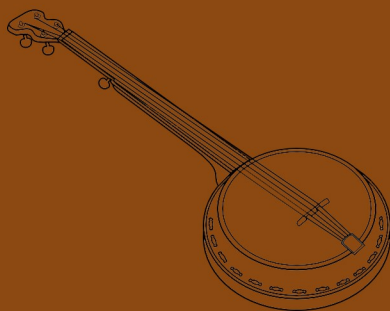


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Everybody Hates Me

I'M HERE IN THE CORNER facing the wall because everybody hates me. Everybody hates me because I did everything wrong. I am a bad girl.

I didn't make the dishes as clean as they could ever be. I didn't drive the quickest way on the quickest road to the river to go fishing. And I talked too much. And I didn't say the right stuff anyway when I talked. And the husband got mad. And then I got mad back. I got huffy and sassy-mouthed, and I got moving fast, all fast and jerky and tensed up and nervous and slamming the pots and junk around, banging the cabinets and the snow-shovel, and then I got all exhausted and slammed myself onto the bed and shut my eyes, but that wasn't any good either, that just wasn't right either, so I got relegated to the corner here, banished under the paper dunce cap. I'm supposed to be thinking about my crimes over here, mulling over my bad behavior, but the only thing coming to me in my head is that I am thoroughly unloved.

I am sixty years old and nobody loves me. That, to me, is really, really sad.

I'm supposed to be over here thinking about how I did wrong, but instead I'm just ever so sad.

And that's just what's really going on. And I don't know how to make that better. And I'm just so weary with trying to make that better.

It wasn't this way with me all the time, a long time ago. I remember that. I hold on to that fact. I was a girl. I recall when I was a fifteen-year-old girl. It was like this then:

On the reservoir road, down in the hot dirt, I was walking. I had new yellow boots, workman's boots, laced up with rawhide laces, the steel toes of them were ringing on the stones of that dirty old road in the summer dust, those stiff new boots, and I was enjoying them immensely, breaking them in, clomping them down with great gusto. I had pride in my walk, and a good juicy feeling all in my hips, in the knobs of my knees, in the broad swagger of my shoulders, busy being a fifteen-year-old girl with all the goodness I could muster about life. And I was doing that, ever so well, when a nasty car began to come and slow behind me. I felt my hackles rise, I felt my spine ready itself in its column for some sort of danger/survival thing, that alarm in the system that a girl knows well at fifteen, that rigidity, well, you know. And the slimy looking guy, that I knew only to get a lightning quick impression of, that I knew not to make eye contact with in any way, the guy who bent his elbow out and said low yet loud enough, "You need a ride?"

It was that time in my life when I knew I was going to absolutely negate evil in the world. I was going to refuse to believe that people could be bad, mean, violent; I was going to turn up the goodness of all, of everyone, and I was principled on that; I would go down as a martyr of goodness and light, be it a mad rapist or criminal robber or psychotic killer, I was ready to open to it and die, because my world was beautiful. Better the death of the body, mine, than to endure

disillusionment and succumb to the devilish underbelly of the unloved. I guess I was Pollyanna that way. I guess I was.

So I gave him my brightest smile, though I did not meet his eye, and kept on walking the dirt, ahead now, calling over my shoulder, "No thanks! Have a nice day, though!" And there I was, breaking in my boots, dusting them up, and so he floored it and burned rubber and was gone, and I tried to tell myself that it was my goodness that had deflected him from his purpose, and I believed it almost, I thought it so, except for the fact that it was a long time before I went walking the reservoir road alone again, though I wouldn't admit to myself why.

It might be like that now. What I mean is that the same anxiety that kept me from going back right away is still here in me, like I am that girl again, and the truth is that what I was scared of then was not the badness in the guy, but that somehow it all got twisted up in my head in a way that made me the bad one. I wanted the world to be good, and it wasn't so good, and I was to blame for that. I have never been able to figure that out much, but it goes on in my head that way. Somebody negates goodness and that makes me the loser. The unacceptable becomes my fault. My disillusionment is like a crime against loveliness. Like I'm supposed to hold that torch.

Like I'm powerful or something. Like I get to be God.

It's just not healthy thinking.

I get so hurt thinking like that.

It is out of love and respect for goodness that I try to excuse all the people who rag on me. I try to shrug. Sometimes I try to understand, to root around in the therapeutic cellar of others. In the end I usually opt out, drop off into detachment, or head for

a corner to lick my wounds under the dunce cap. But I have never doubted myself as a lover. I think a lover is somebody who finds it impossible to hate. I mean, to all-out hate, with vicious hatred, with abandon and irresponsibility, in the face of hurt. So I got hurt, I say, so I got murdered in spirit, dismissed, rubbed out, so, so what? Why kick and scream? Life is cheap. Travel the whole globe and that's what we all know. Ultimately, life is cheap. Nobody thinks twice to take another's life, not anymore, not here on earth, no matter how they go about it.

So we went to kill squirrels. My husband and the other men had guns. I had a burlap sack and a couple of metal hiking sticks, and we all went quietly through the winter woods, bringing our feet down gently, almost tenderly, as if fondling the forest floor, as if reverently, and the men trained their guns on the tree tops, walking softly with their necks out and their faces turned way up. And I walked back behind them, and I saw the fattest silver squirrel running down along an ancient stone wall, silent and industrious, with a fat button of an acorn in its mouth. And I was speechless, beholding the glory of a silver squirrel on a gray rock in a brown and black forest. I didn't tell them. I didn't make the language to tell them to spin around behind themselves and shoot. I knew my language would be death. I knew language was important.

Other squirrels died that day.

I watched one drop out of a tulip tree. It seemed to fall forever.

I do not know what makes a man spit a stream of black tobacco out from between his teeth and talk all swagger and

nonsense while he squats beside a creek and rips the fur and skin off a small animal.

It's not hunger anymore.

And it's not that I am disposed to view the animals of the woods as if they were cute furry little story-book beings.

It's just that ripping apart. It's the way the knuckles go white on a man's hand, or the scarlet of a man's hand all up to the wrist in blood, or that arrogant spit-fly of tobacco. I judge all that. I judge that lack of reverence, not even for the damn squirrel, not even for the earth and sky and God, but for that man himself. What is he doing? Why is he doing that to himself? There's a different way to kill squirrels. A squirrel's life is cheap, so is a human's, but if only we could all go out with a sigh, with a single moment of — truce. You know. Truce. Peace. That way.

Maybe a word of thanks.

Maybe not so much damn panic.

I said this to my husband:

"You know what I would like for Christmas? I would like for you to be kind to me. Authentically kind. I would like you to feel really kindly toward me, and then to act that way. And I would like to be the same toward you. That's what I would love. I would love to have kindness for Christmas this year."

I could make it sound funny. I could make that sound like a sit-com, like it was one of those moments in a sit-com where you watch and laugh your guts out because it's all so impossibly hopeless and cynical, flying in the face of all we would never dare to dream of, so we must poke fun, laughing there in our darkness, spitting on what we all ache for. I mean,

there was my husband, in the weird hours before dawn, making his stark-naked way down the hall toward the toilet, and I said that from my place at the kitchen table where I was drinking coffee and smoking a cigarette and toying with a notebook and pencil stub. There he came, scratching his scalp, with a big hard-on and his eyes all squinty with sleep, and I said that, hoping and dreaming for a miracle that would radically change our lives, me, all full of aching and longing, thoroughly sincere and yet choosing the most impossible and inappropriate moment of all, yet desperate, blurting out my language because I had to, because I would die in all my spirit if I didn't, and it wasn't funny then, it wasn't funny one bit. It was dead of night and it was dead serious.

And there he was. He took a detour from the bathroom threshold, he took a shaky step to the right, and then he came on to the table and sat right down, and his hand was large and full of hot bones and strong muscle and he gathered up my weak old fingers and pressed them to his dry winter lips and he said, "Okay."

I said, "I'm so sorry."

He said, "I am too."

And then he got up and went off to pee, to return wordlessly to bed, and I got back to my notebook, my diary of insomnia, my letters to God, my laundry list of the day's chores ahead, sighing over it all, that simple sigh of truce that made all things right and well in the blink of an eye, in the turning over of a word of language, a word of language that had the power to change all the world. For the first time in all the time I could tell, life had not been rendered cheap.

There is holiness like that, scattered here and there.

I have to be a lover.

It's when we don't panic. It's when we just say things straight and don't panic, that's when we open up this little wedge of space and God gets to come down. Me, I think that's what gives us the courage to make the language, to change the world, to let a squirrel run down a stone wall, not in a Hallmark Greeting Card way, just to let stuff breathe for a second, just before it gets tight again.

By the evening of Christmas Day, all the little grandchildren were throwing themselves about the floor, thrashing around in horrible temper fits and tantrums, wailing out in confused shrieks and great howls all the tension and over-stimulation that had become stored up, shaking indignantly at the sheer overwhelm of the past two days of party and Santa Claus and high wire expectation and stiff new outfits and the poking and prying of strange adults and being asked over and over endlessly how old they were now, what Santa was bringing, had they been good – these children were exhausted to the point of burn-out – the only thing they knew left to do was flail about on the floor, knocking their heads, crying, for they were now drunk on this miserable world of crap and toys, stuffed to the gills with sweets and sweet-talk, and all they wanted was to return to normal, for life to get familiar and routine, for all the fanfare and hubbub to just stop and go away, for the old friend of that ragged smelly teddy bear, the one that could be trusted, and maybe a television cartoon show, turned on real low, and a spot to lay on the floor where all these monstrous grown ups

would keep away, and to enter the world of a good long thumb-suck.

And is that too much to ask? Isn't it the very reason why I am here in this corner, at age sixty?

We all talk too much. I do.

I make this dim little attempt to reach out, and BAM.

You see, it's that my husband will go away in the springtime of the year, again, as it always occurs. He will go to tramp the mountains with gun and with arrow, with fly-rod and with bear-claws, and I will be widowed, as I am several times yearly, and I will not be well. I never am, unless I write the winter through, building my rhythm, getting the language, storing it like a great hoard of acorns and hazelnuts in my silent and crafty cheeks, stuffing it all here in the mouth, at the source of language not spoken, damming it up, so as not to miss him when I at last see the back of that husband come spring. This is consolation. At least then I can give him a happy face when he sees me out the rearview mirror.

It's that last moment before he goes dead to me. My heart can only make him dead. I make up my mind he will not come back. It's the only way I can survive, to talk myself into widowhood while he's up there. That will be the season when I wander the Wal-Mart with a black and grief-stricken heart, dim-witted and genuinely wordless. But now is not that time.

In winter there is always ice-fishing. It is a fine thing for us, and we do well at it. We do well, year after year, taking the yellow perch up on the ice, wandering the lakes round here, the solitude of it, all the ritual of it. We observe the weather and make our plans.

My favorite thing is to haul a beach chair out to the middle of the ice, out in the middle of nowhere, and to sit wrapped up in a big blanket with a book and read the afternoon away, glancing up from the page to check my line or to scan the row of tip-ups for sign of a catch, and to watch the night come on, when we build a fire on the shore and warm ourselves and keep on fishing most of the night through, and that is a time of magic, of stars touching down almost to my tongue and crazy happenings then happen, like deer stealing out to slip and make cracking sounds on the ice with their hooves, or some great cat scouting around the edge of the wood, eyes reflecting in the moonlight, or perhaps we come upon things in the forest, old ruins and foundations that make me pause and think bigger, generationally, instead of just me and my man. These are times, all right.

This is my life in the Hudson River Valley. It's all I know. It's all I've ever known. I am born here, and this is what is in my bones. And when we go in winter to hear the ice on the river, I am splendidly in my element, there beside my husband, listening to the ice sing. The great slabs rub and heave against one another, and it is eerie and unearthly and primal, and it runs all up and down my spine that way, like I am cradled once more, or even in the very womb that knit me up, bit by bit, as if to this very sound of the river rubbing itself in a cold and lonely way. I know who I am at the ice. It's a rootedness, the very art of being a native of a certain place, that brings on an awareness of every nuance in all this landscape, waking me up, heightening the all of me, hemming in the boundaries of where

on earth I belong, and then making everything within those boundaries all wild and crazy with color, with joy.

I guess I am dying now. I cough up these big lungers, and weeks and weeks go by, and I keep coughing. I get gray in the face, and my eyes grow hollow like death looking back, and I think of women in sod houses on the prairie in old days, in winter days of old, and they are in those caves, far from all they know, far from homeland, and knowing they will never make their way back save in memory, and they are dying women, sad and in distress of spirit even more than body, knowing, longing, and knowing again so deeply the great tragedy of this life. And now I am there too, married, a married woman in this my marriage, not a girl, not sovereign unto my own self, not nakedly alone, and it is so scary, so terrifying, so bereft am I of my — my space. I feel like a mute and stupid beast. I feel feral and threatened and instinctive. I don't know how to think anymore. He's going in the spring. I feel inhuman this winter. I guess I am going to die.

It's these soft memories that come now. It's way back, recalling, it's my old grandmothers. There were three of them, altogether. Holy women. Marvelous and mysterious holy women. God, I learned from them. I observed, I learned. Silent and dignified women in black, women who smiled from behind a hand raised to the mouth, a cheap paper fan, a creased lace handkerchief, women like nuns, so pure and chaste even in marriage and childbearing, so quiet and stoic, so lacking in expectation, leading such full and rich lives, all in secret, surprised and delighted at every turn, simply because of the rock-firm belief that life owed them not a thing. Joy in each

nook and cranny, the joy of a child in a woman's body, so deceptive, since the day I realized that these women, who appeared so dim-witted, were treasure houses of stored wisdom and complex insight, these women who walked on eggshells at every hour, all the while gathering mystical truth like greedy chipmunks, stuffing themselves to the gills with life and truth.

I almost missed it. But grace was kind and I looked, and I really saw these grandmothers, and once I had the honest vision of them, I grasped it like a gold ring, and never let go. Now I am old, and I guess I am dying, and so they are all coming to cash in on me, to see how I did, how I measure up, and I love them for that. I say, welcome, old ones. You are welcome in here. Come, old girls, come sit and warm yourselves from roaming.

