted to lend Bird a certain fragility, to render her in my heart as a wounded, sensitive soul, as a sacred little being with a past I could not fathom, and to be kind to her, to allow her that face to the wall, that hurt. I wanted her to be incapable, unable, to communicate her private stuff, there was nobility in that, I told myself. I told myself, you don't go and get mad at incapacity. I told myself, that's just cruel and stupid and small minded, small hearted. I sat there watching Bird watch the wall of the treehouse and I checked my anger, I tucked it into my heart of sorrows, my own hurts and inabilities, and suddenly I had a new view of what this was going to be—not two strong and stunning creatures, but two bumbling anti social people who were inept, ill equipped, and somehow we were going to support each other in that, perhaps even find our glory in that. All around us, they were changing the world back then, but in the treehouse, a world was being changed, two worlds, two sad and sick to death little worlds had collided, and it was me and Bird, and the whole wide forest, sprinkled with its altars and sacred groves, and we were

like a prayer, we were like hands cupped in prayer, and there I saw my anger take wing, and I said, quiet and low,

“Ah, Bird, I’m sorry.”

“It’s my load to carry,” Bird said, as much to the wall as to me.

“In more ways than one,” I said. “It’s kind of profound, when you think of it all, of the all of it. Everybody’s got this baggage.”

“You can’t help nobody with that,” Bird said.

She seemed so small, in the old woolen army blanket.

“Don’t words help, Bird?”

“Maybe on the page. Making words out loud ain’t yielded me much in life.”

I drew my knees up to my chin.

“Are you content with them on paper? Just that?”

“I am.”

It was so wistful in me, to hear that, to hear her say that. It was defeated, there was defeat in her declaration, and an edge there, as well, a feral bite to her voice. And I realized that Bird was yet a little scrap of a feral girl, she’d scrambled up in a world of few and harsh words, but a handful of them, in a wild and dialectal tongue, most likely thrown at her like table refuse, like bones for a starved old dog, little Bird, language hungry, and not even granted an audience for her own expressions. Of course she had to write them, in secret, all alone, in English, the written word tumbling out of her in a mighty fever. I imagined

Bird as a girl with a diary thick as the phone book, stashed on a shelf in the goat shed, amid the dangling fly paper and the shit shovel.

Forbidden. A pure scandal, the scandal of a girl with words in the family.

Yeah. I saw it.

“Bird, if you could say anything, just any damn thing, what would it be? What would you say out loud?”

A sudden flick of energy. Bird rolled round, bright eyed.

“I’d say shut the fuck up.”

She smiled that crooked smile that refused to show her teeth. I laughed at her, but mostly I was laughing at my own self. You don’t play shrink with Bird, Matthew. Yet one more lesson.

It was moments like that that made me want to write a book about Bird. I set out to make my own book, just like Bird was making hers, on that Remington in the woods, only I been writing this book a long time now, many years, and it’s all gobbled up in notebook after notebook, and sometimes I try to shuffle them and make something out of them. They’re old fashioned lesson books, marbled composition books, written and scratched out in pencil, pencils I sharpen with my penknife, and they rattle in all their pages from the pressure of my hand, and what I’m seeking is to do my lessons reverently and dutifully, almost in honor of myself, never having been an honor student at school. They pile up, these notebooks, and I read them at random more often than I try to make sensible order of them, for Bird and I are a quilt, we are a patchwork of art.

She told me to shut the fuck up, and I have, for the most part, except here on the pages of all I have felt and observed. I learned that day that Bird don't talk her shit, and that to try pulling the proverbial teeth is fruitless and not a thing I would want to do anyway, not being a word dentist of any sort. Maybe I wanted to cling, but I did not really want to pry. I guess I did want to, but I knew it was morally not the right thing to do, not to Bird, not to any human being. There was an open sort of hippie vibe going round like the flu in those days. You didn't pry, you didn't ask certain stuff of anyone. Everything was just supposed to be cool and free and easy. But deeper than that, it was just not ethically sound to try to manipulate words where there was a reluctance to make them.

So I made the resolve to stop pushing, and to turn the coin to its other side, that one that had dignity stamped on it.

I remembered that Bird was hurt, that she was somehow askew, not in proper touch, perhaps touched, as they said in the olden days. And people who were touched had a certain distance which, to me, always seemed somehow very together, very holy, like the saints, also of old, who seemed to have had such mentally ill personalities, and yet channeled the Holy Spirit so very well. As a writer of novels, Bird could have been a major prophet, for all I knew. From what I know now, I am inclined to think so, more and more.

I remember that day. I remember poking Bird playfully in the collarbone, and laughing out:

"No, YOU shut the fuck up!"

And how that delighted her no end, and she rubbed her belly as she laughed and laughed.

It's been a standing joke ever since.

That night Bird stayed. She stayed with me overnight in the treehouse. That was a red letter night for me. Something profound was it, for her not to go home to the family that night.

And come morning, an overcast and close morning of fog wisp and damp, I turned over to Bird and said:

"Let's build an altar in the woods. Our own altar. An altar to just me and you."

I watched the implications of that spread over Bird's brow, her cheekbones, her deep black/brown eyes, like the river was washing over her broad face, timeless in its slow roll, and Bird then nodded.

"Okay," she said, in a solemn and hushed whisper. "Yeah, that's very fine, Matthew."

We settled on junk. We decided to scavenge the forest floor for junk. We envisioned a stunning altar sculpted in the refuse that was scattered all throughout the woods. Bird and I did not know what we stood for, we did not know what we meant as a couple, but perhaps, in settling on junk, we were making the statement of us, that we were two discarded people, two junkyard dogs, wild and feral each in our way, removed, one step removed from what was acceptable out there, some of it our choosing, true, yet some of it more deeply the hurts from out there, the sad realization that neither of us fit in the changing world of clashing culture and counterculture—we were as secluded and out of place as the Woodstock nuns.