There he is. There on the sidewalk, down at the corner, slouching in front of the coffeehouse, my old lover. A real old lover of mine. Ouch. I thought he was dead. I had heard that.

Strung out, someone said. A total burn out. Dead.

But apparently not so, since there he slouches. He looks like an old cowboy, like he should have a pair of six-shooters hanging from his hips. He looks older than the hills. He's an embarrassment. It hurts to look.

He's lighting a cigarette.

I shift my sack of groceries and make my stealthy way toward the corner, that corner of destiny. It seems as if my whole life of meaningful encounters has taken place on that damn corner. Old girls and boys, striking up their shit on that very corner. And here I go again, older than the hills now

myself, walking toward the fire of that heart-of-town crossing place, eye on him, the old dog, the old wretch.

I am so much now like my old grandmothers. I am a shy little old bit of a girl, grown quiet, grown up into my real self. There is no flirt left in me. There is nothing here anymore but the dense spirituality of my wisdom years, so akin to childhood, so basic to old age. I don't know how to do the in-between at all. So I decide to just walk up and go naked into the thing.

"Hank. Hey, old Hank. Hey, old coot."

He's looking all about, everywhere but down. Down where I am, under his chin.

"It's Sunny. It's me, Sunny."

Then he knows to look down.

"Well, well. Well, old Sunny-girl. So there it is. I'm hearing you're married all this time."

"Yup. It's someone. He looks a hell of a lot like you. None of the damn trouble, but the resemblance is hitting me hard about now. I married old Blue. Old Blue Whittaker."

"Well, damn. You know he ain't nothing like me."

"You scrawny old muskrats all seem to look alike to me, only on the surface though. You all scramble up out of the cracks of this town, some good, some bad, some in between. But you all get cut from the same cloth in my eyes."

He grins his ragged old grin at that.

"Well, then I guess you like a certain type, Sunny."

"You look okay, Hank. How you feeling?"

"I'm all right. Never thought I'd be ancient, though, and I am now."

I nod. "I guess we're all going to die," I say.

"Yeah, I guess so, old Sun."

I shift my groceries again.

"Well, I guess I'm now saying more than I want, so I'll say so long."

He cups his hands to light himself another cigarette in the wind.

"Yeah, you go on home to old Blue Whittaker now. You take good care of old Blue Whittaker."

"I intend to. I'll do just that."

I turn round from Hank, and my eyes are all rheumy and wet. This is hard.

My memories make this great mythology out of my life. I mean, there are archetypes lurking in every character of my little history, and there are events that stand out as symbols much larger than what they were, because the whole of it could be anybody's stuff, just translated into different languages, into languages of the soul. The father, my father, the mother, my mother, the cast of siblings, the chorus of ancestors, the backdrop of heritage and culture, the religion, my religion, the climate my body has drawn itself up out of and been structured for, and then there is America, the coming to America, to that big crossroads where we all meet and clash and assimilate, or not, where we homogenize, or not, and then there is this town, this river, and that street corner where Hank is slouching, where I am a teenager again, where I am an urchin child, where I am a woman of middle age, where I am religious and alone, where I am running into old Blue Whittaker, where I am married. There is the old yard with the goats, with the chickens, with the rusty trucks. There is the wash hung out. There are the

muddy work boots on the step that have the power to frighten a small child, and the power to ennoble her father, her brothers. There is the stack of books, classical literature, there on the windowsill, the books that set me apart from all I come from, the books that alienate me in my own family, that make me a stranger, subject to ridicule and disdain, the books that devalue me, the books that will make me a lonely sojourner among my own people.

I came from the work boots, and I married the work boots, and I carry the Ivy League diplomas, and I am never at home.

I live this schizophrenic life, and the personas change places at intervals of lightning speed, and the transitions are devastating, but it's my life, it's my lot, and I don't know different. I get dizzy with it, I get the bends, but I don't know different. It has been this way with me from day one.

I get to be the jack of all trades. I get to walk around that way in life. It's exhausting. It's what I know. There is hardly time for the mess of it, to tend so many fires. It's who I am. I love it, some of the time.

I understand, some of the time, the who and the why of the people who are the booster-rockets in my existence. I get why I picked them, even as I struggle and kick out at them all. We come from the mountains. We come from way up high in the rugged cold mountains, the brutal Italian mountains, the backlands, we are the isolated and superstitious ones, we sit low to the ground, we are strong and brown, low and wide and slow to speak, backwards, inbred, vicious and wise, hearty and deceptively intelligent. It runs through the lot of us, it runs down the mountain violently and gushes forth over here to

America and turns us into muddy work booted people, true nobles of the earth, and the women of us come out quiet and larded up with wisdom and mystery and religion that no one can hardly fathom, yet that runs through the veins of us and sustains all that we do and are, and that is me. I am that old woman now, and I recognize myself, and I am clear and straight in that. I may be an Ivy League offshoot, some crazy haywire branch, but I am nevertheless rooted firm and authentic on that tree, and my feet are sure on the mountains. Don't confuse me with anything modern or New Age. Don't attempt to stamp any technology on me. I know who I am. It's very ancient and embedded in me, and I love that. In this I am not confused one wit.

So I don't wonder anymore why I don't match up in this world, in this society. I don't wonder that it is all so strange and perplexing to me. I would not make sense to myself if I was comfortable here.

(And maybe that's why I am a laughingstock. I mean, look at me. I am clueless out there on the street, waddling my weary way through town in my raggedy get-up, hauling along my nasty satchel of books, an old crone limping up the library steps, elbowing my way past all the pretty people, all the cool young outlaws, those rebels without a cause on smartphones and skateboards. Make room for the senior citizen, the white woman, the confused old biddy in the fishing vest with the laundry hamper full of literature, steer clear of that old bitch who huffs and puffs and talks to herself, the batty old fool, hey mommy. And that's me, wheezing my way through the automatic door, fumbling with the turnstile. Old Sunny, come

to town to get more books, sixty years old and still awed and frightened by the public library, still venerating the holiness that lies lined up in the stacks, reverencing the yellowed pages and smell of glue and binding, trembling to reach up high or squat down low in search of that mystical find, the perfect book to resonate like a tuning fork with all that is going on inside. Yes, I am laughable that way. I am a freak.)

Everybody hates me. It's hard. I think it would be easier to be invisible.

Nah, nobody hates me. I'm not that important.

My ears are polluted now. Thick scaly crud grows in them. They itch like mad. Flakes of dead and yellow crust fall out of them, literally. My ears have heard too much in this life now. Blue Whittaker likes violent television shows. Gunshot rings out from dawn till the late-night hours. Tires screech, women and children sob and scream, there are war-whoops, bombs, explosions and sounds of human and animal agony. I scrub the bathtub, load up the dishwasher, roar the vacuum, wish I was elsewhere. My ears are in damned misery. My nerves are grating in my eardrums, pounding away and wanting to run into monastic silence. My hands ache for the car keys, my thighs tense to be sprinting down the road here, but it's all ice and freezing rain, and it's all this hacking cough, and it's that the walls are embracing more than my little needs. I said I would live with you, Blue Whittaker. I said that I would. Now we're getting old and fussy and it's so abominable, so detestable and sorry assed, but me, I said I would do this till I died, and so here I am, straightening out the linen closet and pretending to be happy and okay about it.

Just take me out back now and shoot me.

I am such a liar.

All this language, language, language, polluting my ears, clogging up my ears with crud, real, literal crud. Shit.

But I will lean over the back of the easy chair at odd moments all through this dismal afternoon and cop a feel at the strong cheekbones of Blue, at the scratchy Adam's apple of Blue, and kiss him full and clear, and know I meant what I said, even as I hear my life shrivel and die, my aspirations, my creations all in a coma, I will come, Blue, and tap down my face, my nose tip to your nose tip, and I won't go running, no, not me. You'll go come spring, but not me. I'm tenacious that way. I'm dug in that way, Mr. Blue.

In winter, visitors come here to the house.

First off, the women come. They are writers, and they want to gossip, and they want to one-up one another. They want to talk about work, this business of writing. They want to talk in big, expansive language, and flap their hands about in the air, and mention generous notions, like the spiritual responsibility of good outcomes to stories, of not devastating the reader, of not blowing up the world, of finding what they refer to as the sweet spot, of the discipline, the discipline, the discipline. They resent small children and husbands who interrupt the flow. They wear wild and crazy hair and folksy outfits and I must stock herbal teas and decaf for them. There is something San Francisco about these visitors that is foreign and funky to me. They bring an old aroma that I half recognize from way back, something that smells like frumpy mattresses in vans and armpits in need of soap and water. They are very intense, razor

sharp, they have read absolutely everything and they have known great wealth in childhood and had travel advantages, and I'm sure by now that I am a rather odd bauble in their collective trinket shop, one that they insist on turning round and round, looking for the sense of me, examining the edge of me that has nothing to do with anything, yet authentic in a way that holds the power to fascinate. They don't know who I am, and to them that is an unacceptable fact, one that they must overcome, these women who are taught never, never, to accept the inability to fathom a mystery. They will know me, or they will die trying.

So they poke.

Maureen comes on a Sunday afternoon to poke, and also to get attention, to feed some need in her for approval, perhaps applause, perhaps to see herself in a good light. She eats a slice of cake and tells me her new book is going well, that she is being highly disciplined at the writing task, that it is paying off, that she is accumulating pages. She says this is a serious, literary romance, and that she is not experiencing blockage, that the flow is exhilarating. This is the jump off point for me to enter in, so I lay my palms up on the kitchen table and ask, "What? Does that even exist?"

She fluffs up, preening.

"That's the beauty of it. I don't think anyone's done this before. It's original, unique."

"You're kidding. I mean, you really are, huh? You can't truly say such a thing."

Her face goes through a series of changes. Finally she rallies.

"It's sincere. The work is authentic, Sunny."

“Based on what? You’re in a real delusion to say such a crazy-assed thing.”

Maureen is going to crumple. The first faint signs of meltdown begin to work over her facial muscles. Shit. Why do I have to be true? Why do I have to fuck with people at all, especially these writer creatures? Just put it down on the damn paper, ladies. Just put down your shit, and stop with the publisher’s contract, the bow and scrape for the big-name agent, the acceptance into the famous magazine, the bank loan for self-publishing — stop it, writers. Stop the stampede.

The very first tear squishes out of her eye and makes its tender way down the side of her nose. I’m feeling hot now, flushed, but so on target I could scream at this Maureen. I’m pushing back my chair, rising to start to pace, to maybe make more damn herbal tea or some such nonsense, just to be moving, just to look for deliverance, but oh, the gods are kind, here is Blue Whittaker, come to my rescue, banging back the kitchen door, with his friend in tow, old Stormy, the good old boy with some shotguns that need cleaning, and the two men are stomping their boots on the mat and making great noise about the upcoming Superbowl, and I have that big whooping rush of love for them both. Reality has come home, and just in the nick of time.

Maureen is now wildly distracted, staring at Blue and Stormy as if she has stumbled across two long extinct and highly dangerous critters in a dense forest. Then there is more workboot stomping and old Check comes in. I am delighted to see them, to see Stormy rattling beer bottles out of the refrigerator as if he’s right at home. The game will be on soon,

this is the winter ritual, the pre-game buzz, the drunken afternoon. Reefer will be rolled, voices will escalate, I will write, once I get Maureen to move on.

And BAM. That's when I suddenly realize that I am not liking myself. I am not liking myself on the page, and I am not liking who I am in life.

I hate myself, there in the kitchen. I feel like a loud mouthed, grandiose snob. I've tried to peg out myself, and to peg out these other people, and to blow my own damn horn, and I'm ashamed. I've been, and written, everything I hate about looking at life on the first-take, all the surface sort of brutality that makes life look glib and cruel and that makes my own voice so unbecoming, so against the grain, so not-me. BAM, I hate this. BAM, I hate myself. This is everything I'm not. Only I've written it, so the grains of truth are here, and that is all and what I hate. It scares me. It makes my stomach go sick.

Later that afternoon, Blue finds me out in the woodshed. It's half-time, and he's a little stoned. He's gone all mellow about the edges, sort of blurred and soft, the way I most like him. I know he's been looking for me, and that he hasn't come just to cop a feel, or to ask a favor, but because Blue got on my wavelength, and knew to come search me out, as he always does, to bend close to my ear and murmur, "Hey. You all right?"

"I came up here to have a good pout."

"How's that going?"

I shake my head and grin at the same time. Blue chucks me gently under the chin. "Hey, baby. Buck up, old girl."

I look down at the notebook in my hands. Blue looks, too.

"Well, that's one ratty old book," he says.

I duck this comment by saying, "Writers are so moody, Blue."

"People are so moody, Sun."

"I don't like this book. I hate what's in this crackly old book."

This is where Blue stretches out his long legs and taps the tips of his workboots in a patient rhyming song. Soon he begins to snap his fingers, slow, molasses slow. He does not say a word. He just does this folk-song of his, this body-instrumental. He knows I am going to join in. He knows I am going to cave in to his song. It only takes one clap of my hands, and he knows I will do it. I do. I do, old Blue. Then he is slapping his thighs, then our palms are slamming patty-cake together, and then I am going to giggle, and then he is going to. Then the woodshed is going to ring out with sticks of kindling rapping the walls, with drumming on the big logs, with windowpane tapping going down. This is the music we make, Blue and I, this is how we get through life, through dark patches of life, through self-hatreds, and married hatreds, and blue times and doubting times, and Maureens in the kitchen times, and all the times when we've talked too much and know it, and know to just stop the language. To stop. To bang it out. It's an exorcism in the woodshed. It's a ritual we know to do.

I Am the Brickyard Hobo Girl

I AM THE BRICKYARD HOBO GIRL//I am a lonesome monk
of God//I am once but a river rat with stingy little
breasts//once only a little girl with a big guitar.

I am sloshing//a girl hanging round with the
fishermen//the derelict fishermen//my howl heard clear to
Haverstraw//I am the trainyard drop-out.

I am the mud king of this river//I am your girl.

Strike up the Pentecostal dance! Let us baptize you with a
native song. On this sweltering nomadic night, let us drown
you down here where the mud kings reign. In a moment of self-
indulgence I am bending the strings, abandoned to blue. I was
once only a little girl, a little girl with a big guitar.

Come home, you brickyard hobo, you lonesome monks of
God. The sturgeon are running. You need to come home. The
shad are leaping by the mussel shoals...

Here is the song of the mud king girl. Have I overcome such
a song? Or do I go on living in re-action, rooted in a past both
violent and glorious? The river is like a man to a girl, like a
strong, overpowering siren-man, who calls forth to drown out
all other infatuations, all hope of love. It seemed that way to
me.

We were told not to go down to hobo-town, us small girls.
We were told to stay near the tracks, up by the depot, and to
watch the undertow, and to keep close to our brothers, and to
know where to kick and gouge at a hobo if need came to it.

But weren't they kind to me, those low-brimmed men, with their little fires, who always gave me coffee with sugar, who always came round the grandmother's backyard offering to rake or some such thing for a sandwich. And didn't she just give them bread with thick butter? So I learned, in dim confusion, to trust the actions and not the dark warning words. And it was down in hobo town that I handled my first scratched up guitar, sweating over a lesson, to learn two chords to a river lament. A man tapped time on a bucket. I felt among friends, not among the silly girls with their curly haired rag dolls.

Stored and burrowed deep in my system, in my very constitution, is that first lesson, and the smell of that weathered wood, and the drone of those strings heard for the virgin time coming up through my own fingers, my own throat.

The passion is gone. I hardly can play. Too much love, too much slaughter, too much happened to make the river run far too fast and thick for me to endure. I don't even own a guitar anymore. I am not even a mud king anymore. No longer do I squander days deliciously under bridges with traffic thwacking by above my head. The dark, the dim, the coolness, the damp. But maybe all I have ever been doing, all this time, is trying to get back to this music of bluestown water and fish gutting and whiskey flask. River water can burn swifter than fire.

And Nora is trying to talk to me. She has been trying for some time. Up out of the river fire memories I hear her voice jump out suddenly.

"Where are you? Is this a bad time? Have I caught you — should I come back tomorrow?"

“Please,” I say. “Come on in.”

I’ve kept her standing on the porch and I don’t know how long. I remember now what this is. She’s come about the album. Nora is writing a novel and she is making great reference to blues and to guitars and to women and to young fame and early burn out and walking away, and I am some sort of phenomena that she wants to bend the rules around to make fiction, and I do not mind, for I feel like one big fiction myself, it was so many decades ago, and she says she doesn’t care, because it’s not about me, just a tone she is seeking, a tone to use that I might ignite within her.

Some phrasings. Some voice to get her started. It’s all highly embarrassing to me. Trauma curls just around the edges, like a headache about to start. I realize I am in danger, but I am opening the door to it. Red flags, and yet I open the door.

I didn’t handle a guitar, I handled life. If life poured out of the instrument, it was because a life was being lived. Mine.

I was being bent, shaped, my life was surreal in that it was forming me in patches where hardly a girl could grow into a proper girl, a civilized girl, someone appropriate and made fit for bumbling, crazed society. No, instead I came up among the truly crazy, and it got me to be crazy, and I wonder if I am sorry for that, and often think I am indeed regretful, or embarrassed, or simply gone to some other shore that is irredeemably unable to return or recover from. Isolationist. Anti-social.

Radically unfit. Recluse. The lonesome monk of God holed up in an attic somewhere humming, rocking and humming,

perhaps weaving long strands of memory-stories with which she is binding herself from any decent sense of reality.

Nora appears stupid, or in a stupor, at the least, watery and glazed over as if behind an old glass-pane, pocked with waves and sand bubbles. I cannot relate to her. I cannot give her what she has come here for — her own shot at immortality — it is not in me to make words she could comprehend; to develop that ‘tone’ she is so earnestly in search of.

“What do you mean?” she asks. “What do you mean when you say, yah yah yah yah..?”

It’s lost on me, what she even wants to know.

“I’m trying,” I mutter. “I’m trying to say that hands have a language of their own. That hands will go bloody straining the limits of what they want to say, hour on hour, stripping down to running blood on the strings in the haunting effort to say that river thing that brings them, reduces them, to pins and needles and finally numb and frantic incapacity. You can’t get there. Hands try to play God, and they try to speak Godliness talk, but it kills. It’s not meant for a human being. The point is reached. The player walks away. The player throws the damn guitar in the river and walks away.”

Nora starts scribbling in a notebook. I am panicking now, overloaded heart banging up and out, impulse is there, the impulse to shove her out of my house.

“Please,” she says. “If you would only please indulge me and keep talking. I’m beginning to — what you are saying is — there is a tone to what you are — I’m sorry, if you would only monologue, or something like that, just off the top of your head, if you would only please —”

She pushes a lock of hair behind her ear.

She does not look up at me.

I don't want to go where she wants me to go, but at the same time it is like playing with fire, like seeing something one must never touch or go near, and that is the draw and attraction, to spin myself out, to stick my hands in fire, river fire, purity, to spend myself lavishly on Nora, with every word I can pull out of myself, not for her, not for the guitar, but for the very dangerous catharsis that could pour me over the edge. I want to pour to her notebook, to her knotted brow, to her idea that she can catch my 'tone', a tone I do not even know in myself. Let her be a rock. Let me blabber to the rock of her, and so exorcise such demons as would like to see me ripped to shreds in their presence. Their stony presence.

"Purity," I say. "That's the word. It's all about purity. The one pure truthful and dead on honest spot that blinds to the heart. That sends a bling all up the spine and explodes each so-called hot spot, chakra, what you will, and then beams straight up and right, making that cold warmth, that white light."

"Did you accomplish that?" she asks.

"Of course not," I respond. "I would not be living if I had,"

"But did the guitar enlighten you?"

I wick my hand back and forth in the air.

"I'm sorry," Nora says. "That was a very intimate question. I don't mean to overstep."

"What are you really looking for?" I ask. "What have you really come for, Nora?"

She flushes up in all her face and looks to the notes in her lap, glazing over, I can tell she cannot read them.

"I want to write this novel. It's not about you, or your life, but I've been going round to women who have achieved names, and who have, well, transcended in some sense, and yet you are the only one of them I know who disappeared from the scene, who retreated in the face of fame, and accolades, and you seem not even to have peaked, yet you walked away. That, in itself, fascinates me. I don't know why, and it shames me to say that I am here to ask why. Why did you withdraw that – that gift – from the world?"

"Because I don't love the world."

Nora looks up quickly.

"I don't," I say, raising my shoulders in a shrug, that old familiar shrug I know in my body.

And there you have it, Ms. Nora. There was a world once, down shantytown way, that was hard and desperate and had an edge, albeit a defeated edge, still it was a place of fire, and danger, and life hung by a thread there, cheaply, among all those marginal and neglected and defiant and sickly and murderous, a place where a head cold meant death, and a fight breaking out meant grave injury and weather meant old age by forty, and laughter meant fuck it all, let's sing. I can't hand that over to you, Ms. Nora.

It is at that point that I rise from my chair.

"You have a good day," I say softly, and I walk out of the room, out the back door, and leave my own home for the root encrusted sidewalk.

I will not explain myself//this is the old woman's song//only stand back and do not come close to my ragged domesticity//to my tattered river wandering//to this old rebel

in beat up clothes who lives in poor obscurity//line cast out
from callused hand//this drop-out on the Hudson//this
ancient hungry ghost// I will not tell you who I am, I will not
guide you down onto my land//nor take you gently into these
waters of life//only your own poverty can bring you to your
knees in this Hudson//only your own musicality can cause
your song to be born.

I first came here out of desperation//Now I wander free,
whistling down the tracks, singing my song with abandon//as
you watch the back of me, oh lost world, as you watch me walk
out of your concern//out of your vast need to know me//your
fascination.

And here is a truth//You will never know me.//Such is the
nature of privacy, my love//such is the queer thing you yearn
to break in upon//the tired brown thing of my face//the lone
shrug that moves off in solitude, frustrating your modern
desire for confession.

There is a secret in every child of God//in every moth that
has survived the flame with gleeful joy and lonesome
giddiness//a mystical bent//a quiet flick of the cigarette butt,
a droll putting down of the hat brim, a turning round to face
away to greater glory, a sermon of distant shoulder
blades//the ones that drive you mad.//I am a lightsome
preacher//I am an old fishergirl//I lay no burden on you,
disclose not my feverish poverty, ask no hand-out, no eye
contact, no astonishingly intimate moment, no blending in, no
firm handshake, no precious mirroring//I'm just fishing, my
dear observer//don't strain to make much of me//for I am
well-kept//in these brilliant rags//an old river dog gone silent

for the great crescendo// gone silent for all the crashing
cymbals of a life kept inside.

Go look at your life.// The preacher has stepped down, and
you, old lonely girl, must go silent in the pulpit, backing down,
backing down now.

I go down where they are hauling the crab nets up onto the
rotting planks of the pier.

The crabs, they scratch and skitter like panicked dervishes
They claw and scramble in wild fear

All the children laugh and squeal with delight to see them
race with death.

And I stand, awestruck, to see my river again.

(If you happen upon her sometime—I hear she's down by the
river these days—if you see her, and you see that she is well,
please come tell me, if you see her anywhere, and you can tell
she's fine, let me know. I was hanging with her many years
ago, when she was the darling of the coffeehouses, when she
was just a girl, a little girl with a big guitar and not an ounce of
fear. She would clatter her way round town, with the gig bag
flung up on her back, strutting her stuff like a mean little
bulldog of song. Oh, she had an edge then, she was sharp. She
would tilt a beat-up straw hat over one ear and cause everyone
in the place to swoon. She had a rough butternut voice that
could thicken the air with its juice, nothing pretty about it, just
an authenticity that made us all crazy to go listen to her. And I
hear she's down by the river these days, gone all soft and
dragged down, pressed into the earth like a penny flattened on
the rails, all deflated like a shoe you find lying in the dusty
street, all lonely and oppressed by that man she latched onto. I

always saw her down there when the stripers were running the river, and the crabs were in under the pier, there I would see her skulking around the edges of us, ashamed looking and all worn out. Yeah, if you happen on her, tell me how it is.

Because she was good people. Many times, on many occasions, did I toss coins into her case, did I invest in what I heard from deep in her gut, and it makes me sad, and it makes me crazy, to think these rumors and sightings of her have taken out of the world a being once so straight up. I was in her corner, I mean, she's got a right, to go down is her right, but me, I had an affection, perhaps an attachment, perhaps I was only projecting, maybe she was just a dolt in cool clothes, just another precious idiot wonder child of our town. It's not for me to say.)

The crabs are running

Everyone is in a lather to catch them

To partake of their delicacy. But for me, the good fortune of them grows lesser with the years.

Yeah, that man I hooked up with. That young boozy tramp, that hollowed out crazy firebrand with his ooze of sex appeal. I let him kill the music, the river in me, let him eat me up and leave me gnawing and chomping on my own dead greatness. I buried myself down into his graveyard, infatuated with death by guitar suicide, because I needed the information that women need. I needed to be swallowed whole, annihilated by my own greedy mutilation—I needed to let him stalk and beat me and scoop me out clean to the breaking point.

What did I know, I was crazy, I knew nothing but craziness, that veering off the grid of good living, that down under the

bridge life of a desperado, that torment that was succor all at the same time.

I went for the bad guy, like all good women like to do, and got turned upside down, as if choices were not hard enough for a brickyard hobo girl about to succeed deeply in a world she could never understand, it had to be doomed to failure, if the man had not taken me down, the fame would have, in the end it made no difference. But oh, he made me unhappy. He stole something from me. Life has been a quest to regain it, the music, the river, the blackened and filth strewn soul of me has done nothing but pine for that purity of the drone note that underpins the whole blue melody line.

I listen to the tapes, the album, the burn that I was able to put down so utterly well and straight. Homesickness washes like the two tides, salt and fresh, that cleanse and yet confuse every cell of my system. Shit, I say, snorting at myself. Shit, you dumb girl. It could have been a life. It could have been some sort of life, at any rate. Maybe I could have handled it. Maybe not. But at least if I had gone down in flames, they would have been my flames.

I walked away.

I walked into the arms of a bum, escaping the thing that scared me more, and didn't I just lose my life? Didn't I get snuffed out?

I take the rap. I was terrified of what was happening to me musically, and of where it was all heading. So I divebombed into him. I'm aware and responsible. And now I am old. Maybe way too old. And now he is long dead. He was too wild to live long. Overdose. Yeah, he was that. And I was bloody and

battered and unable to pick up. I told Nora the truth. You throw the damn guitar in the river and walk at some point. You don't recover. You play-act life from there on out.

Why did I come down to this river?

Because I am the brickyard hobo girl. I am her yet and always will be, like a homing pigeon.

And now I stand, in all my old girlishness, and I know I am not right in the head, and maybe that is beautiful. I can breathe here. I can stop regretting and breathe.

They told us small girls not to come here. They told us to watch the undertow. I didn't listen. For love of this place, I did not listen to grown up voices, nor any voices at all. And I did get pulled down, oh yes, but how I loved the currents, and the sloshing about, and the rhythm of the low brimmed men and the yowling siren call of the Hudson. No one let it take me over but my own self, and perhaps even I did not have an ounce of control over that matter. We play and flirt with fire, and some never recover. I am such a one. I have suffered, and I have done my suffering without poise or grace, only with brute survival. The river will take me, sometime, again. I feel it pulling even now.

It could be time to go buy a guitar. It could be time to let my line out that way. Perhaps my hands will know what to do, how to redeem a life badly spent, I have been a bad girl. I have been a crazed and shell-shocked quitter. But, if I could get under the bridge, where the graffiti is scrawled in riotous obscenities, where a girl could find a tune, some mournful lament of a tune, there might be a humble mouthful of words to me yet.

Olive's Hands

OLIVE HAS THICK, SWOLLEN HANDS, raw, red, cracked and splitting hands. They hang off her thin wrists like dangling anvils. Olive's hands scare the shit out of me.