A bicycle wheel. An army of beer bottles. A backpack frame and a bedpost frame. The very base for the altar, over which to drape the whole, our main find: a rusted out washing machine.

These were the things we gleaned that first day. We chose a very small clearing, not far from the treehouse, a bed of emerald moss on which to rest the washer. It was nowhere as well concealed as the altars of old that were so hard to locate, but it was near us, we could visit it, build it, reflect and leave offerings as we built, and we did not have to travel far to get to it. All this made it modern, yet one more statement; Bird and I belonged to now-time.

But altars have a funny way of stretching back deeply, of pitching into the past down a long tilting chute, just as easily as they have a way of rising up and out to what is coming, like yeast rising in dough, like an offering of incense rising into the air.

When Bird lit a cigarette by our firepit that evening, I watched the smoke curling and playing on the breeze coming over from the river, and I thought of a future, a future with Bird in it, where there had been none at all only days ago in the way of my poor head. The aimlessness with which I had been drifting was now anchored, Bird had arrived, Bird had turned up her face in my direction and called my name.

“Bird,” I said suddenly, impulsively, asking a vulnerable question straight from my gut, “do you want glory from humans?”

“Nope.”

She said it immediately, right on the heel of my asking, with zero hesitation. She said it in a low and deep bass tone of voice.

It was startling to me, where my question had come from, and how expressly it had been answered, as if we had both been entertaining that question for very long times in our lives. I couldn't look her way. I looked at the rising of the moon.

"Then why do you write? How come you write?"

Bird drew on her cigarette, but again, the response was quick.

"I write for God."

"What?"

"For the eyes of God."

"Whoa," I answered. "Whoa, hold up."

Bird did not respond. She smoked, and I looked then at her, and she was calm and cool, not a tremor, not a lick of nervousness.

"You mean that," I said.

"I do," she said.

Just then I heard the whistle of the train, the roar of the train, shuttling down the shoreline with its great whoosh of noise overbearing and proud of itself. There was then no chance of talk. We would have to wait it out, so I leaned back on a rock and began to roll a bone. It was then that it occurred to me that Bird and I had hung around the train depot all our lives, but neither one of us had ever been on a train. Ours were the rails, the cinders, the river. Ours was the great gate that swung shut on the hour, when a train came through. Ours was a NO to the world beyond our world. We weren't going anywhere. We were already there. While the train wracked through my head



with its loudness I discovered that Bird's answers were cracking open in my skull, the full implications, or so I thought. Would I ever really understand? This woman was bound for glory, surely, but it had nothing to do with human nurture or acclaim. This woman at the firepit was otherworldly. What that meant for and to me, I could not

Let me start again.

This woman was living for the glory from God.

Where the hell did that leave me?

That was the new question creaking to a halt in the depot of my mind.

But Bird had a different question, and she asked it an hour later. The night had come down, we lingered at the fire, our faces emerging as if masked in gold. Out of the silence, she asked this:

"Matthew, what do you want?"

I remember that I blinked. That I swallowed.

"Huh?"

"Matthew, what do you want?"

"What do you mean, Bird?"

She shrugged. She spread her palms up and out, lifting them, and they, too, were golden.

"Like in life?" I asked. "Like right now? Like here? Or do you mean the whole of it?"

Bird looked slightly amused, and slightly miffed at the same time. She did not answer me. I was on my own with this one.

I did clear my throat then, like a kid preparing for a test, wanting to get it right, and then I clouded down with anger, like a kid being condescended to, damn it, Bird, all high and mighty, all hail to you, Bird, and then I sunk into myself, hacking at the brush of my inner forest, and went blank, and numb, and stupid in myself.

"I don't know," I muttered stiffly.

Bird nodded.

I really felt mad then, and on the spot then, and cornered.

"You know, you don't have all the answers, Bird."

Oh, how I'd missed it. I didn't realize. I was so involved in the damned answer that I missed the fact that tears were coming down over Bird's elaborate cheekbones, that she'd been quietly crying the whole time.

"What's wrong?" I whispered, my heart kicking up.

Bird swiped at her face with the backs of her hands.

"We don't know what we want," she said. "That's the very trouble. Nobody just says 'I want'. I want money. I want a motorcycle, I want a lover, I want fame, I want candy. Nobody just says—" Bird put her face down into the shadows, her hair flopping down in the firelight. "I want motherlove."

Gosh.

I had no response.

In the silence that followed I got up, flicked on my flashlight, and walked the path to the river. I had to see the moonlight over my lady Hudson. I had to see the fishes leaping, the fishes

leaping like epiphanies from up and out of the depths of my own subconsciousness. Bird had mouthed it. It was never going to be untrue. Motherlove. It rolled over me.

But then I wasn't alone.

Suddenly Bird was behind me, literally, bodily.

The palm of her hand resting on my bare shoulder.

"Let's go in the water," she said.

The Hudson was lapping just in front of our feet in the dark, and it was that time, back then, when the salt tide was strong and true, tasty and loaded with the aroma of summer in the Hudson Valley, the hot blue greenery, the water of life, the overwhelm of the senses, the sensuality, the very sex of the river, and then we were in it, sporting and flinging our bodies round about in it, throwing dollops of crystal jewels up into the night, splashing and kicking and then, in our naked solitude, together, so together and sound and whole and right, kissing, passionately, in that paradise of youth, in that innocence and privacy of the entire world shut off and out from us, and it was heady and romantic and secret and titillating as if all the river had gone to fire, licking us like watery flames of desire, smoothing over us, smoothing every hurt and hard feeling and negative vibe, like the oil of gladness anointing us for future things, for what we were going to become, more and more, in our love. In love, we were going to push it, we were going to push back whole mountains, me and Bird, we were. We were going to drape the forest with the fragrant balm of who we were. We were building an altar that would stand, plumb and true.