Shuck corn, beat the bread, clean out the fish, gut the rabbit, wring and pluck the chicken, smoke cigarettes, drink beer, shoot pool, change diapers, smack the washboard, whack the vegetables with a dull knife, stitch a coat, manhandle the flatiron, brush knots out of unbraided hair, hammer a straight nail, pack a punch or slap a face, pick an ice block to smithereens.

Rugged Olive, shrunken in, caved in, boxed in. She sits in the corner in a rocking chair and lets her hands lie on her knees, but they jerk and jangle and tremble and spasm for want. Empty handed, they look like cadaverous beings straining for resurrection.

When I stand in front of her, I wish she would put her hands up round my jawbone, cupping it, and lean down and say some one kind thing, one sweet thing such as a child would like hearing, but the most she can do is whirl me about and tug at each pigtail in her abstracted way, hard, until my eyebrows pull back with the force of her. Then a bony ragged finger will push between my shoulder blades, as if to say, off with you now.

Olive milks the two goats. I stand back in the shed, in the dark gloom, and watch her mangle each teat as if she hates all

the world, even the thick warm milk that hisses down into the pail.

One time, Olive put on my roller-skates and bumbled her way down the pitted dirt road in a riot of dust and I thought that was the last of her, but she returned at dusk, carrying the clumsy skates, slicked all over with sweat running down herself, flint faced, and I never knew whether she'd had a good or a bad time. Her elbow was busted open, though, and she silently patched it over with lamb's ear and tape.

And weren't we ignorant, and backward, and backwoods, and knowing no people? I went on off to school and didn't learn a thing except to read and draw with crayons and sing folksongs, and that was plenty enough uselessness, save for the reading, which Olive liked because of the picture book she'd kept since her own dim childhood, and now I could tell her what the pictures had to do with.

A blue rosary day, told off like echo-beads, hours of you and hours of me, circling the vast reservoir in nowhere, forest overhang on water sifted with fog, I can only rarely see you up ahead, hugging the shoreline of rock and roots. Silence is our language, and the trout glide in vegetation, easily frightened, and I stop, gone suddenly stone-still, to cast my line and let it drift.

I want something. Far more than a basket of fish, I want something deep inside my system, something that swims shyly and on guard, elegant and honest. I want to pull insight out of these mystical waters.

You turn and see me through branches. You nod, knowing I have seen the trout. You push on, once more out of sight in the fog. I keep my hand dead-steady on the line.

The day is cold. Pouches of snow cling to rocks like mushroom caps. The fir trees are wet and pungent. Dampness is raw in my fingerbones. I stand, collected in myself, gazing at a pair of mallards, feeling my line without looking down. There is a heightened awareness thrumming through me, a chorus of background thoughts not quite surfacing to consciousness. I am here, but also daydreaming. I am alert to two separate realms. I am waiting, patiently, but taut in every fiber of myself.

I want to have a pure heart. My life has been a constant attempt to see and hear what is pure, the truth underneath, the truth under all the water of living, silty, salty, murky and slimy, under the ooze of language, to arrive at the most pure spot of what is really being said.

My ears ache and drip with assaults. Dim words fling themselves out of dark places. I quiver in my very eardrums at what passes for truth. How often I lie to myself. How often I listen to delirium.

Just say the thing.

Just stop and say the one thing.

I promise I will enfold it.

Have I become your Olive? You have disappeared into the fog, but I know you, man. Long have I lived with you now, smacking bread, gutting fish, milking goats, and keeping quiet. I know all about me. Me with you, I know about. But, am I as

stone cold as Olive? No. But there is Olive-ness in the way I am standing here, on the edge of this reservoir, staring into space, my hand still on the line. There is internal Olive in me, resigned, flint faced, full of words that never come out, only broil around inside of me, heating up, some of them even burning, and now is the time, now, in my life, when you will hear them, for no, I will not be your Olive. I will not hold back from you. I will not withhold out of some sick incapacity that would shove you between the shoulder blades and send you off with that hard gesture. The gesture that meant kindness, but came out blunt and dismissive. No, my man – there is way too much silence between our love. I do not mean of the kind that women make themselves sick over with their men, no, I am not that either. I mean the purity of the words that a man and woman should know how and when to say. Olive could not teach me. I will teach myself.

Jerk, snag, lift. The trout panics in the air, but I steady it and silently lower it into the basket. It flops and thrashes about, but the lid goes on and I bait another hook as if in trance, for this is my hands now, doing their work.

Only inches behind me, the snap of a branch. You are here. You have come out of the mist like a symbol, like a phantom, like my lover. You rub your chin on my shoulder. You open your creel bag. You have out-fished me, but perhaps I will out-word you, someday – maybe someday soon. Maybe only an hour from now. Who knows the way of words? They trail along much slower than the things I want to say.

Olive with a three-pronged rake, hacking at the earth. Olive unrolling chicken wire, bleeding at the knuckles as she goes. Olive fogging up in the steam of hot water, as if her face was on fire.

I scratch at this notebook with a heavy leaded pencil, crossing out stuff violently, drawing in the margins, stabbing at lines until the paper tears in places, and still I do not know the wailing pure truth in me, the truth that wants to even scream up out of what I want to say, to my husband, to Olive, to my own self, to everybody chattering away like a forest full of birds in this coffeehouse. I feel under a canopy of shadowy trees, rustling and caw-cawings, and chairs scraping back like bark and the bum bum bum of the music hammering out language with my fist curled round this stubborn pencil. This is no place for a story, yet it is the most foreign place to everything that Olive was, and he is, that I can think of.

Olive smoked endlessly, lighting one cigarette off the other as it burned low, flicking ash, flicking back her hair, flicking back her crossed ankle, smoking as if she were angry, her foot impatiently tapping the floorboards.

Yeah, Olive was damn mad.

Olive slammed things around, bitter-faced, silent, occasionally a mutter so dense would escape her that it was impossible to tell what she had said. Olive pulled the knobs off the cabinets, crashed the silverware down on the table, swept the floor with such venom that the broom was mangled to bits at the end. Olive raised dust, walked in a cloud of film, and was astoundingly beautiful and thoroughly unaware of that fact.

I mean, she was striking. Dark, and elegantly lined, and firm and skinny and tall and long legged and gorgeous. Olive, in an old cotton dress, flinging chicken feed, was breathtaking. I miss that. I miss spinning round some random corner and coming to a halt, simply to behold her.

Jack is tall and elegant and angry in all the same ways. All bones and lean muscle and long-jawed and long-haired, and quick and sharp and thick in the hands, and thick in the cheekbones that curl up into his temples like ledges, like living things.

He calls me Livvy. He says things like, “Livvy, get in the truck,” and I always do, and I never know where we are going until we rattle-trap down some potholed road and end up at the edge of some vast wood, and there you have it, wonderland.

So I always get in the truck.

Maybe all my life I have just gotten in the truck.

I always want to see where it is going to stop.

So, I’m writing in the coffeehouse, to a raging pulse of music, and I am homesick for the folksongs. I mean the ancient, primal folksongs of childhood, the ones we sang when we did not know at all what was going on, the songs that lulled us unconscious, the jump-rope chants, the small percussion rattles and tin tambourines, the little triangle with the stick.

Jack sings: MY BODY LIES OVER THE OCEAN, DAMMIT, BRING BACK MY BODY TO ME.

And I know what he means. He really means, JIMMY CRACKED UP, AND I DON’T CARE.

This morning I said to Jack, "I feel to crack up."

And he said, "Have at it, woman."

He put his arms on my shoulders and held me back from him, studying my face. "Yeah," he said, "Hell yeah, bring it on. Show me what you got."

But I did not have the goods. Not the kind of goods that Olive would have produced. Olive would have cracked up magnificently.

I cannot compete with her. I cannot measure up, not in beauty, not in violence, not in silence, not in self-neglect nor self-harm nor self-ignorance. So I ducked out from under Jack, skipping round him.

"I'll write it," I said. "I'll have my quiet crack up on the page."

"Well good luck with that," he snorted. "Damn, I thought you had it in you."

"I do," I said. "Just that I'm sneaky. Or a coward. Or all that."

"Go slam the typewriter," he said. "But if you're going to slam it, then really slam it."

I shrugged and slouched my way out of the kitchen. I was supposed to get angry and show him all right, but I only felt a defeated loser rise up in me, taunting, like some fucking jump-rope ditty:

MISS LIVVY HAD A BABY, SHE THREW HIM IN THE
BATHTUB TO SEE IF HE COULD SWIM.

Nothing I threw on the page would swim. It gets sucked, with that queasy sound of drain-swallowing, like paper crumpled in a fist and thrown against the wall. Jack, I did not tell you anything pure or real or anything I honestly wanted to

say. I did not even tell you the background, the history, the myths and facts and memories that prop up all I want to say in this life. It is human nature, punching me in the stomach all over, and how can I ever venerate such failure as human imperfection, when the whole of me wants, well, holiness. I want to be good, Jack. I don't want to say it wrong, I don't want to get it wrong. I want it to come out sparkling. It makes me crazy that it doesn't.

Now I am here in the coffeehouse, trying to make it sparkle, trying to spin gold, and all I hear is tarnish, and all I taste is Olive, like a nail is churning around in my mouth, or a stinging bee, or a blockage way back in my throat, causing me to write nothing but WAH, WAH, WAH.

When I was waiting on that thing I could not make the word of, I tapped into a tambourine sort of jangle somewhere in my heart that crashed about like a prayer meeting and I threw up my hands in the silence ringing in the ears of the house and said glory hallelujah in the hermitage of all my life lived out in the gaps between noises.

No one wanted anything.

No one was even here.

I was not even spying on myself, such was the absorption of my little gathering of spirits, of OH COME ANGEL BAND, COME AND AROUND ME STAND.

I felt you. I felt you so close. I felt you so close that I fell down on my face and pressed the floorboards in awe and reverent wonder.

You, Olive. For Olive is not dead. She is up the dirt road yet. In 1969, at the age of 17, I walked away. I took a walk down the

dirt road, and went out into the world, and it was not fine. I've been up there a few times, probably to prove something to her, to me. I am not yet forty, but I have seen Olive from the trees, often spending hours there without her knowing, watching her, observing Olive as if I were an anthropologist. I study the quirks I know so very well, and I have seen her, aging into a knockout at just shy of 60, and she is some fine and loopy woman. Eccentric, is that the polite word?

One time, when I was possibly 27, or thereabout, I strode into the clearing and caught her off guard. She was digging a hole. She had been digging a long time, and she was struggling mightily when I walked out of the woods. I saw the canvas tarp before Olive saw me. I knew then that the old dog had died. I saw the way Olive's right shoulder was pushed way up by her ear, a gesture I had always known. It was Olive's grief shrug, and nothing else ever came from her in any kind of grief over any animal or human, except that simple raising of the right shoulder. It was her war-cry, her sorrow, and her resignation.

Without a word, I took the shovel. We had not seen each other in years. She yielded it to me. She stepped some yards away and lit a cigarette.

"Was it that one that looked sort of like a lop-eared collie?" I asked.

Olive lowered her eyes.

"He was a good dog," I said, digging. "I guess you took care of him. They get sick and die, is all."

"Nothin' lives long," Olive said. "Nothin' stays long on this earth."

"How you been?" I asked.

"I'm all right."

"I'm going to get married, Olive. Man's name is Jack. You want to come to that?"

"You can bring him by sometime," she said. "I won't be coming to no formal thing."

"Yeah."

Olive stepped over to spell me, but the job was done. We lowered the tarp and pushed clods over it, and then Olive shoveled it to a mound,

"You want a marker?" I asked.

"I got this," she said, drawing a wooden stick from her dress pocket. It had a blue ribbon tied to it, and she stuck that in the center of the grave.

I turned to go back toward the road.

"Well, married," she said to the nape of my neck. "I didn't figure you for it."

"Me neither," I said, without spinning round to see her face. "I don't even know if I can do it, Olive."

"You'll make do," she said simply.

I put up my hand to the air, palm up, and kept going.

Jack has never met Olive.

Why am I afraid?

Somehow Jack is just all mine, and Olive is just all mine. Somehow they are separate worlds, and if I meshed them, I think something might happen in me, something crazy, or sinister, some land-mine of the soul. Archetypes, like ancient gods, clashing in the sky, bringing something inclement, some weatherish disaster of epic sky-battle that would hurt me,

badly, even to the point of devastation. Some instinct of the bowels has me push them to opposite poles and leave it that way.

But I am not stupid. My very act of polarization is sure to bring them face to face, because life works that way. Life is almost sick in that way, magnetically sick in shoving forces around that mere humans try to control.

So I am on edge. I am on edge one day when Jack says that the stream that runs down off S-Mountain is brimming with trout, or so his buddy P— says.

Too close for comfort. My jawbones clench and my fingers dig into my palms.

“What’s the matter with you?” Jack says.

“She’s up there, Jack.”

“You come from off of S?”

I nod.

“Well. Well, hot damn. That is one fucking slab of Heaven. That is one fine mountain.”

“I know.”

“She’s up there yet? Woman, I know you on ten years coming up, and there it is.”

I fiddle with the dishes. I make the water run hot and noisy and pour too much soap. Jack reaches from behind me and shuts down the faucet.

“I tromped that stream years ago,” he says. “I mean, a long time ago.”

“I know. I saw you. I was up there. I was up there living and being a little girl, and I saw you. You were barely a teenager. You used to set traps all through there, and I always knew

about you, and I always knew how to not get tangled up in your lines."

"You were that little girl."

"I was."

Jack turns the water back on. He rolls a cigarette and walks on out the door to go smoke up in the garden. I feel my hands shake as I lift a plate. I feel my heart kick up, anxious, on guard, though there is nothing wrong. It is only that fate has come to stare at us, to maybe rock my world, to maybe not, to maybe only cradle me, but either way, my heart kicks up.

Nobody is how I view myself. A type of roaming nobody on God's earth. Homesick and wandering in blasted out Paradise. S-Mountain has always meant just that to me. It is a place where invisible girl me walked the tightrope thread between real old earth and phantom heavenly forest. It is a place loaded down with mystical recognition, with associations that have to do with the veil of unreality. There is no protection from transcendent experiences on S-Mountain. We lived there like people who were referred to as "touched". And we were. And I remain touched to this day.