In that awesome and heady summer, on a day as oppressive as tar, I met Bird's mother. It had been a long time coming, that thick walk down that thick street, a street of stone walls and stone Madonnas wound and wreathed with morning glory, a street of trellises weighted with purple grapes and tubs of tomato and basil plants, a street of ragged dogs and spry straying goats, we walked holding hands, my palm ever so wet in Bird's calm brown fingers, her wrist encased in a cheap cuff of nickel and fake stone, a bauble meant to look like real silver, her hair in a single loose braid slung over one shoulder, her tee shirt sweat soaked at the back. We went up stone steps. Bird's was one of the poorer versions of a home on the block. It was a very small cement place, cracks running through the outer walls, little windows set not so well, a rickety front porch of old wood hidden behind curtains of vegetation. Deep in the shadowy corners of this porch, on a piecemeal wooden chair, her face almost hidden behind an old fashioned paper fan, slowly guided by her hand, sat a very skinny woman in a black sleeveless shift of linen, her feet bare, her hair coiled in plaits about her head, peering over the fan with steady black almond eyes.

"Mama," Bird stated, nodding her head slightly toward me.

The woman took me in silently for some time. Then she said something to Bird. I do not to this day know the Italian language. Bird responded, her voice deep throaty and sounding like a complete stranger to me in her native tongue, so thrilling, I could have listened for hours to its music. Finally, in all of it, I heard my own name, Matthew. Finally, Bird's mother folded her fan and regarded me as if at ease, generously, I thought, as if she was about to joke, in some lighthearted manner. And then she did. She nodded to me and pointed at Bird.

"My daughter," she said. "My daughter, she writer."

How quickly we all chuckled.

"My mother has come to terms," Bird said. "Matthew, this is Rosa."

I remembered Bird's initial warning, that hers was a family she would not want me to meet. But here I was, beholding Rosa, and Rosa beholding me, and there was in me no sense of the ominous, in fact there was a shift in my anxiety level, a slow motion lowering of the pulse of things, of the fretful hounding I had done to coax Bird to bring me here. Bird herself seemed strangely relaxed, as if she and her mother were simply old friends, easy with each other, no alarm bells were ringing, I was only a stranger in a very strange place, colliding with a culture unfamiliar and palpable as if the very floorboards were foreign. It was quiet here. All my stereotypical images of loudmouthed temperamental Italian families obsessed by food and religion did vanish and I stood yet, waiting, in a posture of waiting, although this slow wait was not cumbersome. The woman was very striking, a study, all elegant planes and lines such as beautiful women have, and she was still, and her eyes were frank in their appraisal of me, not at all demure or downcast. She seemed instead to be very clear, and she knew, in her clarity, who I was and exactly what was going on, and she sat, very centered, in the way Bird was always in herself, and I envied that. Whatever had been imparted from the mother to my woman Bird, it was a thing in life I had missed out on, did not possess. It was soothing, the vibe in this shady porch, it had a tone of nurture that moved me.

Rosa said:

“She make books. Is crazy. She no make babies. She no make husband for to make babies. She big writer.”

I watched Bird lower her head. A very small smile played like a sunbeam on her mouth.

“Mama wants babies,” Bird whispered. She said it with a mock pout in her voice. “Poor Mama.”

Rosa chuckled and flicked her wrist, flapping her hand.

“You come, you take coffee.”

I realized she meant me, for she was rising to her bare feet.

I'd thought about mothers a lot in my life. It was a time, then, when young men and women were throwing off their mothers and fathers, throwing them all under the bus, with all their values, their politics, their childrearing, their education or lack thereof, the status quo of family, the family of the fabulous Fifties, the secrets of reputation, of propriety, we were all motherless children in those hair-raising times, rebels, rock stars, anti, contra, homeless as if we'd been hatched, not brought up. We lived in vans, tents, shacks. We lived in, yes, treehouses in the woods. I was such a one, a long haired boy adrift, until I landed in a place called “Bird-land”. I didn't care anymore. I was tired of my own funk and my own anger. I had become a lover. I loved Bird with a passion of a man who would, could, throw a mountain into the sea.

“You fooling with my daughter.”

Rosa dropped a cube of sugar into a very tiny china cup of black coffee. It was not a question. We were alone in the kitchen.

“Four sons I have,” she continued. “You must watch for them. And you must watch for my husband, for Mario. I say, so you know to watch. Me, I see you good, you love much. They no will see.”

She pushed the glass across the table to me, with a gentle motion.

“Brute,” she whispered. “My boys. Brute.”

I didn’t know what to do.

It’s not a family I want you to meet, was what Bird had indicated.

I sat there, and in my mind I saw the altar we were building in the forest, the altar of beautiful junk. I saw it so clear, our work in progress. I held that image, while, a couple blocks down the hill, a train come roaring through at the river, and there in Rosa’s little kitchen, all the windowpanes started rattling from the impact of the vibrations, and it seemed the walls were running with yet more cracks and the floor was unsteady in that small concrete house.

I ain’t a man who shirks a fight.