Jack will not recognize me. I am sure of that, for he does not truly recognize me even off the mountain. I rarely recognize myself off of it. Nobody. I was nobody there, and I am nobody here.

The wildest, most untamed and untapped emotions can reduce anyone to nobody, once a person comes to terms with Paradise. We are small in forest-realms, yet smaller in Heavenly ones.

Still, my heart kicked up when I thought of Jack attempting to put his hand into Olive's, for some jerking and awkward moment, some seemingly trustful second of searing burn. Surely she would not meet such a hand, only whip hers behind her violently. Olive shakes no hand in her life. Olive perceives only rude pretention in the face of a kind gesture.

I say to Jack, "The trout on S-Mountain are no better than anywhere else."

Jack says, "They're monsters! And you know that. They're out-of-this-world gigantic and wild and they put up one hell of a fight, and I meant to give them one."

"I won't go with you," I say.

"Why? Scared of the old biddy, are you?"

"Jack."

"I'll go alone."

He says it with a snap to his words, not petulant, but cranky and mean and like a low growl.

I am sad. Then I fall to that numb and blank state, glazed over, and I walk away, up beyond the garden.

"Oh, yeah, go sulk," Jack says to the back of me.

Already Olive is between us. But I can barely feel my own hands, let alone worry for hers.

I do not think I know so much about this coffeehouse and all the dynamics that live and breathe here, these gaggles of talkers, the sudden recognitions, the casual stops at tables by friends, the rapport built up on layers of running into the same dear faces. I study friends. I do not have any.

I maybe used to burn to have friends. I would try to dream them, but they always seemed like trees to me, or stick figures with blanks for faces. Still I wanted one or two of them, or maybe at least the experience of the event of “coffee with the girls”. But the vision would fold in on me, as quickly as it could proceed. What to wear to this “coffee” was enough to panic me. What to say was beyond me completely.

It is so very hard to look up from my work. What if I met someone’s eyes? I study the bulletin board by the doorway. The whole world hangs, ragtag, on pushpins. Everything a human could want is there, and plenty that no one wants. It is a collage of insanity. I feel akin to every bit of it. It is a portrait of how I feel, how I look: “Please help me. Please love me.” But, if anyone did, surely I would run, up beyond the garden.

Laptops on tables. People lean into each other, saying intimate things. There are gestures and postures and cool clothes. Music. There is always music. Maybe the music is what makes me the saddest. It’s too joyful to endure.

Worry. Worry-beads. Droplets across the hairline at my forehead.

A long time ago, in a faraway world, I brought Olive a picture I had crayoned in the school. It was my attempt to draw a goat, with the words “For Olive” scratched about the bottom. I remember her snort. Then she bleated, and bawled, much like a goat, and I did not know at all what she meant. Was she disgusted? Was she happy? Did my shaky offering offend or delight her? I stood in agony. Slowly she folded it into four perfect squares and tucked it in the bosom of her dress. She

turned round, and I thought there might have been a vague smile, but she spun round too quickly for me to know. I wanted to believe it was a smile. I spent hours, walking down through the woods, pretending and arguing my point, that it had been a smile. I said, in whispers, "You're welcome, Olive", or "I'm so glad you like it, I made it for you". But I was deathly worried. Power-some worried. I remember I picked many berries, wild red raspberries, and poured them into my shirt front and carried them carefully home at eveningtide. At the table, I unfolded them.

"Well. Thanks," Olive muttered.

I flushed up all red.

"It's a good likeness of a goat. The brown one, particular," she said. "I fancy the brown one, so it's nice to have a likeness."

I ran. I ran outdoors to cry.

Up beyond the garden I feel Jack's hot rebuke. I feel misunderstood: hurt, angry, not sympathized with, being made to buck up and be a man about this trout fishing thing and not act like a sniveling baby. After all, it is only an old woman, and what has that to do with anything? And how could Jack be so dim-witted? How could he be so set on his way being all right and honorable, to catch the best trout in the mountains, to feed ourselves royally, and not even glimpse the fact that it is Olive up there, Olive who raised me up in such strange circumstances, and how come he cannot feel that from my end of the stick, and so much as take a thought for what fishing S-Mountain could possibly mean for me?

I grab a fat branch and whack it, hard, against a tree trunk.

What about me, Jack? What about what I feel? What about what I want, don't want, what about my choice in matters large and small?

And there you have it. It's all about Olive, and it's all about the whole of my life here, too.

Little Miss Livvy, so goddamn fragile.

Yeah, that's right, I am. Newsflash—I'm fucking fragile. No kidding. I come from some alien experience of neglect, or isolation, or some damn trauma that somehow left me screwy. God, Jack, hadn't you noticed?

Wah wah—but yes, that's right, I am wah wahing with every right in the world. Alone. I do my wah wahing all alone. It's what I know. It's how I survive. It's how I get through times when Jack's will pushes up hard against mine and bruises and goes purple and hurts like a throbbing mess of blood vessels gone to pulp. That's what it feels like in these times, Jack, when you bang up my heart so unconsciously that you don't even know you lifted an emotional hand. And all I ever do is go make coffee or pile up the laundry into the machine.

Is it always? No. Shots come out of dark nowhere on rare occasions, and this is one of them.

So he meets her? What is the big deal? So we fish and never see her the whole time?

What's the big deal? I know how to be invisible. I have moved silently through forests all my life. But Olive will know. Olive can smell me miles away. The aroma of a small girl lingers all over me. It seeps into my clothes. It sifts through my hair. It powders the soles of my feet and the palms of my hands.

"What the hell are you smacking around up there?" Jack yells.

I freeze, ashamed of myself, and put down the branch. He is going to come up here now. I must compose myself. Why do couples do that? Why do they compose themselves? Jack appears.

"Look," he says, "it's really okay. I can go on my own, scope it out, and if it's good, I'll come let you know, and we can go together. I'll go play scout, all right, Livvy?"

"All right"

Jack puts his index finger on my third eye and taps.

"Don't be a silly old girl. Don't go getting mad at me, old girl."

I smile wryly. It hurt, but I didn't want it to anymore. I just wanted status quo, and I just wanted to climb down the hill and go home.

I look at my own hands. Here they are, and I see that I have lost too much weight again, for my fingers are sly and thin, not yet boned with arthritis bulbs, but I know that will come to me later in life. My fingers are not long, and my hands themselves are small and flat and wide, yet they are hands of power that do powerful things. They do all the things Olive has done, yet there is not here the gracefulness and poise and anger that Olive's hands held so well. I sit playing the Appalachian dulcimer, watching my hands spill out music, soft and droning and haunting, and this is all mine, the one skill Olive never possessed nor was able to use, playing mountain music, making sorrow come out of these hills.

My own hands please me, in a blunt, mute sort of way. They are not pretty, nor delicate, nor fragile, yet not manly, they are all woman, yet they are strong and boxy, roughed up, and animated with a red-brown dry-bone cracked and backwoods aura about them. If only I could once lay them in Olive's own, or splay them out side by side, to see how I measure up, to see if I approve, if she approves, if we are really the same two who lived in the same place so long. If only I could intimately place them, just so, hers palm to palm with mine. Maybe that would make everything all right. Maybe that would generate something very close to love.

"Olive," I would say; "Look. Look at our hands."

As if to say, "Am I like you? Am I yours?"

It's only fantasy. But I envision it so clear, Olive's hands curling up round mine.

I guess that is the point at which I know I will not be going up to S-Mountain with Jack this year, nor any other year. In some profound way, I am done. I know now that the next I will hear tell of Olive is when she is laid in the ground.

Somehow I have survived enough, scrambled myself up into some sort of woman, maybe not the kind that can hold forth in the coffeehouse, nor be brilliant or brainy or beautiful, but I have built a life, with Jack, surely, and with my heart. With my heart I have made a wedding of past and present, and I have been resilient and brave, but I have also been worn down and pockmarked by memory, by isolation, by unfulfilled dreams of life in the big leagues, and it comes to me, gazing reflectively on my own hands, that they have a work to do now, a work

wholly their own, an artistry just about me. My hands fit well in Jack's, and that is a fine thing for a woman to do. Beyond that, however, my hands are learning to hold a pencil and make a word, a looped round word, the word of my life. Perhaps that is the way I will travel now, a wordsmith, a crafter of language, of the things I wanted to say, and the things that lay sleeping in these hands of mine. Olive's hands live in mine, but deep in the marrow, my own name is animated and itching to play out. So it's up beyond the garden I sit, with my pencil and cheap notebook, pulling out word after word, telling the beads of me.

Was it right? Was it normal? Was it twisted?

Does it really make a difference?

Jack has gone fishing. This time I am down under the trees alone.

Nineteen

SOMETIME BEFORE MIDNIGHT I gave her a dram of whiskey to help ease it. I was only nineteen years old, a small girl yet, in overalls, my hand shaking as I offered the shot glass to her thin scaling lips. She was old and brittle and fragile on the blasted-out sofa damp with mildew on the screen-porch. A milky television with a coat hanger antenna faded in and out of reception. The rifle was propped in a corner by the sad aluminum storm door.

She was yellowed with jaundice, her old belly swollen like some bizarre pregnancy. The grandfather picked up the rifle, stuck his foot to the door and cleanly shot four holes in the mailbox.

"They don't bring the damn check," he said in the moonlight. "The fucking postman steals the check."

I took the icy hand of her into my own warm paw. Her nails were blackened.

"I'll shoot you woman," the grandfather said. "I'll shoot you if it will help."

He was drunk. He had been tipping since sunset.

"Put the gun down, Poppy," I said low and quiet and steady. "There's coffee in on the stove."

"She's got a right," he slurred.

"Not from you," I said. "From God, and God alone. Now be a man and come sit here by your woman and behave like a man ought. I'm going to the garden to piss, and don't you shoot me nor nothing else."

I took his shoulders and manipulated him into the chair at her side.

Something glinted in the darkness of the garden. At first I thought it was the eye of a critter, a raccoon or skunk, but as my perception grew stronger I saw it was too silvery. Slowly the form of the grandfather's mandolin took shape, lying in the weeds and vines of the tomato plants. I took it up. It was swelled and warped with dampness, but I tuned it deftly and began to play a long-ago lament from the old country, slow and wistful with a grief that was stoic yet sad. I closed my eyes and played. I knew she was listening.

Roe Emerson

ROE EMERSON WAS JUST A GIRL. Every day the clock ticked on the wall, and Roe was just a girl. It was in nowhere, close to the river, a beat-up bucket of a house where nothing happened, where very little happened, where ever so much was cheap and dear and mean, especially summertime, where the river was hot and steamy blue, and even the pages of the Sears Roebuck Catalogue were damp and warped with humidity and the paper dolls cut from it were damp and warped and sticky with humidity. A loner girl, a roaming child; the train depot and the long curve of blistering rails, the Convent Orphanage behind the cast iron fencing, children run amok that she had no access to, and the deep thick air under the bridge of the estuary where she slapped about in the mud and ooze; all of this got to be her world in summer solitude, a line of joined paper dolls, women in girdles linked to men in suits and ties and children in faded Easter clothes from last Spring, all warped up now in summer, all disoriented with Easter gluttony, riffled and lined up under the bridge, tattered down to dull like Roe her own self.

A quiet child. Nothing to bother about, that Roe.

And no one did, hardly, as every day the clock ticked on the wall and the paper-people stood sentinel on the bubbled glass windowsill save for when they were taken on an airing to the cavern under the bridge.

It was a vast world for a little girl.

A roaming child of a girl.

She's touched. That was the rumor among the river folk.

She'd heard it from between her shoulder blades, but she had no notion of what it meant. She was but a barefoot little wick of a soul, roaming the train yard, on fire with the inexpressible, words like skittering bats forming in her mind: Today they will hold a First Holy Communion Mass at the Orphanage, and the seven year olds can go, but I must wait and bide my time and study yet six months, whatever six months is and then have my turn, only we have no veil and I don't want one anyhow because Jesus was so poor with bare feet and born to a barn and so I should receive him such, barefoot and ragged like Him.

Her mother had stroked out very young and gone to mute and with a drooped left hand. Her father smoked a pipe. He lowered the crab nets every morning at 5 AM no matter what the tides. Her little brother, called only by the name Ridiculous, was Lord of the Hudson, a gabby boy who shined shoes already at five, grubby with boot polish: that Ridiculous, he's going to grow up to be a rich man someday, is what she heard said.

She was touched, and Ridiculous was going to be rich. It was already set in stone, and there you have it.

Roe Emerson slouched around at the cast iron fence, kicking up dust, hands in her pockets, threadbare corduroy, looking up on occasion, to see orphans lining up after play. The nuns were airy and breezy and not sweaty or thick. Nothing drooped on them. They had voices like Irish pennywhistles. They were very motherly, like hens with chicks. They were like storybook hens with chicks.

Ramone Keeps Going West

The Other Side of the River

Long ago means nothing really. But the river was there. The river is the marker of my life, and I have always known where it was. It taught me left from right, north from south, east from west, and always the sun has set on the other side, on THOSE mountains, not on mine.

Other people live oriented to THAT side. I don't go there anymore. Long ago means bad stuff. It's not nothing really, it's bad, bad stuff that went down over there with people over there, and some are dead and some are so forgotten by me that they are blurs in the head.

Ramone wouldn't think so. He would be upset, for he lives and loves over there, and feels a foreigner on my side. He comes over the bridge in a car and keeps looking over his shoulder the whole time he is here, for the couple of hours he spends here, he looks over his shoulder, just the same as I would on his turf. His brooks and forests are different. He knows them as intimately as I know mine. He lays his moccasins lovingly over certain stone walls and rocks and wetlands over there that I no longer remember much or love at all.

It's what keeps us apart.

I can't leave home. You know it. You know all I say. I stay here. I have always stayed right here. Close to the river. On my side.

I'm not an adventurer. I've been over those cliffs, long ago, which now means nothing.

One time a man met me at the base of a mountain with a shotgun pointed at me. There was a chain across a dirt road, leading up to his mountain, and I had been picking fiddleheads down along through there. He was a wild man, and I was a wild girl. I stood with my feet splayed in the dust.

"Keep movin'," he said low.

I put my face down, studying the ground.