The most special thing about Bird’s writing is that she wrote specifically and exclusively in the avant garde style. This way of writing gave an access to depths of consciousness that broke open like prayer flags in a river wind, opening and snapping and crackling like whitecaps on the Hudson. Sentences ran for miles, and they were toothless, devoid of any sense of

punctuation or grammatical sense, and in that they split emotions down the middle in ways that made the reader's heart giddy-up. Yeah, Bird was off to the races, and she didn't have time on the page to make what she had to say prim and proper. The innards, the underbelly of what her stories were truly about was all she cared for. Of course they could not teach her at college. She was teaching them. Bird was making a new map in a dry and overdone terrain, and the harder she got to follow, the more people seemed to want to follow. She made her readers work. Already the awards were coming, the reviewers getting ear of her. Success was only a cat poised to pounce. We knew that. I knew that Rosa knew it, too. And that she saw these men of the family were going to challenge it to the hilt.

No one, however, was scared.

On the kitchen table were some scattered notebooks, a couple pencils and a dirty rubber eraser. A penknife as well, for sharpening. I was staring.

"Tools," Rosa said quietly.

I nodded.

"She works hard," I said.

Rosa reached over and tapped the back of my hand.

"Take care of her."

And that was it. She left the room.

In the afternoon I walked down into the forest clearing and found Bird sitting on the ground in a bed of greenest moss before our altar. I hung back, beholding that fine and beautiful



woman, her hands slack for once, her shoulders down and off guard, Bird doing nothing, on a bed of greenest moss, her hair hung back down free, her stamped cotton skirt draped all about her tucked up legs, her face lifted up to a pile of junk with an old bottle of wildflowers set on a rusted out car fender. How I did love her. She was so private, such a monk of the wilderness, she wore the sunlight like our lady of the junkyard, my lady, my woman of all that was pure in me, able to love in me, she was sitting there bringing out the best of me, down inside myself.

I knew someday soon fame was going to try to drag her off this spot, and I also knew it was not going to be able to. The dignity of her very spine would keep it all away. Bird would not sell out, and that was my prophecy, seeing her there in the generous sun.

I turned then. I had some nails to nail back at the treehouse, and Bird was clearly nailing some of her own in this moment. It was enough to backtrack, loving her, letting her be.

I wanted to do something. I wanted to do what Rosa had told me to. I wanted to take care of Bird, but I realized that Bird soon would be recognized, and that it was she who might have to shield me. I hoped I was wrong.

Bird was down at the altar a long time. I went up into the treehouse and sat there, smelling the river close by, smelling one of those afternoon storms that would swing by in a couple of hours, one of those heart-booming thunderstorms that loved to stir up on the Hudson, sporting over the water like a terrified pioneer reeling back east to home. The air was blue-humid,

ropey with moisture, drunken and addlebrained air, and my skin was all salt-sweat. I sat in only my cut-offs on the wooden milk crate, mending my mental nets, tidying my soul for the next casting out to what life would bring. Bird was writing a novel of nuns and wayward girls. And what was I doing?

I was watching her.

And I was watching over her.

I picked up my damp notebook.

I wrote awhile, in my slow-poke way, until I heard my own name. It was Bird, below, her voice like a single stroke of a chime, just that one touch:

"Matthew."

And I was there.

"Here, girl."

And the sluffing of her bare feet on the ladder.

"They say in my house, 'you don't tell the family stuff.'," Bird said. "And I'm not, Matthew. Only they think I am. They think writing is one big tattle tale of all the secrets of who and what they are. Me, I don't even know that, that who and what of them, and it is not in me to even attempt to say what I haven't the clue of. I'm a writer of fiction. But they don't know what that means. It's not in their wheelhouse to so much as imagine beyond the finite. The furthest they will ever go is in some of the smallest mysteries of Catholicism, oh, the saying of the beads, or the solemn anointing at deaths, and such. And they don't have but a slim grasp on those things. Whatever would they do with the notion of fiction, of writing, of anything

in life beyond the stonework and the childbearing and the thick enclosure of family? Damn it, I'm spent just trying to make the words of what the world views as peasant life, and the dark complexity that the world has never grasped, save those who are living in that fucking labyrinth. It's so crazy convoluted that no outsider can do anything but make caricatures. It's queasy, this limbo land I'm in. It's, no, I can't make anymore words of it now, I need to do what I'm doing, and I need, ah, shit, I need to not go back to school in the fall, I need to duck down my head and do this thing. I'm exhausted, Matthew. I'm twenty one years old and I'm exhausted. That is pathetic and absurd."

Boom!

That first crash of thunder.

I was on my feet, securing the tarp for what was about to happen, the monsoon of summertime, on afternoons like this when the air was so dead right that heat and damp were in our very brains.

Perhaps the mysteries of the faith are born on such days, when every primal instinct in our systems is on high alert and we are cavemen again, totally believing in the gods of the heavens. Our spines wang up, our hair rises on our napes, we cower down and know the power of the Lord.

I pulled Bird into my heart.

"Your mother is very alone," I said.

Bird snuggled into me.

"My mother has but one girl child, and that girl child is a freak of nature in our culture. My mother is confused, not knowing whether to be deeply ashamed to the point of

mortification, or to protect and stand by a girl who is quirky to the point of danger. Do you know who I am, Matthew? I am the traditional village idiot, the one who sits drooling on a bench in the square, the one everyone pities and feeds and shakes their heads over. I'm the scandal. And I'm the one my family cannot afford to let roam. I am supposed to be chained out back with the dogs and goats, where the wild things are kept under control."