"You hearing me," he said. "Don't pretend different."

I shuffled away. I felt him hot all down my backbone.

That was over on Ramone's side of the river. That was long ago. I had been sleeping up on the bluffs with Ramone, sleeping on the hard rocks of thick granite slabbings. We were too stupid then to seek soft forest land. We were playing at some game that we were unhappy about. You know, like young people play house in the outdoors. We were loving each other without any wisdom at all in our brains. I brought Ramone the fiddleheads and we ate them, but I did not tell him of the mean wild man. I only told myself, this is Ramone's side of the river. The side that goes west and west and west into the setting sun and slides down and dies.

West and West

So Ramone and I die, over and over again, yet our friendship resurrects, year after year. He goes west and west and west, and then comes faltering east every year or so, flapping in like a homing pigeon, nesting down for a day or two, borrowing that car and crossing that bridge nervously, shyly, with fluttering

wings and heart, to patter down the steps to me and pull me up out of my gloom to go look. We go look, trembling, to the vast western expanse of his side from my side, clutching at a rail, getting all red and windblown and chapped and drizzled on—that always seems to be the weather when he comes and pulls me up out of my gloom and we stand gazing at the other shore, at his shore. His hand folds down over mine, and we remember our decades of friendship, all the quirky funny bits and pieces and the sad profound bits and pieces and all the places I have lived over here, the funky brittle falling down places where he has always come to pull me out of the gloom that is life at typewriters and guitars and poverty and coffee. We have eaten vats of spaghetti and salted hard boiled eggs and listened to a million hours of record albums and made words and made silences and made compassion in our crippled ways, stabbing in the dark at what it means to forge the searing iron of friends at various ages and what means what at each stop and fork in the road of whoever is changing and veering off crazily at 17, 22, 30, 41, 50, and marking milestones with love's twisted overgrowth of vines and brambles and always the river, his side, my side.

He calls. From all over the world, he calls. We make pithy small phrases that break our hearts but mean everything. New Zealand, Israel, Albania, Scotland, Turkey, China, California; Ramone calls and we stutter and hem and haw and then before I know it, some day comes and I hear his slapping down the steps to pull me out of the cement gloom.

I stay here. I have a husband now. They stare at the football and I fumble with the coffeepot, and it's lousy tasting, so I kiss

my husband, and Ramone and I go out to the brewery where he drinks dark beer and I drink real coffee and we talk of old days, and what's doing over on his shore, and what's the writing, and what's the folk music and what's the relationship scene for single Ramone and the married scene for married me. How's the tone, how's the mood, how's the sadness or gladness or the latest precious possession that we will look upon with disdain as we window shop the town where Ramone keeps one eye over his shoulder, this not being his side, and therefore the dark and insecure side, and the anxious to go back to his side looking, over his shoulder, Ramone.

We exchange manuscripts.

We hug.

He starts the borrowed car.

He waves out the window to me and my husband.

Ramone goes west and west and west, all the way around the earth.

Failure to Engage

Failure to engage. It's what I have, what I do best, what happens to me, my frustration, my sorrow. I am a failure to engage. Invisible. Abandoned. Defective in this area.

I have been in severe physical danger many, many times in my life. Wilderness dangers have always abounded, hairy situations, split-second decision-making moments, and I have pulled through, almost each and every time without panic, though some had that element. Why is it that I engage death, but not life? Death pays attention to me. Death dogs me in the

woods and water of mother earth, but people shrug at the mere grunge of the sight of me. How come?

I've been asking that question all my little life.

Assertiveness. Failure to be assertive. Failure to engage.

Look! But not many do, and when they do, it doesn't seem to interest them, this thing that I am.

But Ramone looks.

Ramone has always looked.

At the Psychiatrist

Sitting WORDLESS across the table from the psychiatrist.

WORDLESS. I don't KNOW why I did it. I don't know ANYTHING, at least not anything that I care to SAY. Why do I even have to BE HERE? I'm sick of this shit, this PICK, PICK, PICKING. It's none of their business why I did it. It didn't hurt THEM. It didn't have anything to do with THEM. I didn't hurt anybody but my own SELF. My body. I have a right. IT'S MY BODY! Nobody can MAKE me take or do or talk any damn thing. Slouching. Folding my arms now. Clock ticking on the wall over his head.

Pressing my head to the cold enamel edge of the bathtub as I kneel on the floor tiles. I close my eyes and feel how good it feels. It feels so, so good. It feels so good that my throat goes tight and gobbed up with tears that are not going to flow, but the tight thickness of the gob of tears feels so good stuck there in that aching way that they do when they don't get released. I LOVE THIS. THIS IS ONE OF MY FAVORITE THINGS.

TOUCHDOWN! And the crowd goes wild!

"I'm sorry, but our time is up..."

Hallelujah.

In the night I sit in a camp chair out on the ice, fishing through a hole under the astounding full moon. I guess vaguely that I have a headache, but oh, the yellow perch are hung from the stringer over the back of the chair and it's so damn QUIET, for once. Eating fish is good. A bump on the head is good. Lonesomeness is good, like a good, good friend. Ice is good, like cold enamel.

Up to Snuff

So Ramone is this famous person now. And I'm this invisible person that he comes to drag up out of the gloom every year or so, and that's established, only the thing is, we are both lonesome people, and we suffer from that, which is why I figure we bother about each other, because love is rare, and even if we don't really know what it is, we bumble our way through this love-friendship like a hit or miss mad car chase, trying to connect up good and proper, forever lacking poise.

It is like this:

If Ramone gets a bad glass of beer, he calls the waiter and sends it back.

If I buy some shitty little shirt that fits all wrong and the threads are fraying right off the rack, I throw the receipt and the shirt in the garbage can.

Ramone says it, and I stuff it down and down deeper yet.

Only on one thing do we agree: we know we are stunningly intelligent and therefore unable to connect up to most of the rest of the world, not out of snobbery, but out of true frustration and that devil, boredom.

He's high tech. I'm stone age. We're smart dummies, really; I mean that; we are cluelessly brainy, only Ramone can globe-travel and be famous, and I can stare at a blank white wall all afternoon strumming a two-bit ukulele, and those are the sum of our gifts. We aren't fascinating folk, but would that open our doors anyhow? Does it matter? We are so damn beautiful, but you can't talk either one of us into that one. Of course, sometimes we tip that on its head, and say, oh, we are geniuses, fuck the world.

Isn't that always the problem with lonesomeness? Standards?

But he is not here now. He is off to some cold country, something like Greenland or someplace, delivering a speech, and I am here in the gloom, and my husband has gone a'hunting, literally, for the season of Autumn is dazzlingly upon us, only I've got the emotional sniffles, the blocked up sinuses of feeling and awareness just in from a walk and didn't notice a fucking thing. A great ramble round the ghost town, and all I saw the whole time was my own feet, and a tree root or two humping up the sidewalk like the living in them was battling every odd.

Yeah, me too.

Sometimes Something Drastic is Called For

Slumps have to be gotten over with. Emotions, like tree roots in sidewalks, have to rise at some point, and the great wheel of upheaval must eventually take place. I have been waiting patiently, but the natural, organic process is not working out so well. I figure that over a month was long enough to be encased in cement expecting a miracle. Time for action, I told myself, be

it of the violent sort or not, I am become fearless. Bring it on. Ramone stands at a podium somewhere on earth, my husband sits in a tree-stand somewhere on earth, but why is no mean old man pointing a shotgun at me to get my goat, or why am I in no sense of danger, which is the thrilling thing that blows like a volcano from deep within and revs the engine of my inner life?

Push the river. It really doesn't flow by itself. Not this time. I need debris. I need all kinds of crap. I need a crack up. Nothing less will do at this time.

So I do the scariest, most dangerous thing in the whole world I can think of. The thing that annihilates all crap, and freaks the crap right out of me, that thing that a human stares down until a human disperses and breaks up into all the bits and pieces of this damn human situation. It's like staring into love, intimate love, up in the face love, not balking, just gazing straight, no left, no right, just like eyes open hard looking and looking and looking. I do the freakiest, scariest thing ever.

I PRAY.

I SIT DOWN IN ONE SPOT AND I PRAY.

Not for anything. Not for anyone. Not for my own self. Not for deliverance. Not for a big emotion-rush.

I look at the Godliness of God. I sit in my body, looking at the holy Godliness of God, the Lover of all lovers. I say,

"Pour. Pour it onto me. Pour it onto me, God, until I am loved into oblivion."

The hardest thing. The hardest thing my little human self has ever done. The danger of all dangers— the one sure to put out all my need to be loved. To receive love. Not strokes or warm fuzzies or good sex or kind words or some strong bear hug or

being shot with a bullet or stabbed to fucking death or drowned out by the river that has an east and a west or cursed at or spit at or told I am brilliant or told I am this or that or the other.

Nobody can do this. Ramone can't fix this, nor my husband, nor solitude, nor walks about town, nor grizzly bears, nor psychiatrists.

I don't pretend to be fluid. But I am a daredevil. That's why I'm sitting here praying.

The Friar in the Woods

WE HAVE NO LUCK to go up there for the copperheads that fortify the reservoir stone walls nor the mange-ridden coyotes that roam the woods up there we don't go no more in summer because we are not swift of foot no more and our eyes ache to see that land up the mountain but we don't go. We used to go with the gun but not now. Now we have to stay below where the sluice runs a wild stream down for us to catch the rainbow trout and be contented with all that and we give them to the old Brother who lives in the hermitage after we have cleaned them up nice for him only two or three at a time because he don't eat much no more out of religious sensibility. We have seen him on fire burning for God and we don't much disturb him except for to bring him fish and sometimes he sits in the sun outside his hut and receives us nicely with a kind word of truth that tells us of ourselves and our own potential. He is a most wondrous old Friar that way. The bottoms of his feet are like thick moccasins encrusted with skin and dirt and we like him so very much.

He will take a catfish too in deep summer when it is hot and the land is dreary but he is never dreary for the fire in him makes him radiant always and never goes out. The palms of his hands are always deep red and sometimes bloody and I never say to him about it. I know he is a sanctified man. Once I gave him pipe tobacco and he sat and smoked for an afternoon and his face was very pleasant and beautiful as he lit the day with cherry flavored incense coming from his clothes and wafting

through the lower part of the mountain. I don't know his name if he has one.

He's got a sacred heart all right. Blood drips from his fingertips and flows off into me and in the night when I lay down in the tent with my lover I think of him not far away and I know he knows we are sharing his area of forest and he is okay with that with us with that we are lovers and maybe he opens his cracked up old blasted out prayer book with the binding all shot and the leather all greasy and says the litany of us to Jesus.

He's been there before us many years. We don't say nothing to anyone about him and most don't know he is even there except when dopers come from the city to seek sanctuary and stumble on his place and soon retreat once they see him at his occupation. Not much else but rare hikers and what my lover calls hippie tree-huggers and they skirt him and move on as if reverently afraid. We know him though only for his kindness and for the fish he likes and we know him a long time since we were very young but he was there long before we were even very young.

In the night my lover says, that old boy ain't long for this world.

And I say, he's here for a long time yet, but already he lives in Paradise, so either way makes no matter.

The Wooden Flute

A LAMENT. This was what the wooden flute yielded on that summer day. The Hudson was steaming, its banks putrid with August. August was thrumming up waves of light that could be seen lamenting the brutality of the humid sun; August was vibrating in some obscene way, coursing through the veins of the air in currents of rank and offensive odors and sights. Eyeless fish washed up in the clay; the river children were listless, up to their ankles and bottoms as they squatted in the gray waters, pools of oil in kaleidoscopic colors surrounding them; waterfowl shit was swelling in the heat. Bluebottle flies. Odor such as only the river could gasp up, unique as a particular woman's scent to a particular man; familiar that way, deeply intimate to the river people of that river town. They knew her, that river, from birth; her ways were stamped on their foreheads and strapped to their arms like religion. In August the river was always a lament, a dirge, in the blue Dorian mode of summer's thickest heat. The very wood of the flute was bloated and hard to manage as she tried to make it mourn. It gave a tired and swollen sound, a weird and haunting sound, appropriate for what it was trying to convey; a depressed sound for a depressed time.

It was noon. Oppression was on the land, on the water of the river. The convent bells struck the hour. The woman squeezed and droned a lament out of the flute, there on the riverbank, next to the train station, a lament as desperate and run down as the place and season, a lament like a sad piece of littered

newsprint that has barely strength to waft across the dusty street. A limp and flaccid lament, sent out over the water from the damp teat of her flute; a reflection on all that was the world at that moment, a comment, perhaps even a lullaby, to soothe the panicked river as it lay dying in the heat.

The woman understood, the way only a native of the river could, that this noontime suffering would rally, come dusk, come midnight, would pull itself up by its bootstraps and cause the Hudson to shimmer in the sunset and moonlight, when the fish would again bite and the crabs scurry, and there would be food once more from what was now her tired store. She would open her arms in the night, this river, but now, at noon, she would only languish painfully while the convent bells pealed, and the wooden flute made a counterpoint call and response.

Weary. The land, the water, the children, the birds.

No solace, save for the mournful sound of the flute, on which the woman played a sorrowful tune.

And all the air gone blue.

Up in the town proper, an appreciative audience was clapping for the folksingers. This audience was glad for the air conditioner that roared over the door. They were glad for glasses of iced coffee, glad for the good cheer being served up by the young couple behind their guitars. The young folksingers were educational, brisk, jolly. They sang river chanties and clever ditties about the history of the great Hudson. They recited vignettes and heroic snippets of the river culture. They had come up from Manhattan, this bright young man and woman, had ridden the train to come and entertain.

As noon struck, they launched into their weekend afternoon offering, hoping to see their tip jar swell.

They were college students, the two of them. They were bursting at the seams with knowledge of the river's environment, its past, the songs that had been sung on it over generations. And to the people of the town who sat and heard, these young folksingers were reflecting back what was already in the bones of the town, as if they were being shown a slide show of their own native infancy. The songs they heard resonated; the songs were already simmering in the blood of these people of the audience. Therefore the applause was one of enthusiastic recognition, as if they were applauding themselves, slapping their own backs with pride.