Religion is the wild thing, I thought, sitting in the violent storm with Bird. Religion is the thing that cannot be tamed, made docile, for that is the day God really is dead, the day the lights go out, one by one, across the other shore, out in the wild places, deep in the wild hearts of people. Bird's light was on, and it was on passionately, and her family knew that, those brothers, they knew it, that father, he knew, as did poor Rosa, her very body in the crosshairs, Rosa sighted in as the problem that generated this problem who was Bird, and Bird could not comfort her mother, for Bird was in the freedom struggle. Rosa was in the great tug of war, but Bird was already out and beyond, coming up now into the public eye, and the family shame was burning on the family cheeks, and it was all a'fire, and the times were changing, even as it was being sung up and down the river.

She was saying words this afternoon, words such as she had not made out loud since she first called my name, and I was impressed, and I was moved, and I loved. We were trembling with that storm, boom after boom, we were primal in the whole of our togetherness, and the world was far below now, down and under this rickety treehouse, college and jobs and filthy lucre and interaction and culture and the biggest bug a'boo, family. We didn't care. We were holding on, trembling away,

they couldn't come get us yet, all our innocence and love, they weren't going to get it yet, and, when they did, when that day come, we were going to meet it in love.

"Nobody gonna chain you, Bird," I whispered into her hair.

"No," she whispered back, "but they sure are going to try. There's a reputation at stake, Matthew, and one false move can topple an immigrant family trying to survive and rise, and me, I'm the false move."

"I ain't scared," I said.

"We ought to be, but I ain't either," she said.

And Bird wanted to know why I never played my guitar. She wanted to know how come it simply sat warping in the corner, neglected, and lonesome looking.

No, I hadn't told the world about me and the guitar yet, and I hadn't told Bird, but suddenly, when she asked, I saw the future open, financially, and it scared the shit out of me, because I knew all I was capable of on the guitar, and I knew we could eat like kings from afternoons I could spend peddling the blues at the depot, the coffeehouses, I saw the job that was right under my nose, the work that could keep me from toilet scrubbing and lumber hauling, and I wanted to do that for us, peddle my true work, peddle the kind of emotion that could flow out of the guitar, that I was skilled at, that I was trying to forget about, the incredible pain that blues brought on, could it be transformed into the intimate burr of the love I had for Bird? Would the lovers of the world resonate? Hell, would I be able to take what had happened to old renegade Matthew and twist

it up into the Matthew who stood before forest altars and felt that quickening of the spirit that could translate most anything rough into something tender? Blues can make a man weep. I knew it then.

I didn't answer Bird for a long time, for a few hours. I didn't answer and she didn't press, but by the end of the storm I was able to say, calmly:

"Bird, I believe I have a talent, and I believe you will quite like it. And you're right, a guitar wants playing, not sitting all damp and lonely in a musted up corner."

And Bird nodded, and the rain quit, and she settled down to her typewriter with no more words for the time being.

And what was I then carrying? I was carrying a warped and wretchedly beat up guitar down through the woods, carrying it by the neck, feeling the heft of it, the whole heft of it, more than the guitar, the entire heft of it, of that which was within me, down through the woods, down off the deer run, down through the hollows, down where the brook ran, the roar of it, where the trout did leap and slap the waters, frolicking, down into the territory of the blue heron, I was going to go play the blues, for the first time in a long time, I was going down to an altar I knew, a ghostly place, a place where two rusted out old metal chairs sat facing one another, a place where I imagined a million dialogues had taken place, in some far time, perhaps two great elders of the forest had sat smoking pipes and talking, talking the blues, talking themselves out, rain drumming on the roof of trees above them, I was going down there to take a seat, cop a squat, see what my hands could say,

there in the thick carpet of needles, fragrance run riot in the woods, I was going, carrying that guitar by its neck, to see what I could wrest out of it, if it was still there, that skill, that heft, that emotionality of play. I was carrying my life, my future, I was carrying the heft and weight of Bird as I would carry a stone in my pocket, a smooth worry stone, a river rock, as I would carry a beam across my shoulders, as I would carry a sudden onrush of hope, a gushing forth of prayer, as I would carry

And it was there. It was all still fucking there! My blues ran up my spine into my guitar and made my music.

I knew then why I had ever picked up a guitar in my life. And I handled it, and I played it, and by the time the hours had gone away from me, I came to my ordinary senses once more, intact and whole, me, Matthew, and I went over to the brook that ran in sensuous curves to the eventual Hudson, and I dipped my guitar, and cupped my hand, and drew up the water and baptized that guitar, and then I did baptize my own self, and then I stood up straight, hugging the old dear thing, and said, to the water and the sky:

“All she needs now is new strings.”

And then I put my face to the sun that danced with motes in the forest, and I said:

“Thank you.”

And then I leaned against a tree, set down my axe, and rolled a joint.

Times were changing, all about the river, indeed. And I was going to be part of it.

I called it “zone playing”, when you hit that sweet spot on the neck of a guitar and then

The religion of guitar.

The mysticism of blues guitar.

The framework of blues and the infinite possibilities, within those four lines, like the restraints that bring freedom and beauty, emotions breaking into openness within confines, the confines of three repeated lines, and then the fourth coming on like a dark moan, coming out of that boxy shape of blues form, like you’re down in a hollow, like I was down in the hollow at the brook, and everything is constricted and aching, longing, bubbling, choking on itself in the heat to get out to the river, like that, playing up the neck like that, hurting, despairing, truncating only also opening, like the throat opening to express, to disgorge its ragged howl.

It was crystallizing in me, the hot ball of it, and of how I could make that happen, the music, and the living of it, and the living as a result of it.

Did I know that fame was going to knock at my door too?