They were enjoying themselves, the singers and the audience. A pleasant camaraderie had been struck.

She had bought the flute in a junk-shop in the town many years ago. She had paid four dollars for it. Many people had played it before her; the mouthpiece had been worn and oily. The wood was dry and brittle to the touch, and the flute had been painted hastily and garishly with red and yellow designs. There were hairline cracks running from several of the finger holes.

She had tended it lovingly, rubbing it down with lemon oil, painting it with a rich black oil-based enamel. Because she had loved it, it had served her well in turn. They had been together many years, the woman and her flute. They knew each other intimately and skillfully. It was now a true river flute for a true river woman. It had seen her through cold nights of fishing and hot nights of fishing. It had tramped with her up and down the

banks, along the train tracks; it had slept in the car with her and nestled under the stars with her. It was a flute that knew how to journey and how to be at home. It was neat and un-self-conscious, an artless little flute. It was the one thing owned by the woman that she prized. When she was not playing it, she wore it on a string around her neck.

In the coffeehouse the young woman read an entry from Henry Hudson's diary. She read of green water, of the thick perfume coming from the vegetation of the river. She read of sturgeon, so large, of mussels, great mountains of them on the beaches. The audience settled into the rhythm of her voice. A peacefulness came over the room, and a longing. It was the longing for the pristine, and for the primal. In their minds the noble Indians came into view, shy and dignified beings, otherworldly, graceful as does. In their minds the Palisades rose up majestically, and all about was green, green, and sweet, sweet. The young man segued into a poem, causing a collective sigh to rise in the coffeehouse, a magic moment of transportation. It made the people of the town sit tall in their heritage. They were being told the story of themselves and this thrilled them and made them docile and childlike under the voice of the young man. They sipped cold coffee and nibbled pastry, and their eyes grew dreamy. They remembered, collectively, events that they had not witnessed firsthand, but that were their common ground. They felt that all the hard edges of their town were softened for this space of time, that goodwill prevailed on the sidewalks outside. The audience grew tender, courteous. When the woman began to sing, some

of them could be seen singing with her, softly, more gently than they thought they had been capable of.

The woman let the flute come to rest on its string between her breasts. She cupped her hands and lit a cigarette. She stood ankle deep in the tepid water of the river, gazing across to the other side. The air was dead still. The air was a dense and heavy thing, hard to manage. The air was blue, a blue haze, milky as a cataract. Mother earth was old, sister river was old. The very air was old and stale as an old person's breath. It was hot. It was close and hot. Her shirt was wet to her back, ringed at the armpits. Her hair was stuck to her neck. Her face was red with the exertion or living through this afternoon. Her face was tired and old. She was as worn and old as the river; she was as ancient as the river.

They were happy after the show, the young couple. They had made some money, had a good time. They liked this river town. They took a taxi to the train station at the river, and found they would have awhile to wait. They went into the bar across the street and came out with a couple of beers and a paper plate loaded with French fries smothered in brown gravy. Balancing the food and drink and their guitar cases, they picked their way over the tracks and sat down on a rickety bench by the water. The heat was oppressive, but their spirits were high. They were young, and it took them some time to truly notice their surroundings; the dead fish, the hungry looking children sitting in the water, the bird-shit and the litter, the young people, so different from them, smoking reefer on the far side of the

ragged beach. Slowly, very slowly, the mood shifted in them. They grew quiet, perhaps spooked a bit; they grew nervous. They felt a quiet guilt steal over them, as if they had no right here, drinking and eating and being happy. They felt too prosperous, too optimistic, too intelligent to be in this place; a certain amount of shame stole over them.

"Jesus," the man whispered. "This is another world down here. I feel like I've landed in a foreign country."

"I didn't see this when we first got here," the woman said, gazing out at the water, afraid to make any eye contact. "Do you think we should wait in the station?" "I don't know. Hell, what are we being so freaky about? Just act naturally. Here, have a fry."

"I'm not comfortable here," she said. "Maybe we ought to —"

Suddenly the dead air was penetrated by the sound of the reedy wooden flute. Once again the old woman was playing a lament. It wafted out on the afternoon blueness, mixing with the scent of reefer and foul river water.

The woman sat bolt upright.

"God! Do you hear that? God, how magnificent! Where the hell is it coming from? It's so eerie. It's so eerie and beautiful. Who could be playing that?"

The man put his hands on his knees and strained forward, listening.

"Someone very real, all right. That's real, authentic music if I ever heard it. Wow."

They began to look around. Their eyes swept the shoreline, taking in the river folk, the old, the young, the people in

between. The man ducked his head and pointed out with a jerk of his chin.

"There," he said.

The old woman stood up to her ankles in the grimy river. It was as if she was coaxing the sun to go down, playing it a sad lullaby to ease it on its way over the mountains of the western shore.

The young woman leaned forward on her elbows as she sat on the bench, studying the back of the old one playing the flute. She was beginning to understand something in that singular moment. She was beginning to understand that, as much as she wanted to find her own self in the old woman's stance, in the old woman's music, she could not. For the first time, the young woman was encountering a world thoroughly and completely closed to her. Not just alien, but emphatically closed. This was not a frustration, but, rather, a deep sense of grief, in fact, a real grieving within the young woman's heart. She felt it in the core of her system like a blow. She felt that the very river she had sung of all afternoon up in the town was saying no to her. It was as if the river was saying no, you do not know me, you cannot know me, not as a mother, for you are not born of me, have not been raised by me, and you cannot cross the line into me, not like these ones, not like this old woman; I am not intrinsic to you. You must forever stand on the outside, singing of me, but not with me. You, young woman, are outside the vibration of me. You and I are strangers who will never be intimate.

Hearing this, deep in her system, the young woman gasped. She made a short hiccup of sound, incomprehensible, and

clapped her hand over her mouth. Something inside her wanted to howl out, out over the limpid water, as if she were the very lament pouring out of the old woman's flute. She was struck down with sadness, there on the bench. Her spirit was mourning, as if mourning the very essence of all she had ever believed about herself, as if mourning her authenticity.

She felt shattered and disoriented in that moment, listening to the old woman's wooden flute.

She felt that she would cry out.

She stood. She stood up and her fists were clenched at her sides.

The old woman was deeply aware that someone was watching her back. She did not look around behind her for a long while. She played on, as if in a trance, while she felt some stranger's eyes bore holes in her spine of steel. She played from that strong spot, always, and this was no different, despite the intrusion. She played true, true to the river, true to herself, in a straightforward line of lamenting, in a bond between her and the river, a pact that kept them trysting there no matter who or what would desire to intervene. When the lament was done, in all its sadness and longing, then the woman let the flute drop on its string between her breasts, and she turned. Her gaze immediately found that of the young woman's, and their eyes locked in a profound way. Each stood, one before a bench, one ankle deep in the river. They looked across the distance into one another's eyes as if in recognition, as if they had knowledge of each other instantly. There was neither judgment nor sizing up in the old woman's watchfulness. Despite that fact, the young woman's face reddened with a blush of shame and

anxiety. Her mouth parted in a little breath, her shoulders flew on up like a threatened bird's, and her fists clenched yet tighter. She felt sweat trickle in places on her body. It was as if she flinched, or squirmed under the eyes of the old woman. She felt belittled. Most of all, she felt betrayed. She felt betrayed by the very river itself. Yet the old woman was clearly not condemning. No, the old woman was merely looking. Why then, was this young woman in such pain? Perhaps it was because she perceived indifference staring her in the face. She was young; she did not tolerate indifference well. But in a second, in an instant, she began to turn and perceive that indifference was not the issue at all. The old woman was not indifferent, nor was she curious. She was just looking. Her eyes were not passive, nor were they passionate. It was the simple, bare-bones neutrality of the eyes that was causing such an unnerving in the young woman. She saw that this was how it was; she saw that the river was in the old woman's eyes, telling her that this was simply how things were. It was the nothingness and the everything of all that vast river, staring at her, making her want to howl out.

She wanted to catch her train with her partner and never come back. She wanted to reconstruct her inner world, her folk singing, her studies, her love of the river lore.

She knew this would now be impossible.

The young woman knew that a line had been crossed.

A lament. This was the true song of the river. An old woman stood ankle deep in the Hudson and played a wooden flute. Before her the river lay quiet in the dense heat of August.

Lois' Amazement

I AM GRIEVOUSLY AMAZED when I lay out the lines of where the hell I have been.

Perhaps it is a fertile time for higher ground.

Living in this little shed in the mountains of upstate New York with an isolation delicious and bigger than my very sense of inner soul. Living the marginal life of nowhereville, smoking a corncob pipe in the middle of a forest of dew-wet and profound nothingness. Nothing. Me, a pipe, amazement, a sick past, and a present-time soft mellowing in my marrow. Something native. Primordial. I know this. I knew this by the time I was four.

We never knew how to do anything real, like real people did. We were stupid that way, or backwards, or simply unexposed to life as it went in the real world. We just stayed off to the side on our own and tried to not be seen or noticed. Me, I knew we would get taken away. I knew that early on.

They lived in split level, ranch style, Tudor stucco, yard primrose two car garage TV blue light and we studied them but they were alien to what we could understand.

In time, we got some money. We had no idea what to do. So we made a big house and lots of cars and oriental rugs but we were still covered with mud and laughed at and not spoken to.

It's hard to imagine that I left school, left the convent, too, left a jail cell, left some boyfriends, burned some bridges, won some contests, lost some catfights and still get out of bed and stand up in the morning.

We never knew nothing.

We used to be proud and ashamed both at the same time. I think we just wanted time to stay still, like unwound clocks.

The priest said, homosexuals and people living out of wedlock and divorced people are bad, wrong, sinful, and need to be cut out unless they come for our assistance in confession.

Our Lady of Sorrows.

Our Lady of Sorrows, pray for us.

Tom-tom. Tom-tom. Ta-tuh. Ta-tuh. Do you hear it? Do you hear the ground? Do you know the root of yourself?

She tapped the table again. Ta-ta-ta-tuh.

That's the way we go, she said. Do you know the root of yourself?

We say, "The Psychology of Religion" — and what the hell does that mean?

Going Away

LIMPING FROM THE FIGHT, disjointed in the sockets of my life. Fell down the sinkhole in my own way.

Popped a shirt button, bloodied my lip.

School days in the classroom of the Lord. The monastic way of sandals slapping down marbled

hallways. Beehives and rosary-making. Wine cellar casks. Study. The chanting of the Hours.

Limping from the fight. Tangled in the ring. Chickens in the rainy dooryard.

I was going to go away, but this is too beautiful to leave. I have a fever in me for the gorgeous transparency of liquid intoning when I hear the drums start. Something tissue thin is all the remains between me and him.

No one knows why, and that will always be the truth.

Maybe you're deep.

Maybe you're dark.

And intelligent, mystical, shy, quiet, loaded with language, but you still will never know the why of the world, the sift of the earth, the measurements of pain or grief or sinew. We live like wrinkled newsprint, like a game of kick the can. It's glorious. It's Hallelujah land. It's all so dim and mysterious.

What do you make of hurting?

What do you say to numbness?

How do you erotically enfold profound river depths?

Who are your archetypes?

I waited for you under the stone arches. I waited for you in the burning incense before the lit tapers. I waited, ironing the altar cloths.

I really don't want to go away.

Down the worn path a farmer weaves his body back and forth in rhythm with a scythe. He works the field like I work my prayerbook. Yet he is so much more graceful at it, so much more one with his field than I with mine. If God were but one blade of timothy I could put him in the gap of my teeth and carry him round all the day, savoring his aroma and tasting his sweetness, and no matter what I did I would still taste God, no matter what I did, no matter what wanted to distract, no matter what mundane or tiresome business earth flung up at me, God would be in the gap of my teeth, his aroma wafting up all about my face. I would bend and weave like the farmer, in a cloud of God, and it would be no mind if I went or stayed.

The Hunting Beagle

I GOT CAUGHT. It was all the trouble, that I got caught at the very thing I had not done. Falsely accused of stirring up the prized hunting beagle, the one that sat in the basement back by the furnace minding its own business until it was time to take it out to tear up the woods and waters fetching ducks and rabbits and whatever game was the damn game of the day, and here I was accused of exciting the thing with play until it was off its feed and half off its rocker. It slobbered after the red rubber ball and the stuffing of a baby doll and the shiny tinfoil of old Christmas decorations stowed down there in the cellar. It shit a minefield of lumps all about the concrete in the darkness and dampness down there until old war-daddy came clumping down the steps with a strap of thick leather and I thought I was a goner, only he handed the strap to me, and said, "Walk the dog."

I didn't even know the dog. The dog was a total stranger to my seven year old self. It had been there only three days and had evidently cost War-Daddy an arm and a leg, whatever that meant to me in my puzzled state over most every expression that came my way in those days, words flung about, words strung across the cover of a school textbook: Developing Mathematical Skills, which I thought read that the Devil was loping my way with some sick notion of numbers in combinations which seemed absurd, or phrases like: there are children starving all over the world for that venison you are pushing around your plate like a toy. What, were they all

coming up the dirt road to get it? Out the window above the mother's head, I saw not one of them.

I didn't even know the dog. War-daddy clipped the strap to it and said, "Walk the dog in the woods. Go."

We went up and out the wooden storm door that opened to the world of green that threatened to grow right into the very house, and I tried to figure out how to walk a dog. The dog started right off to walk me. We went down through the delicate white birches, and the sassafras, I scratched the dickens out of myself being walked by the dog through the most vicious thorns and brambles. Then, in some random flash of a moment, this nameless dog hit a scent, and we were off, and my arm was no more than a charcoal stick drawing made during 'art and folksinging' at school, just the slenderest of lines with a little fist wrapped round the leather, and I was racing and pounding at the forest floor and sweating and my nose running with snot and on it went endlessly till the woods were nothing but a blur when it came to me that I could do one simple thing. I could open my hand.

I opened my hand and fell to my bottom and the only blur left was the priceless hunting beagle going, going, going, going, out of my sight, gone, dog, gone.

I went back to school a week later.