I didn’t know anything. I felt something though. I felt the earth run in rivulets as if out and away in tracks from where I stood, and I knew I had to find Bird, and I knew I had to tell her of this, this opening up of a space within me, as if I was standing on some shaky ground that wanted to solidify and reform itself, into who I was on guitar, into what that had meant to me, not having had it a long time, and then, at the go ahead from her, here I was, in myself, sure as she was in herself. Bird was going to write avant garde that ran in forever long stretches, and I was going to make blues that ran in the



box of twelve bars, no more, no less. Over and over, we were going to crayon ourselves into the patterns that were going to strain outward and upward, and we were going to be some kind of seen, and found out, before we had much more time to breathe, and the intimations of that were scaring us in the same way the violent thunder had, and running up the spine of who we were, and thrilling us as quick as we were growing uneasy. We were the anti-socials, Bird and me, yet we saw something coming, we doubted we could handle it, we were ready to jump back and let the train shoot by, and we were ready to jump up at the same time, flung headlong into the boxcar, into visibility, we were, I thought, like the nuns of Woodstock, about to leave our cozy little monastic treehouse, for some sort of foray into hippieland, into stardom, into the land where gawkers and hawkers lived.

I thought of Rosa. I thought of the brothers, the ones who had not yet made their appearance. I thought of the woman who was trying to send Bird through college. I thought of our altar in the woods, our mighty and holy heap of junk.

Bird was in the willow tree by the river. She was draped all about herself in the willow tree, like a Madonna, like a holy woman, like a nun in her habit, there under all the racket of the branches weaving in the river breeze. I could see her peering out from in there, looking for me, and I walked toward her, with my guitar, and in a great rush she flung back all those pliant branches and came running toward me, and there we were, that was it, there wasn't going to be a going back.

I tell you, I was using terms like "transcendent guitar", hell, I was using words like "sanctification". I was thinking in ways like that.

And there were “guitar saints” on the land in those days who could raise humans to higher realms.

For me, the “chant” of blues was Gregorian in scope, to me, blues could bring one to the other shore, clear, full of the kind of clarity that could only be achieved in the mud and muck of defining sorrow and suffering, and doing it well and skillfully, be it in a round about and sloppy way.

I wondered why I had ever stopped playing.

There had come upon me an inner apathy, a treehouse lethargy, until my name had been quietly pronounced, until Bird.

And then, we actually were like the Woodstock nuns, up in that tree, Bird slamming the keys of the typewriter, me wanging out the blues, like two insanity cases, rooted and grounded in art, pouring, pouring, oh, we were just pouring it out of ourselves then, giving lavishly of ourselves to all the world to come, to audiences not foreseen, we were gifting the forest first, as if in preparation, as if in homage, to that very first audience, to God, to the tradition of altar-building in worship of God, we were making that festival of noise and prayer, and it was sweaty and moist and hot, and Bird and me, we were hot.

They will call blues “primitive” music; they will call avant garde “primitive” writing; it’s that you leave things out; it’s that you put down the essential; it’s that you open up wonder, honing a craft, wordsmithing, bending a note, it’s that you open a channel, and no one teaches you, your own emotional rawness informs you and your work. We were craftsmen, we were carpenters, me and Bird, making up our structures, building the furniture to house our deepest thoughts. We chose

the mediums of that time. We were where the action was at, deeply embedded in what was going down, happening, all round us. The greats were being great, but they were being great because the times were supporting them, the art was timely, and we had no idea, the two of us, that we were timely, too, that we were in step with everything that was ragged and honest. We were riding a vibe, the vibe in the air that gave us permission, that unlaced the corset of the airless 1950's. We had leaped back to long before, every bit as much as we were in now-time, for we had gathered our themes on the backs of who was there way before, who had built the altars, who had breathed the blues and the indiscriminate run on sentences and the illiterate alliteration, and the howl of the forest, and we had swung them up into the contemporary, and so. And so me and Bird were doing what our history required of us, because it was in the very spine of us. And because we loved.

And because we were in love.

That delicate Bird.

Bird at the river.

We fished. We swam. We heard the ache of the trains at night, snug down in the treehouse damp, our skin hot, our summer lolling in slow molasses days, thick syrupy days of being in love. Gosh, I was breathing. I was inhaling the very stuff of being young and in love and having a revolution going on right down underneath my once lonesome treehouse. It was awesome. It was sticky with awe, the very humidity of the Hudson Valley was charged with a sense of devotion to God and all those guitar and writer saints that roamed like old children about those parts in those days, giants of the land,

under the strong right arm of the Lord. And we were sitting in it, in that, and we were happy.

Angel, Marco, Jimmy-John and Buzz.

I was playing blues at the train depot, a cigar box in the gutter, taking on cash.

I knew right off that these were the brothers.

Yeah, I missed a beat. Then I stopped altogether. I sat still, regarding these men in their ripped jeans and work shoes and worn to the bone tee shirts. I think Buzz was the scariest looking one, there was an insanity there, an out of control kind of glassiness about the eyes. But, all in all, they were a quite ridiculous bunch. I shrugged and went back to the guitar. Next I looked up, they were gone.

I went back to the treehouse later with a pocket stuffed with bills, and I was pleased and proud and hepped up with the music, I was walking in the zone, and I was stoned, and I felt great, and I was perhaps a bit full of myself, like I wanted to go sweep up Bird and brag on myself, about my depot debut, my gig, only she wasn't there. The typewriter lay in a mangled crumpled smashed up mess of jangled parts by the fire pit and there were a few ripped up pieces of her pages scattered round, flapping awfully in the river breeze.

It was the longest time. I mean, I stood there for the longest damn time, in a stupor, immobile, fogged over with the thousand emotions, the longest damn time, before I caught sight of him, in the trees, scoping me out in the trees like a skulking coward, only I suddenly knew he was not, for Mario,

Bird's father, was on me in a rush, a compact man of muscle, hands like twin anvils, biceps ripped with bulge and vein and venom, this guy was no scrawny brother, this was the original, the father of my girl, red eyes, spittle, and he had me, and he had me good, the guitar went flying, I was down, I was down and I wasn't going to be getting up anytime soon, I was bloody, I was a mess, I was swallowing a tooth of mine, I was puking, I was getting lost in the loss of this fight. You can't fight a man whose daughter is your girl, you can barely hold your own for a few seconds before it comes to you that this fight is one you cannot match, for you love where he is one gigantic seething locomotive of rage, outrage, he is beyond, he is beside himself, he is not even fighting, he is beyond fighting, and if you don't tuck and roll at some point, he is going to be found guilty of murder and you are going to be dead. So at some point I rolled over, and took some swift kicks to the kidneys, and then he was shouting, some brutal Italian words I had not the knowing of, but they were hard round words, and I didn't need to be told, they were the words of "you leave my daughter the fuck alone", clear as the bells clanging at the convent near the train station.

He left like he came, skulking, like a demon, like a fucker, down through the trees like a coward, so as not to be seen or caught, he left like a man of fury and bedevilment, and I lay spitting blood into the dust with my hands in wild fists, wanting the motherfucker dead, terrified for Bird, and feeling all the primitive wonder a man feels when he is deeply wounded in body and soul all at once, at the end of some glorious afternoon.

Then, catharsis.

Let me tell you that I was totally and thoroughly ashamed to find myself weeping in the dirt. Weeping like a man in want of a mother, as if I was folded up into motherly arms, that motherlove Bird had spoken the word of, I wanted that enfoldment, that shushing low voice, that lullaby mama, and I cried and cried, blood gurgling out my mouth, salt running out my eyes, bloody snot pouring from what was most likely a broken nose. My ribs hurt, my back ached, my nerves were all a'jangle. Everything was in pain, I hurt, and I was all alone and scared and sad and a lost boy. I just sobbed.

How they must have been laughing, back in the trees, the gleeful brothers. How they must have been gaining joy from this sissy longhair crying like a baby in the dirt, no match for a man twice his age, nothing but a pussy, getting his come 'uppance, the fucking faggot.

I remember opening my eyes, my swollen bruised eyes, to behold in horror that there were flies buzzing round my face.

Mario. And what was he doing to Bird right now, back at the miserable house? Was he beating the crap out of his own daughter? Hadn't the smashing of her typewriter and the ripping up of her work been enough? Was he blacking up her eyes the way he did mine? Was he chaining her out back with the dogs where she belonged? Maybe he was waltzing her up the church aisle to hitch her wagon to some dumb ass creep he'd picked out off the boat to make his girl a proper Italian childbearing wife. Maybe he was saying, you, big writer, if you want to write, write the grocery list out and take the basket and get with it.

Shit. There were five of them. If he beat me so bad, how could I defend her if he beat her bad too? Worse, what if he

beat her spirit? What if Bird laid down her pencil on that kitchen table? What if Bird closed down the penknife, where she clearly ought to have taken it to his throat?

And then I didn't know what to do. I lay there, spent, in the dirt, flies buzzing at my face, and I didn't know what to do.

*I'm gonna lay down my sword and shield,*

*Down by the riverside.*

*Ain't gonna study war no more.*

I had loved her more than--. And I had loved Bird more than she had loved me.

And that was the rub, that maybe I had made just one giant mistake.

Yeah, the longhair was done being a fighter.

I'd been in barfights since my days as a high school kid, always up and ready, rebounding, crashing back into the fray—

Now I had a permanently bent and slightly bulbous nose on my long square face, and a missing tooth under my upper lip, and a scar through my right eyebrow, the whole of it protruding from a perfectly straight mass of black hair that fell in a sheet to below my shoulder blades, and maybe I was more handsome from the crush of it all, the crush of life, the hit of having loved a woman more than--, who had never once said I love you Matthew back to me.

My guitar had a split down the center of its back.

Done fighting, Matthew. Over and out on fighting.

Peacenik. Turning over a new leaf.

Done weeping in the dirt.

I'd made it up into the treehouse, studied my face in my shaving mirror, used the roll of duct tape I had for the tarp on the split in my guitar, I was doing what they called: regrouping, what they called: pulling yourself together, and I was coming now into the territory of doubt, the place they called: what am I doing, and why am I doing it?, and I was leafing through Bird's pages that were strewn about the floorboards, random scratches and snippets of work, those crazed runaway sentences, those incoherent lovely rambles, sick in all myself, doubting and sick and in the kind of duality that makes a man sweaty and queasy, frustrated and frightened, and for sure not knowing who he even is or what he even wants, and I was ready to throw Bird over the side railing, ready to let the girl fly on her own or crash and burn, I was ready to make it none of my damn business, broken and crazed as I was, I was ready to steal on off to my own house, my own mother and father, distant and disapproving people, but at least halfway decent sane, just stuck in the muck and muddle of middle class bullshit and lacking zero imagination to rise above, solid old meat and potatoes mom and pop. But I was then that summer near twenty three years old, and a man doesn't steal home anymore by then. And a man doesn't curl in the fetal position on a futon in a treehouse either. A man mends his guitar and his pride and puts one foot in front of the other and goes off to his gig as planned, with his cigar box and his swollen hands to earn some bread and tell whoever will listen that he ain't studying war no more.

Let her find me.

If she loves me, let her come find me, she knows where I am.



Was it the cry of a chickenshit? Or was it the statement of a man who knew he wanted and needed to be loved by his woman, to see and hear that she loved him as much as he loved her?