Today we will learn to form some of our first simple sentences in both print and cursive script," the teacher announced, handing round oddly lined newsprint type sheets of paper, with dashed lines in between solid ones and I did not know at all what that meant. We had peeling black leaded

pencils. "Put your name neatly at the top right-hand corner," the teacher said.

I bravely licked my pencil and began, but halfway through my name came a great gurgling sound from up my belly and a thick feeling in my throat and I barely had time to realize that a dandy of an upchuck was on the rise and no stopping it. It poured over the desk and globbled off the edges.

It was the mother who came to pick me up.

He's found the dog," she said as I climbed trembling into the car. "The dog's okay. He sold it back to Reynolds this morning. Said it was too high strung for that kind of money."

The mother looked sideways at me as she steered the car. She looked sideways at me and smiled.

Jasper Pond

I'M LOOKING AT A BOOK at the bottom of Jasper Pond. It lies embedded in watery plants, wet pages woven into the rushes and the sand and the muck and the blackened snail shells, and the pages move underwater like living things in my blurred vision. It is startling, to be swimming along the shore and come across this sea creature that turns into a book. My yellowed arm stretches down through the silty waters to reach it, yet I stop, hesitating to disturb such a disturbing sight. The pages move silently, eerily, they bend in slow motion on the floor of the pond. It is not a matter of who threw this book here, or why, only of the what of it. What book is this? I want to know, yet I do not want to disturb such a sleeping beauty as a book sunken in the plants and algae of Jasper Pond.

It's a waterlogged copy of *A MOVEABLE FEAST*, by Ernest Hemingway. I sit cross-legged in the dense woods of the shore, sunlight hitting the pages intermittently in the play of forest canopy, and flip the thickened dripping leaves of soaked paper. I know this book extremely well. It is an old friend of mine. Many years have I read it, my old worn copy, with a different cover, this is a different illustration, this is somebody else's copy, it bears no inked in name of the original owner, but here they all are, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, Hemingway's wife and Mr. Bumby, the ski slopes of the Alps, the Paris coffeeshops, the sharpening of pencils, the racetrack, the prose of Hemingway in Paris self-explained in great detail, the thrill

of Hemingway's prose self-explained, the rush up the spine of me sitting cross-legged in the forest with a book that is almost a lover to me, as if I had pulled my lover up from the drowned depths of Jasper Pond.

What went wrong with me? I wrote a book once. Many decades ago I wrote a book, to fine reviews, to great applause, to fifteen minutes of famous life in the fast lane. What the hell was that, my walk away? My simple and defiant shrug into the forest? Perhaps it was this:

A man is passing down the road that we have not seen before. Around here there are no strangers; strangers here are an event. So we mark him, this man, we mark him and take note. In a moment, we know his clothes, his shoes, the cut of his hair, the knuckles of his hands. We know him in a minute as if we had seen a photograph of him for decades. Each of us on the porch feels something different about him. The men are wary and ready to fight. The women hang back feeling threatened. The kids are curious and bashful yet loaded with intrigue.

To me this is a movie, something seen over and over forever in imagination, on television, in novels. This is the stuff of Americana. Rural, sort of superstitious and outrageous all at the same time, something romantic and hillbilly. Something that should be taking place in black and white with background music.

Obviously, something is supposed to happen.

Nothing will, though. No one will say a single word.

The man goes on. Attitudes are born, curiosity is raised, and the man goes on. He passes the porch and starts to grow

smaller. There is nothing for a long way; he will have to walk at least three miles to get to anything.

Me, I'm in the window, braiding my hair, looking through the screen, twenty-seven years old, binding my braids with rubber bands. I watch the slow gait of this man. He is old.

I am the quiet and kind one. Of everyone in this house, I am the sort of one who would go out in the road with a glass of water. I would defy all the meanness in this house and do that. Always. I have that. I have that reputation. I am not respected for it. I am, rather, rebuked, ridiculed and shamed. In fact, the household is convinced I am demented. They do not approve of defects of any kind, but demented just might be the highest on their list. I will be hurt badly if I fetch a glass. I know all about consequences.

I go to the back of the house, but the door hinges squeak just the same. It's about to begin now. I place a clean handkerchief over the full cold glass to keep any bugs from flying about it. He's growing smaller, but I am young and I am quick.

We walk the road, but do not know each other's names. In time he says he's bought the farmhouse and land up in the higher part of the mountain. He drinks the glass of water. He pulls a wooden recorder flute from the inside of his jacket and plays it low but not mournful, beautifully. After a while he sits on a stone wall to tie his work boot lace. He says people will come. He says the place will be a retreat. He says they will all live in love and peace.

And then I know he means the hippies.

I do not balk. I do not so much as blink. That is the way it is with me.

He has hooded hawk's eyes, of a hard icy blue. His beard flows white. He will teach yoga, he says, and guide trips. I fail at first to understand, then perceive, however dimly, what he is referring to.

"And do you like tripping out?" is what he asks me, sliding his eyes sideways, as if to take me in doubtfully, as if I could not possibly be up to tripping, such an uncool specimen, yet his look is also generous and inclusive, as if to wonder why not, to wonder how transformable I could turn out to be.

I shrug.

"I have not done that in my lifetime," I answer.

"Ah. And those are your people back there?"

"All in one way or another. They're kin, though not proper parents or siblings. I'm the family charity case, raised pretty much by the lot of them, caring pretty much for the young of theirs."

"Perhaps the servant? Perhaps earning your keep?"

I look down and scruff at the dirt of the road. Goldenrod hangs thick and heavy at the edges, and I rip a bit at it and cast it off.

"I guess that says it," he observes. "How come you stay? Twenty-seven is sort of a long time to hang in."

"I'm the dreamer," I say.

He nods. "Yes. Can't exactly fend for yourself if you're the dreamer."

"Its like that," I say simply.

"You've got good bones. Strong and lean and healthy. Dreaming agrees with you."

I laugh then. I lift up my face and laugh.

"Well, you're welcome, dreamer, once the place gets itself right. It will be good to have a dreamer for a neighbor. Who knows? You might dream a dream of us and join us."

The words sound warm, like oven-biscuits in my belly. No one has said a kindness to me in so long that my belly goes warm and my face goes hot.

The dark and overgrown trail has been reached. It is no wider than a few inches and I know it well, barely able to be traversed in deep summer, slick and treacherous in winter. The house is way up in it, not visible from the road. The trail is marked by a pocked and rusted mailbox blown down sideways to the ground, and gaping open without a door.

The man sticks out his hand in one sensual and old-fashioned gesture.

"See you round," he says.

I barely have time to touch his fingertips before he is swallowed in vegetation, the trees and overgrowth swishing back to disappear him. I stand in the road a long time, holding the empty glass.

It is what happens to us, to dreamers. We walk away from what could have been stunning, to what was stunning about us, and we go up trails to nowhere, burying ourselves in dense and purple vegetation until it twists all the destiny out of us, all based on an empty word of kindness, a cold and hollow invitation to the circus, to the fantasy-land that veers us far and

away from writing the next novel, or leaving the busted up home on a dirt road for a life of wisdom and loveliness, all because of a dazzling dangled carrot and a cold glass of water covered with a cleanly thoughtful handkerchief...

Joe in the Forest

DEEP IN THE FOREST the wild children were berrying. They had old rusted coffee cans, gleaned from the trash bins of houses out there on the periphery. They were picking fast, their grubby and bony little hands in a fever, slimed with black juice. They ate while they picked, black-lipped and hungry children. All were thin and stunted; some had shoes of varying sorts, some none. They had matted hair and ragged clothes; still, beauty had been generous with each of them. They were stunning little children, delicate and fairy-like, even the rough boys. And they were quiet. They did not fight among themselves, nor establish a pecking order, nor whine of their marginal lot in life. They were graceful, graceful as young goats, leaping away like fawns at the sound of any intruder nearby, their knobby legs strong and fast. These were the roaming children of the forest, hardly glimpsed by any outsiders in the August heat of the Hudson Valley's woodland floor, save for when they ventured, as a band, to the great river's edge, skipping over the train tracks, gliding silently as one to the water to scavenge the shoreline for anything useful, and, in their meandering, to dip in and out of the river like a flock of seagulls, their arms wide open, their feet pattering with droplets.

The brokenness of lost children. I was one. I knew helplessness, the helplessness of silence, the glory of it. Wordless, I roamed; I was a roaming child of the great woodlands, a mere myth to the world beyond. Year after year I

eluded most of mankind, a ragamuffin, a river-rat, a small girl in a wide country.

I grew.

And Joe said: "Look at that woman."

Tommy leaned over the railing of the train platform, a rickety wooden affair, and whistled under his breath.

"Now that's some kind of beat-up little looker," he said quietly.

Joe nodded.

"Can't for the life of me tell how old she is," he said. "She can't be too old. But that's one rugged beauty, all right. God damn, I'd give something for her story."

"Fisherwoman," Tommy said. "They age real quick. But yeah, she's a beauty. Think she'd even talk to us? If she's half as interesting as she looks, it could be some story-line."

"Even if we just run a picture," Joe said, starting down the creaking steps. "Man, these river towns are full of photo-ops."

I felt those men coming, just the way I have felt every human being who has ever approached me. I sniffed them on the wind, and felt the riverbank pulse under their shoes, and I heard their useless conversation almost before they could mouth their own words. Scavenger men, birds of prey. Sissy-birds, mocking-birds in sneakers, shutter-bug birds, silly, ridiculous, and intimidated by me. Eager beavers, dog-paddling through this world in search of high art.

My refuge is the forest. My refuge is the river.

My refuge is a large place inside myself.

That day I had an old soup can full of bloodworms. The stripers were running, but all I had taken in so far were a

couple of catfish and an eel. I was putting a worm on the hook when they came up, those men, and the blood ran through my fingers and dripped down to my elbow.

I thought she was hurt at first.

God, she was beautiful.

When I got up close to her, as close as I dared, I saw that it had nothing to do with taking a picture, nothing at all. I just wanted to look and look at her and get my fill. I wanted Tommy to go away, so I could just look and look. The woman was a rough and ragged creature, tattered and worn, but so magnificent, so superior; she was a true thing, standing there in rubber boots and a faded dress, with her hair in two brown cables down her back, and a face that could stop time. She was lean and muscled and very brown, a reddish brown. She was thin and strong and hard, yet soft like, well, like defeat, like the way defeat softens a soul. I don't know; my spine tingled, like a current was going through it, all up and down, and that was spooky. I kept looking at the side of her face, at those cheekbones, at the skin stretched taut over them, over the nose; I kept looking at the full brown lips, at the thick eyelids that were so broad, at the brow of her that curved wildly back almost to the temple. I kept looking at the place where her forehead was so intelligent and wise I could hardly bear it. It was uncomfortable and impossible. It was romantic in a way I did not know yet in my life how to experience decently.

Why does it always go back to you, Joe? Why does it always go back to that day?

You tried so hard to make a civilian out of me.

It's not in me, Joe.

This house you have rented is not in me. These clothes are not in me. It is not in me to cook and clean, to play house with you. It is not in me to be loved by you, to be intimate.

I stand in this kitchen and I hear the rustling of the forest.

I don't care enough, Joe, and I never will. My feet want to roam. My fingers want to drip with black juice. I want to kick at the river's edge and howl at the waning moon. The privacy of me is way too vast for you, mister. You took on far too much when you took on me. Don't ask me to be normal in your way. You don't know what you are asking.

I tell her, over and over, that she is a pure pleasure, but I can see that she takes no joy in that. This woman, this woman in my heart, who is she? And why must I love her, the all of her, and moon about her, and want to gather her so copiously into the all of me?

Now she has stood over the kitchen sink and taken the butcher knife and lobbed off her braids. She has done it matter-of-factly, as if it were routine, just part of the day, and she runs her rough fisherwoman's hands through her short hair, smiling absently up into the treetops outside the window. There is something of her that is too smart and wise and good to be insane or anything like that. I recognize her very true self as she keeps her back to me; my lady is a wild thing, and I have made the mistake of caging her. My heart sinks down inside me. I know now that when I saw her for the first time, there was already dread in me. My gut should have recoiled, but no. I ran headlong into what would and could only hurt me, because I needed to play this out, because I needed the sheer information

of her, telling me who I was, in turn. I am not just a lover of beauty; I am also a lover of trueness, of purity. And she has been nothing but true.

I want to go with her. Wherever it is that her body is telling her to go, I want to go too. Whatever she is systemically turning back toward, I want to run there with her. She is calling myself out of me. She is pointing the way.

Joe's shoes are completely inappropriate. I want to urge him to take them off, but he is so tender of foot, he would not make it. He trails farther and farther behind me, trying to keep up, trying to be game about it. I loop back to him from time to time; I feed him berries and scallions. I scoop him water from the streams. Joe is grateful. Joe is burning with some need to understand me, to know me.

I grew here. I thrived here. And I was hungry and desolate here, once upon a time. This was home. This was refuge. This is the place I was snatched from, farmed out to be educated from, to have all this drummed out of me; this place was deemed unacceptable, and I did not know why. I was educated in a whirlwind of confusion. And like a homing pigeon, I flew back, over and over, and was found over and over. No more. Now I am here to stay. No Joe will remove me by force, no man will yank me, reeling, from my place on this earth. So let him follow, let him flourish if he can. It is no business of mine.

She killed two rabbits with a handmade slingshot. She gutted them out and set them to roast on a fire. It was night. Joe was feeling glazed over, disoriented, somewhere out of right time, right space. He sat in a sort of trance, watching the fire, smelling the strange meat. She turned the spit and sat next to

him, and already she had an odor emanating from her, a feral musk that Joe shrunk from in himself. He squared his shoulders and tried to will himself to be brave. He cleared the gravelly feeling in his throat.

"Tell me what happened to you here," he said.

She had her face to the stars. She continued to look at them, but she answered him, "We were rounded up. All of us children were rounded up and taken out of here."

Joe looked at her profile.

"By force."

"Absolutely. We certainly had no wish to leave."

"Did they hurt you?"

"Only the ones who fought. The kids who kicked and bit, because they panicked."

"What did you do?"

"I bent my shoulders down and went."

Joe sat then, staring into space, the dense space of the forest. He knew the truth of what she had just said, the reason why he was now going to stand up and walk out of the woods alone.