Hell, who ever knows what to do right anyhow in this life?

I wasn't much good at doing right, never had been. A disappointment to my own, a disappointment to the status quo, the disappointment that was a generation back then, a rebellious and stiff necked people, hard of heart, in the name of love and peace. And weren't we all hypocrites in our way? All, perhaps, save the nuns of Woodstock, none of us pure of heart except maybe them, in their geeky habits and clean motives, wandering into the mess of mud and chaos and the noise of the decade, the violence of noise, the violence of one abuse after another, from every damn orifice of society, spewing noise, puking up noise that would change the face of the map, the damn upheaval that would usher in

What, exactly?

Certainly not romance.

The Rosa's and the Mario's of the world would still come streaming, those mismatched couples would become who we all were too, who was I fooling, hooking up with a girl like Bird? It was a time of swing your partner, swap your partner, and I was suddenly nowhere in the dance, only a busted up lame guitar player at the train depot, a face of flint now gazing out over my river to the quiet round mountains of the other shore, unmoved, immovable, king of the Hudson, alone, alone.

You break my heart, Bird. You fucking break my heart. But I will not study war no more.

And I did go to our altar of junk in the woods. There, on top of the washing machine, on top of the car fender, on top of the busted out chairs, I laid the broken and mashed parts of Bird's typewriter, and I threw away with a thrust the wilted flowers, and broke the little vases and pots they had graced with glory, and then I sat down on the ground and cocked my head to one side and considered this great heap of garbage that had meant ever so much, this junkyard of love, and it was nothing but trash, nothing but litter in the garden of the Lord. This is what comes of it, Matthew, I told myself, that love gets trashy and cheap and awful, once you let the humans in.

It was my fault. She never did want me to know or see her people, and there I'd been, insisting, like some stupid middle class kid, like family was what you were supposed to do, yeah man, go meet the damn fucking family, like what normal assholes did, go chat up the family, do shit like get married, join the folks together, camaraderie, bullshit like that, you know, cook outs and badminton and everybody just one big happy gig.

God.

How could I have been so

But let me start again. I mean that. Just let me start all over again, with Bird, with Bird below my treehouse saying my name. Just that. JUST THAT.

And I was not cool with myself then.

I needed a new guitar. The thing was barely playable, and I had so much music in me, and I needed to count out my cash, but there was this mammoth lump in my throat that wouldn't let the music up and out past it, there was Bird, in my throat.

I needed to take a baseball bat to this junkyard. I needed to fell a tree on it.

You don't befriend a guy like Mario. You don't have this violent fight and then meet in a bar and throw your arms around each other and nothing happened, you know?

But that was just what I wanted. To scour the bars and come across him and splay out my hands, palms up, and say, eh, Mario, how 'bout I love your girl and we all live happily ever after?

You know, I was almost ashamed to show my face to the river. It all always comes back to that fine water lady, my Hudson River. I stood there, peeking out through all the weaving cattails like the shy boy at the dance, the bullied little wallflower, ashamed of myself, to show myself, to that vast magnificence of the diamond waters that flowed both ways.

She doesn't judge. She just flows up, she flows down, fresh to salt, salt rushing back up, she cleanses herself like a spent lover. She purifies. She gets down to it, never in a hurry, never in a fury, she just lets the whole earthly world flush on out of her, the driftwood, the dead fish, the human refuse, the nuts and bolts thrown overboard, she just quietly purifies herself, she breathes, sure as a human, she breathes in and she breathes out, my one, my river.

She don't fight. Not like us humans. If she wants to take someone down, she don't fight about it.

So I started prowling the bars.

I was looking for him.

And at the same time, man, I was looking for a gig, one that would earn me enough cash to get a decent guitar.

Yeah, old Matthew, making the rounds, the more deteriorated the roadhouse, the more I expected to find him. I expected to find him in the dregs, and I was looking for him.

But I never found him.

Days ticked by.

My guitar was falling apart.

I played the depot every day. I played for coins, for dollar bills, I played my guts out, my swollen fingers raw I played, my black eyes healing, my lip lifted with effort, revealing my missing front tooth, my rakish new scar peeking from my long black hair, the days were blistering hot, blue humid hot, I was the trainyard blues bum, the hippie of the commuter rush, the comrade of the flower children, the shy delight of small kids hanging back behind the legs of young mothers, and I was still thinking about mothers, about fathers, but mostly about God, about the altars of God, and what was that, the business of prayer, of blue and swollen prayer, of the raw and of the missing and of the

“Yo, if that ain’t Matthew.”

A guy’s voice, from the other side of the road, and damn if it wasn’t Paolo, that old philosopher king, that old guitar player friend, hadn’t heard tell of him in a couple years, damn if Paolo wasn’t crossing over the road to stand smack in front of me, damn, shaking hands.

“What the fuck happened to you?” he asked. “Somebody beat you up?”

"It's a long story. Paolo, you rat, you old coot, you still playing yet?"

Paolo nodded eagerly.

"Better'n that. Got me a music shop going. Got me some damn capital, man. I'm turnin' into a capitalist, buddy."

"Where at?"

He jutted out his chin.

"Down the Albany Post Road a'way. Down river by the mussel shoals."

"Hire me."

"Can y' get there?"

"I can get anywhere."

"Come down and play your guitar. Come down and sell guitars for me. You look like you could use one yourself. What a wreck. Who beat the hell outta your guitar?"

A man chooses not to fight in his life. I made that choice that summer. I made a choice to harness my strength for something else. I had a skill, and, in my mind, I also still had a woman. I knew Bird would find her way back to me. I knew I had to let her do that on her own, in her way, in her time.

There are altars in these woods. I see 'em.